Language, Identity, and Resistance: Code-Switching as a Narrative Strategy in Contemporary South Asian Diasporic Writing

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Abstract

This article examines the strategic deployment of code-switching as a narrative technique in contemporary South Asian diasporic fiction, arguing that the interweaving of English with South Asian languages constitutes a form of linguistic resistance that challenges monolingual norms while articulating complex diasporic identities. Drawing on sociolinguistic theory, postcolonial criticism, and diaspora studies, this study analyses selected works by Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Monica Ali to investigate how these authors employ code-switching to represent the fractured linguistic landscapes inhabited by diasporic subjects. The research utilizes a qualitative textual analysis methodology, examining primary literary texts alongside theoretical frameworks from sociolinguistics and postcolonial studies. The findings reveal that code-switching in South Asian diasporic fiction operates on multiple levels: it authenticates cultural representation, disrupts the hegemony of Standard English, creates solidarity with bilingual readers, and textually embodies the hybrid identities of diasporic characters. The article argues that code-switching functions not merely as decorative local colour but as a substantive narrative strategy that transforms the English language itself, creating what Salman Rushdie has termed "new Englishes" capable of expressing experiences that monolingual discourse cannot accommodate. This study contributes to ongoing scholarly conversations about world literatures in English and the politics of linguistic choice in postcolonial writing.

Introduction

The South Asian diaspora, dispersed across Britain, North America, and other Anglophone regions through histories of colonialism, labour migration, and postcolonial movement, has produced a rich body of literature that grapples with questions of belonging, displacement, and cultural negotiation. A distinctive feature of much contemporary South Asian diasporic writing is its multilingual texture: novels and stories that weave Hindi, Urdu,

Bengali, Tamil, and other South Asian languages into predominantly English narratives. This linguistic heterogeneity, far from being incidental, constitutes a deliberate narrative strategy through which diasporic writers articulate the complex, often conflicted identities of characters who inhabit multiple cultural and linguistic worlds simultaneously.

Code-switching, defined in sociolinguistics as the practice of alternating between two or more languages or language varieties within a single conversation or text, has received extensive scholarly attention in linguistic research. However, its literary deployment raises distinct questions that exceed purely linguistic analysis. When a novelist chooses to embed untranslated Hindi terms within an English narrative, or to render a character's internal monologue in a hybrid linguistic register, these choices carry aesthetic, political, and ideological significance. They position the text in relation to audiences (both Anglophone and South Asian), to literary traditions (both Western and subcontinental), and to the English language itself as a medium shaped by colonial histories.

This article investigates code-switching as a narrative strategy in contemporary South Asian diasporic fiction, focusing on works by three prominent authors: Salman Rushdie, whose maximalist prose has profoundly influenced subsequent diasporic writing; Jhumpa Lahiri, whose precisely crafted stories explore the Bengali-American experience; and Monica Ali, whose debut novel Brick Lane depicts the Bangladeshi community in London. Through close textual analysis informed by sociolinguistic theory and postcolonial criticism, this study addresses the following research questions: How do South Asian diasporic writers deploy code-switching as a narrative technique? What functions does code-switching serve in the representation of diasporic identity? And how does literary code-switching challenge or transform dominant linguistic and literary norms?

Literature Review

Sociolinguistic Perspectives on Code-Switching

Sociolinguistic research has established code-switching as a systematic, rule-governed practice rather than a deficiency or confusion in bilingual speakers. Early work by scholars such as (Gumperz) distinguished between situational code-switching, triggered by changes in social context, and metaphorical code-switching, which creates particular rhetorical or interpersonal effects within a single context. Gumperz's concept of "contextualization cues" illuminates how language choice signals social meanings beyond the propositional content of utterances, a insight highly relevant to literary analysis of multilingual texts.

Carol Myers-Scotton's (1993) Markedness Model provides another influential framework for understanding code-switching (Myers-Scotton). Myers-Scotton argues that speakers choose languages based on the social indexicality of each code: unmarked choices conform to expected norms for a given interaction type, while marked choices deviate from expectations to negotiate identity positions or achieve particular effects. This framework helps explain how diasporic writers strategically deploy marked linguistic choices to disrupt readers' expectations and foreground cultural difference.

More recent sociolinguistic scholarship has challenged the assumption that code-switching necessarily involves distinct, bounded languages. Scholars including (Garcia and Canagarajah) have developed concepts such as "translanguaging" and "codemeshing" that emphasize how multilingual speakers draw fluidly on their entire linguistic repertoire rather than switching between discrete systems. This perspective aligns with literary representations of diasporic consciousness, where linguistic boundaries often blur and hybridize rather than remaining sharply demarcated.

Postcolonial Theory and the Politics of Language

Postcolonial criticism has extensively theorized the politics of language choice for writers from formerly colonized regions. The foundational debate between Ngugi wa Thiong'o, who advocates writing in African languages as a form of decolonization, and Chinua Achebe, who defends the appropriation of English as a legitimate postcolonial strategy, frames ongoing discussions about linguistic choice in postcolonial literature. For South Asian diasporic writers, this debate acquires additional complexity given the multilingual landscape of the subcontinent and the varied relationships different communities have with English as a colonial inheritance.

Homi K. Bhabha's (1994) concepts of hybridity and the "Third Space" have proven particularly influential for understanding diasporic linguistic practices (Bhabha). Bhabha argues that colonial encounters produce hybrid cultural forms that cannot be reduced to either colonizer or colonized origins. The Third Space of enunciation, which emerges in the interstices between cultures, enables new identity positions and modes of expression. Code-switching in diasporic literature can be understood as a textual manifestation of this Third Space, creating linguistic terrain that belongs fully to neither the homeland language nor metropolitan English.

Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin's The Empire Writes Back introduced the concept of "abrogation and appropriation" to describe how postcolonial writers reject the metropolitan standard while simultaneously appropriating English for their own purposes. This framework illuminates how code-switching functions as a strategy of appropriation, transforming English through the incorporation of indigenous linguistic elements. The resulting hybrid text refuses both complete assimilation to Anglophone norms and complete rejection of English as a medium.

Literary Code-Switching in South Asian Diasporic Fiction

Scholarly attention to code-switching in South Asian diasporic literature has grown substantially since the 1990s. Feroza Jussawalla and Reed Way Dasenbrock's Interviews with Writers of the Post-Colonial World (1992) includes discussions with several South Asian authors about their linguistic choices, revealing sophisticated awareness of how language functions ideologically and aesthetically. More recent studies have examined specific authors and texts in depth.

Salman Rushdie's linguistic innovations have attracted extensive critical attention. His essay "Imaginary Homelands" articulates a poetics of migrancy in which the English language is "conquered" and remade by postcolonial writers. Critics including (Suleri and Brennan) have analysed how Rushdie's prose incorporates Hindustani vocabulary, Bombay street slang, and inventive neologisms to create a distinctively hybridized voice. Rushdie's influence on subsequent diasporic writers makes his work essential for understanding the development of code-switching as a literary strategy.

Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction has been examined for its more restrained approach to linguistic hybridity. Scholars including Judith Caesar (2007) and Simon Lewis (2012) have noted how Lahiri incorporates Bengali terms selectively, often leaving them untranslated or glossed only through context. This technique, less flamboyant than Rushdie's, nonetheless produces powerful effects of cultural specificity and reader positioning. (Lahiri) own reflections on language, particularly in her memoir In Other Words, reveal deep engagement with questions of linguistic belonging and creative expression across languages.

Monica Ali's Brick Lane (2003) has generated significant critical discussion about the representation of immigrant communities and the authenticity of linguistic representation. Jane Hiddleston (2005) and Michael Perfect (2014) have examined how Ali deploys code-switching to represent the linguistic experiences of Bangladeshi immigrants in London, while also noting controversies about Ali's own relationship to the community she depicts. These debates

highlight how code-switching raises questions not only of technique but of authority and authenticity.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis methodology that synthesizes sociolinguistic and literary critical approaches. The research design is interpretive, seeking to generate nuanced readings of how code-switching functions within selected texts through close attention to linguistic form, narrative context, and ideological implication. The analytical framework draws on sociolinguistic concepts (including Gumperz's contextualization cues and Myers-Scotton's Markedness Model) while situating these within postcolonial theoretical perspectives on language, identity, and power.

The primary texts selected for analysis represent different approaches to code-switching within South Asian diasporic fiction. Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children (1981) and The Satanic Verses exemplify a maximalist approach to linguistic hybridity, incorporating extensive Hindi and Urdu vocabulary alongside inventive wordplay. Jhumpa Lahiri's short story collection Interpreter of Maladies and novel The Namesake demonstrate a more restrained deployment of Bengali terms within predominantly English prose. Monica Ali's Brick Lane provides a third model, representing the linguistic experiences of first-generation Bangladeshi immigrants. These texts were selected to illustrate the range of code-switching practices in contemporary South Asian diasporic writing while focusing on authors who have achieved both critical recognition and popular readership.

The analysis proceeds through identification and categorization of code-switching instances within selected passages, followed by interpretation of their functions in relation to characterization, reader positioning, and ideological effect. Instances of code-switching are examined for:

- Grammatical integration, that is, how South Asian language elements are incorporated syntactically into English sentences
- Translation practices, including the presence or absence of glosses, footnotes, or contextual explanations
- Narrative function, that is, how code-switching contributes to characterization, setting, or thematic development
- Ideological positioning, that is, how linguistic choices position the text in relation to Anglophone literary norms and South Asian cultural traditions.

Secondary sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, academic monographs, and theoretical texts from sociolinguistics, postcolonial studies, and diaspora studies. The study acknowledges limitations inherent in the selected corpus: three authors cannot represent the full diversity of South Asian diasporic writing, and the focus on prose fiction excludes poetry, drama, and other genres where code-switching operates differently. Future research might extend this analysis to encompass a broader range of authors, genres, and diasporic locations.

Results

Salman Rushdie: Linguistic Excess and the Chutnification of English

Salman Rushdie's fiction displays the most exuberant and programmatic use of code-switching among the authors examined. In Midnight's Children, Rushdie famously describes his narrative project as "chutnifying" history, a culinary metaphor that applies equally to his treatment of language. The novel incorporates Hindi and Urdu vocabulary extensively, often without translation, alongside Bombay street slang, English archaisms, and neologisms of Rushdie's own invention. This linguistic profusion creates a textured, multi-layered prose that

resists smooth assimilation to Standard English norms.

The analysis reveals several distinct functions of code-switching in Rushdie's work. First, South Asian language terms authenticate the cultural settings and characters. Words such as "achha" (okay), "yaar" (friend), "chai" (tea), and "chutney" itself root the narrative in specific South Asian contexts that English alone cannot fully capture. These terms carry cultural associations and connotations that their English equivalents lack, enriching the representational texture of the fiction.

Second, Rushdie's code-switching functions as linguistic resistance, challenging the hegemony of metropolitan English. By refusing to italicize or translate many Hindi and Urdu terms, Rushdie positions them as equally legitimate elements of his prose rather than foreign intrusions requiring special marking. This strategy reverses the usual hierarchy in which English is the unmarked norm and other languages are marked deviations. Readers unfamiliar with Hindi must either accept incomprehension, seek external resources, or infer meanings from context, a reversal of the usual relationship between Anglophone reader and text.

Third, code-switching in Rushdie embodies the hybrid identities his narratives explore. In The Satanic Verses, the protagonist Saladin Chamcha struggles with his relationship to Indian identity while assimilating into English culture. The novel's language enacts this struggle textually: Chamcha's sections are rendered in more Anglicized prose, while other characters and contexts generate denser code-switching. The linguistic texture of the narrative thus varies with focalization and theme, making language choice a vehicle for characterization and ideological exploration.

Rushdie's invented vocabulary deserves particular attention. Words like "hobson-jobson" (a term actually derived from colonial-era linguistic encounter) and playful constructions that hybridize English and Hindi morphology create a sense of linguistic creativity and instability. These inventions suggest that the encounter between languages generates not merely mixture but genuine novelty, new linguistic forms adequate to new cultural conditions. Rushdie's prose thus models the productive potential of linguistic hybridity rather than treating code-switching simply as the preservation of heritage language elements.

Jhumpa Lahiri: Restrained Code-Switching and the Weight of Untranslation

Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction employs code-switching more sparingly than Rushdie's, but the selective incorporation of Bengali terms produces distinct and powerful effects. In Interpreter of Maladies and The Namesake, Bengali words appear at moments of cultural specificity that English cannot adequately render: terms for family relationships ("Baba," "Ma," "Dida" for grandmother), foods ("mishti," "luchi," "begun bhaja"), and rituals ("annaprasan," the rice ceremony; "shraddha," funeral rites). These terms function as markers of cultural authenticity, grounding the narratives in Bengali-American experience.

The analysis reveals that Lahiri's translation practices vary strategically. Some Bengali terms receive immediate contextual glossing, as when a character explains a tradition or when narrative description clarifies meaning. Others remain untranslated, requiring readers to tolerate ambiguity or seek external clarification. This variation creates a texture of partial accessibility: Anglophone readers can follow the narrative while remaining aware that cultural depths exceed their full comprehension. Bengali-American readers, by contrast, experience the pleasure of recognition and the validation of seeing their cultural vocabulary integrated into literary English.

In The Namesake, code-switching becomes particularly significant in relation to the novel's central concern with naming and identity. The protagonist Gogol Ganguli struggles with his unusual name (taken from the Russian writer) and later legally changes it to Nikhil, a more conventional Bengali name. The narrative carefully distinguishes between the Bengali "daknam" (pet name) used within family contexts and the "bhalonam" (good name) used in

formal settings. This Bengali distinction, largely unfamiliar to Anglophone readers, illuminates a cultural logic that shapes the protagonist's experience in ways that English kinship terminology cannot capture.

Lahiri's code-switching also registers generational differences within diasporic families. First-generation characters like Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli are represented as speaking Bengali at home, with their dialogue rendered in English translation. Second-generation characters like Gogol increasingly lose fluency in Bengali, a linguistic attrition the narrative depicts with quiet pathos. Code-switching thus becomes a marker of assimilation and loss, tracking how diasporic identities transform across generations. The diminishing presence of Bengali in Gogol's adult life textually embodies his cultural displacement.

Monica Ali: Code-Switching and the Representation of Immigrant Community

Monica Ali's Brick Lane presents code-switching from the perspective of first-generation immigrants for whom English is a second language acquired in adulthood. The protagonist Nazneen arrives in London from Bangladesh through an arranged marriage and must navigate an unfamiliar linguistic and cultural landscape. The novel's representation of her linguistic experience differs markedly from Rushdie's confident hybridity or Lahiri's second-generation negotiation, instead emphasizing the difficulty and gradual acquisition of English competence.

The analysis identifies code-switching in Brick Lane as serving primarily to represent the Bengali immigrant community's linguistic environment. Characters speak to each other in what is understood to be Bengali, rendered through English translation, while Bengali terms appear for cultural concepts and expressions that resist translation. Religious terminology ("Allah," "inshallah," "mashallah"), kinship terms, and community vocabulary create the texture of the Tower Hamlets Bangladeshi community that the novel depicts.

Ali's treatment of English acquisition provides insight into the power dynamics of language in immigrant experience. Nazneen's husband Chanu speaks English fluently and uses this competence to assert authority, while Nazneen's limited English confines her to domestic space and community networks. Her gradual acquisition of English over the novel's course parallels her growing agency and independence. Code-switching here maps onto gendered dynamics of power within the immigrant family, with language competence functioning as a form of capital that enables or constrains mobility.

The novel also represents code-switching as community practice. Scenes set in the garment workshop where Nazneen eventually works depict multilingual environments where Bengali, English, and other languages intermingle. These representations of community multilingualism contextualize individual code-switching within broader sociolinguistic ecologies. The novel suggests that code-switching is not merely an individual stylistic choice but a collective practice embedded in community life.

Critical controversy surrounding Brick Lane raises questions about authenticity and authority in code-switching. Some Bangladeshi community members criticized Ali, who grew up in England and does not speak Bengali fluently, for misrepresenting their experience. While this study does not adjudicate these debates, they highlight how code-switching carries stakes beyond mere technique: the incorporation of community languages into literary English raises questions about who has the right to represent particular linguistic communities and how such representations position those communities for external audiences.

Discussion

The analysis reveals that code-switching in contemporary South Asian diasporic fiction operates as a multifunctional narrative strategy with aesthetic, political, and ideological dimensions. While the three authors examined deploy code-switching differently, common

functions emerge across their work: authentication of cultural representation, disruption of Anglophone norms, creation of differentiated reader positions, and textual embodiment of hybrid identities. These functions confirm that code-switching constitutes a substantive literary technique rather than mere decorative exoticism.

The findings support theoretical perspectives that emphasize the productive potential of linguistic hybridity. Bhabha's concept of the Third Space illuminates how code-switching creates textual terrain that belongs fully to neither English nor South Asian linguistic traditions. The hybrid prose produced by diasporic writers generates new possibilities for expression unavailable in either monolingual mode. This aligns with Rushdie's programmatic statements about "conquering" English and creating "new Englishes" adequate to postcolonial experience.

The analysis also reveals significant variation in code-switching practices that correlates with authorial positioning and thematic concerns. Rushdie's maximalist hybridity reflects his cosmopolitan orientation and his project of transforming English into a vehicle for subcontinental polyphony. Lahiri's restrained code-switching registers the ambivalent relationship of second-generation immigrants to heritage languages experienced primarily through family context. Ali's representation of first-generation immigrant multilingualism foregrounds questions of access, power, and community. These variations demonstrate that code-switching is not a uniform technique but a flexible strategy adapted to different representational purposes.

The question of reader positioning emerges as particularly significant. All three authors create differentiated reading experiences for audiences with different linguistic competencies. Bilingual readers familiar with Hindi, Bengali, or Urdu experience recognition, validation, and cultural specificity that monolingual Anglophone readers cannot access. Conversely, monolingual readers must navigate varying degrees of incomprehension, a reversal of the usual privilege enjoyed by English-language readers of world literature. This differential positioning carries political implications: code-switching refuses the expectation that postcolonial literature should be fully transparent to metropolitan audiences.

The findings also highlight the relationship between code-switching and questions of authenticity and authority. The controversies surrounding Ali's representation of the Bangladeshi community suggest that code-switching is not simply a neutral technique available to any writer but a practice embedded in questions of cultural ownership and representational ethics. Writers who code-switch claim a relationship to the incorporated language and its community; the legitimacy of that claim may be contested. This dimension of code-switching extends beyond purely linguistic or aesthetic analysis to encompass the politics of representation in multicultural literary production.

The implications of these findings extend to broader debates about world literature and the globalization of English. Code-switching demonstrates that English is not a monolithic standard but a family of varieties shaped by diverse cultural and linguistic encounters. South Asian diasporic writers, by incorporating elements from Hindi, Bengali, Urdu, and other languages, participate in the ongoing transformation of English as a world language. Their work suggests that this transformation is not a corruption or dilution of English but an enrichment that expands the language's expressive possibilities.

Conclusion

This article has examined code-switching as a narrative strategy in contemporary South Asian diasporic fiction through analysis of works by Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Monica Ali. The findings reveal that code-switching operates as a multifunctional technique that authenticates cultural representation, disrupts Anglophone literary norms, creates differentiated reader positions, and textually embodies the hybrid identities of diasporic

subjects. While the three authors deploy code-switching differently, reflecting varied relationships to heritage languages and distinct thematic concerns, common functions emerge that establish code-switching as a substantive literary strategy rather than superficial local colour.

The analysis demonstrates that code-switching in diasporic literature carries political and ideological significance beyond its aesthetic effects. By incorporating South Asian languages into English prose without full translation or assimilation, these writers challenge the expectation that postcolonial literature should be transparent to metropolitan readers. They claim English as a medium capable of transformation through encounter with other linguistic traditions, creating hybrid forms that Rushdie has termed "new Englishes." This linguistic appropriation constitutes a form of resistance to monolingual norms while simultaneously participating in the ongoing globalization and diversification of English.

The study contributes to ongoing scholarly conversations about language, identity, and representation in diaspora literature. By synthesizing sociolinguistic and postcolonial theoretical frameworks, the analysis illuminates how code-switching functions both as a linguistic phenomenon and as a strategy of cultural positioning. The findings suggest that close attention to language choice in diasporic literature reveals dimensions of meaning and effect that thematic analysis alone cannot capture.

Future research might extend this analysis in several directions. Comparative studies could examine code-switching practices across different diasporic communities (South Asian, Caribbean, African) to identify commonalities and differences in how postcolonial writers deploy multilingualism. Diachronic studies could trace how code-switching practices have evolved over time, from early twentieth-century Indo-Anglian writing to contemporary global fiction. Reception studies could investigate how readers with different linguistic backgrounds actually experience code-switched texts, testing the theoretical claims about differentiated reading positions advanced in this study. Additionally, examination of code-switching in other genres (poetry, drama, life writing) and media (film, television, digital platforms) could reveal how the strategy operates differently across forms. What remains clear is that code-switching constitutes an essential dimension of contemporary South Asian diasporic writing, one that demands continued scholarly attention as diasporic communities and their literatures continue to evolve.

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