



Linguistic Exile And Identity Reconstruction In Transnational Literature: A Study Of Self- Translation And Cultural Belonging

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Abstract -

In contemporary transnational literature, language has emerged as a critical site for negotiating identity, belonging, and cultural transformation. This paper examines the phenomenon of linguistic exile, defined as the deliberate adoption of a non-native language for literary expression. Through a qualitative textual analysis of works by Jhumpa Lahiri and other multilingual authors, the study explores how self-translation and linguistic displacement reshape narrative voice and identity construction. Drawing on postcolonial theory and sociolinguistics, the paper argues that linguistic exile produces hybrid literary forms and redefines the relationship between language and selfhood. The findings contribute to interdisciplinary debates in literary studies, migration theory, and language identity.

Introduction -

The relationship between language and identity has long been central to literary and cultural studies. In an era of globalization and increased mobility, writers increasingly operate across linguistic and cultural boundaries. A growing number of authors choose to write in a language other than their mother tongue, not merely as a necessity but as a deliberate creative strategy.

This phenomenon, which can be termed linguistic exile, challenges traditional assumptions about authenticity, nationality, and linguistic belonging. Unlike forced linguistic displacement, linguistic exile is often voluntary and deeply tied to processes of self-reinvention.

This paper investigates how writing in a non-native language:

transforms literary expression

reshapes narrative identity

creates new forms of cultural belonging

Theoretical Framework -

This study adopts an interdisciplinary framework combining literary theory, postcolonial studies, and sociolinguistics.

The concept of identity as fluid and constructed is grounded in the work of Stuart Hall, who argues that identity is not fixed but continuously produced through representation.

Similarly, Homi K. Bhabha's notion of hybridity and the "third space" provides a useful lens for understanding how linguistic exile creates in-between cultural identities.

From a linguistic perspective, the work of Roman Jakobson highlights the interpretative and transformative nature of translation, which becomes central in self-translation practices.

Literature Review -

Existing scholarship on transnational literature has focused extensively on themes of migration, diaspora, and cultural hybridity. Studies have explored how writers negotiate displacement and belonging through narrative strategies and thematic concerns.

However, relatively limited attention has been paid to the specific phenomenon of authors who consciously abandon their native language. While bilingualism and translation have been widely studied, self-imposed **linguistic transformation** remains underexplored.

Authors such as Jhumpa Lahiri exemplify this shift, as they move beyond bilingualism to fully embrace a new linguistic identity. This paper seeks to address this gap by examining the implications of linguistic exile for literary form and identity construction.

Methodology -

This research employs a qualitative approach based on textual and linguistic analysis.

Textual Analysis

Close readings of selected literary works written in non-native languages are conducted to identify narrative patterns and thematic structures.

Linguistic Analysis

The study examines:

lexical choices

syntactic simplification

stylistic features influenced by second-language writing

Comparative Analysis

Where applicable, texts written in both native and non-native languages by the same author are compared to identify shifts in voice and expression.

Analysis-

Writing Beyond the Mother Tongue

Writing in a non-native language disrupts automatic fluency and introduces a heightened awareness of linguistic form. Authors often produce more deliberate and controlled prose, characterized by simplicity and precision.

This constraint becomes a creative resource, enabling new forms of expression that differ significantly from native-language writing.

Linguistic Exile as Identity Reconstruction

In works by Jhumpa Lahiri, the adoption of Italian represents not merely a linguistic shift but a profound transformation of identity. Writing in a new language allows the author to distance herself from previous cultural frameworks and construct a new literary self.

Linguistic exile thus functions as a form of self-reinvention, where identity is actively reshaped through language.

Linguistic Vulnerability and Creativity

Non-native writing introduces elements of vulnerability, including limited vocabulary and grammatical uncertainty. However, these limitations often lead to innovative stylistic choices, such as:

minimalism

repetition

unconventional syntax

These features contribute to the emergence of unique literary voices.

Hybrid Identities and the Third Space

The concept of hybridity, as proposed by Homi K. Bhabha, is central to understanding linguistic exile. Authors writing in a non-native language occupy a “third space” that transcends traditional cultural boundaries.

This space allows for the creation of hybrid identities that are not bound by singular linguistic or national affiliations.

Discussion-

The findings suggest that linguistic exile challenges dominant notions of linguistic authenticity and national literature. It highlights the dynamic and constructed nature of identity, emphasizing that language is not merely a reflection of identity but an active agent in its formation.

Furthermore, this phenomenon raises important questions about:

the role of language in defining literary canons

the boundaries of national literature

the relationship between language and cultural belonging

Conclusion-

This study demonstrates that linguistic exile is a significant and underexplored phenomenon in contemporary literature. By adopting a non-native language, writers engage in processes of identity reconstruction that reshape both literary form and cultural meaning.

Language, in this context, becomes not just a medium of expression but a space of transformation, enabling new forms of belonging and selfhood.

References -

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