

Alessandra Rizzo

University of Palermo

Translation and Bilingualism in Monica Ali's and Jhumpa Lahiri's Marginalized Identities

ABSTRACT

This study, drawing upon contemporary theories in the field of migration, postcolonialism, and translation, offers an analysis of literary works by Monica Ali (of Bangladeshi origins) and Jhumpa Lahiri (of Bengali Indian parents). Ali and Lahiri epitomize second-generation immigrant literature, play with the linguistic concept of translating and interpreting as forms of hybrid connections, and are significant examples of how a text may become a space where multi-faceted identities co-habit in a process of deconstructing and reconstructing their own sense of emplacement in non-native places.

Each immigrant text becomes a hybrid site, where second- and third generations of immigrant subjects move as mobile, fluctuating and impermanent identities, caught up in the act of transmitting their bicultural and bilingual experience through the use of the English language as their instrument of communication in a universe which tends to marginalize them.

This investigation seeks to demonstrate how Ali and Lahiri represent two different migrant experiences, Muslim and Indian, each of which functioning within a multicultural Anglo-American context. Each text is transformed into the *lieu* where identities become both identities-in-translation and translated identities and each text itself may be looked at as the site of preservation of native identities but also of the assimilation (or adaptation) of identity. Second-generation immigrant women writers become the interpreters of the old and new cultures, the translators of their own local cultures in a space of transition.

ABSTRACT

This reflection on immigrant subjects occurs when identity still occupies a strategic role not only in literary and cultural studies, but also in the field of linguistics and translation. A multicultural perspective suggests that a non-static and fluctuating existence does create richer identities and new systems of identification. This has compelled theorists such as Homi K. Bhabha, Iain Chambers, Michael Cronin, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Édouard Glissant, to name but a few, to place a certain emphasis on concepts such as hybridity, borders, translation, and creolization, with a view to understanding those identities residing in interstitial and peripheral spaces. In this study a selection from a corpus of literary texts belonging to immigrant tradition intends to explicitly engage issues related to language and identity, and to the modality in which English and translation intervene in the definition of bilingual identities in a state of marginalization.

Language in identity representation is central to the experience of immigration, for the linguistic function is crucial in the shaping of a new identity. Immigration involves a move to a new context, where language proficiency is important, not simply if one considers its function for the integration of the immigrant subject, but also if one takes into account the way in which language competence affects the sense of belonging each immigrant identity might or might not develop. This underpins the intention of looking at the notion of identity with a view to exploring how, and to what extent, the construction of identities has to be scrutinized through the support of English and translation as effective potentials that mould identities existing in the interstice. The English language and the practice of translation are thus not considered from a mere linguistic or textual perspective but are seen to act as instruments of creativity. Translation becomes the metaphor for diasporic creativity, a creative means of political and cultural transformation of identities in adopted countries.

The question of the English language in immigrant contexts introduces the concept of bilingualism in English-diasporic populations which, in particular, refers to three principal factors:

the way a diasporic subject copes with both their mother tongue and the language of the host country; the postcolonial situation and the use of English at the turn of the twenty-first century; the current status of English and its relationship with the future of national languages in transnational worlds. (Kral 9)

Second-generation diasporic subjects are not necessarily linked to the experience of loss and nostalgia, they are rather interested in that of residence in the host country. Levi and Weingrod highlight this theory by

suggesting how “diasporas are no longer ‘depicted’ as melancholy places of exile and oppression . . . In sharp contrast . . . diasporas are enthusiastically embraced as arenas for the creative melding of cultures and the formation of new ‘hybridic,’ mixed identities” (45). The concepts of bilingualism, in-betweenness, hybridity, and doubleness, all of which refer to the construction of an immigrant identity in the host country, are here taken into account as a theoretical support to the scrutiny of second-generation immigrant literature, where marginalized identities make the effort to conquer new alien spaces.

In Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003) and Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and *The Namesake* (2003), literary works from the south Asian immigrant tradition, the representation of translated Bangladeshi and Indian ways of life abroad is encapsulated within translating and linguistic practices which function in terms of creative tools in the diasporic aesthetics. Second-generation immigrants have dual identities, as their nature (in terms of language, culture and setting) is two-sided, and English and translation contribute to strengthening their sense of linguistic, cultural and geographical duality. Diasporic narrative is thus a textual model that testifies to the in-betweenness of immigrant characters who, even though condemned to a permanent condition of uprootedness and marginality, also possess a certain ability that permits the non-native self to explore new horizons through linguistic and translating strategies.

The redefinition of English not as an instrument of power and domination but as a “stepmother,” to borrow John Skinner’s expression, leads us to think about the new linguistic and cultural system in adopted countries. Both Monica Ali and Jhumpa Lahiri seem to insist on the liberating role of the English language as a technical device for social reinvention and emancipation from patriarchal rule. The fact that the two languages, the mother tongue and English, assume distinct roles in the context of immigration, introduces a new hybridized view of the English language in the diasporic setting. English ceases to be an instrument of colonial domination and becomes a tool of redefinition, not a choice but “a fact, a constitutive element” (Král 127). This changes the notions of “mother” and “stepmother” tongues in immigrant contexts and makes English a “de-territorialized and redistributed language” between Anglophone and English-speaking populations, a language that appears to be spoken by four groups of people:

native speakers; speakers of former British colonies; . . . a third group which includes diasporas in the English-speaking world, for whom English has become the language of everyday life; finally, the ever-increasing group of speakers outside the English-speaking world who use this language in the workplace. (129)

The English language is today strictly connected with issues concerning culture and identity construction, and its linguistic, creolized form is allied to translation as a means of giving voice to subjects belonging simultaneously to nations, languages and cultures in a state of transition. However, hybridized subjectivities in immigrant settings possess a new artistic creativity, which inevitably produces “innovative types of identifications, re-visitations and complex processes of creolization which criss-cross several artistic expressions” (Balirano 87). Second- and third-generation immigrants acquire a new stability that is indeed enforced by a hybrid perspective which favours negotiation and interconnection among diverse identities by “means of different media and idioms” (87), and which engenders mechanisms of “self-identification with the homeland” (87). This linguistic practice, which, to a great extent, happens in one main language, relies on techniques such as “amplification” (88) and on linguistic devices such as the blending of “different accents, norm-deviant syntax, code-switching, code-mixing, double-voiced discourse or alternative forms of semantic collocations” (87), stylistic procedures that portray the lives of hybrid identities who, instead of speaking English, are intentionally represented as “‘dubbed’ or ‘translated’ into English” (88).

In *Translation and Identity*, Michael Cronin points out that the condition of an immigrant identity is that of a “translated being” who moves from

a source language and culture to a target language and culture so that translation takes place both in the physical sense of movement or displacement and in the symbolic sense of the shift from one way of speaking, writing about and interpreting the world to another. (45)

Similarly, Anne Malena explains how immigrant identities are translated beings in countless ways. They “remove from the familiar source environment and move towards a target culture which can be totally unknown or more or less familiar;” they “most likely will have to learn or perfect their skills in another language in order to function in their new environment;” “their individual and collective identities will experience a series of transformations as they adjust to the loss of their place of birth and attempt to turn it into gain” (Malena 9). One can deduce that translation becomes a sociological strategy which describes dual or multiple identities, a kind of “cultural filter,” where languages come “alive in transit, in interpretation,” “re-membered, re-read and rewritten” (Chambers 3). The nomadic aspect of a migrant language makes these identities mutable, unfixed and uncertain entities, whose dual condition entails “a continual fabulation, an invention, a construction in which there is no fixed identity or final destination” (25).

Monica Ali and Jhumpa Lahiri testify to the way in which the migrant self is free to “flee the overlapping pressures exerted upon identity definition to explore new horizons in the spatial and metaphorical senses of the term” (Král 39). In their narratives, identities describe the two sides of their nomadic life and embody the concept of “doubleness,” which Linda Hutcheon defines “the essence of migrant experience” (9). As Hutcheon points out, “caught between two worlds, the immigrant negotiates a new social space; caught between two cultures and often two languages, the writer negotiates a new literary space” (9). To put it in Mikhail Bakhtin’s terms, the hybrid subject becomes “not only double-voiced and double-accented . . . but also double-linguaged” (360).

Monica Ali (1967–) was born in Dhaka to a Bangladeshi father and an English mother but was raised in England from the age of three. The plot in *Brick Lane*, a novel set between Bangladeshi villages and London, evolves around Nazneen, a Bangladeshi girl who was born in East Pakistan and who is obliged to migrate to London at the age of eighteen after marrying a Bangladeshi man. In England Nazneen is unable to socialize, as she cannot speak English, a language she would like to learn. The heroine has no feelings of doubt about the culture and language of the host country, which she considers a stepmother tongue that does not threaten her self-representation. She suddenly realizes how important learning English would be for a redefinition of her personality in a country where she has no pressure from the patriarchal society from which she comes. Nazneen gradually forms ties with the English language. The first stage of this relation is best embodied in the episode which describes her looking at signs in the streets, which inform her what not to do: “No Smoking, No Eating, No Drinking” (Ali 46). She begins fantasizing over the English language and envying the facility with which other immigrants have appropriated the language of the host country. Karim, the man who will become her lover, is proficient in English, wears European clothes and possesses European objects. He is an exemplary hybrid man, whose identity is the sum of two worlds, the Bangladeshi and the English one, and whose mastery of the English language gives him nothing but privileges. The language of the adopted country is romanticized and transformed into an instrument of self-representation, liberation and creation:

Nazneen, hobbling and halting, began to be aware of herself. Without a coat, without a suit, without a white face, without destination. . . . But they were not aware of herself. In the next instant she knew it. They could not see her any more than she could see God. They knew that she existed (just as she knew He existed) but unless she did something, waved a gun, halted the traffic, they would not see her. She enjoyed this thought. She

began to scrutinize. She stared at the long, thin faces, the pointy chins. . . . The woman looked up and saw Nazneen staring. She smiled, like she was smiling at someone who had tried and totally failed to grasp the situation. No longer invisible, Nazneen walked faster and looked only at what she had to see to walk without falling or colliding. (56–57)

Ice-skating is Nazneen's first approach towards various acts of translation through which she learns English and the English culture:

"What is this called?" said Nazneen.

Chanu glanced at the screen.

"Ice skating," he said, in English.

"Ice e-skating," said Nazneen.

"Ice-skating," said Chanu.

"Ice e-skating."

"No, no. No *e*. Ice skating. Try it again."

Nazneen hesitated.

"Go on!"

"Ice es-kating," she said, with deliberation.

Chanu smiled. "Don't worry about it. It's a common problem for Bengalis. Two consonants together causes a difficulty. I have conquered this issue after a long time. But you are unlikely to need these words in any case."

"I would like to learn some English," said Nazneen.

Chanu puffed his cheeks and spat the air out in a fuff.

"It will come. Don't worry about it. Where's the need anyway?" He looked at his book and Nazneen watched the screen. (36–37)

Practices of linguistic and metaphorical translation also occur between Nazneen and her family, where Bengali-English words and accents are mixed in a very confusing way. Shahana, Nazneen's daughter, speaks English at home though her father disagrees with her linguistic choice:

"Kadam," said Nazneen.

"Bor-*ing*," sang Shahana, in English.

Chanu remained calm. "Bangla2000 web site. Who wants to take a look?"

. . .

"What is the wrong with you?" shouted Chanu, speaking in English.

"Do you mean," said Shahana, "What is wrong with you?" She blew at her finger. "Not 'the wrong.'"

"Tell your sister," he screamed, reverting to Bengali, "that I am going to tie her up and cut out her tongue." (200–01)

Metaphorical translation in Monica Ali's immigrant writing does not seem to involve two languages. It is rather represented in terms of identity

transition, a process which regards an immigrant subject's attempt to escape from the rules of marginalization within a foreign/host country. In *Brick Lane* Nazneen skates in her sari, which symbolizes a hybrid confluence of the British and Bangladeshi culture, both making up her identity. Her Bangladeshi sari and her Western footwear affirm her sense of cultural freedom which is manifested through acts of non-linguistic and non-textual translation, a system of metaphorical translation in which Nazneen recognizes the host culture:

There was no reason to wear it but she wore her red and gold silk sari. . . . She moved her legs beneath the table to make them dance in her lap. She pulled the free end of her sari over her face and moved her neck from side to side like a jatra girl. The next instant she was seized by panic and clawed the silk away as if it were strangling her. She could not breathe. The table trapped her legs. The sari, that seconds ago had felt light as air, became heavy chains. Gasping, she struggled from the chair and went to the kitchen. She drank water straight from the tap. It hurt her chest and the last mouthful made her cough. (277)

In the final passage of the novel, the art of ice-skating parallels the art of translating, both epitomizing the absence of linguistic and cultural barriers. The art of ice-skating and the technique of translation put Nazneen in a state of placement and displacement, where the crossing of physical and mental borders is permitted:

“Go on. Open them.”
She opened her eyes.
In front of her was a huge white circle, bounded by four-foot-high boards. Glinting, dazzling, enchanting ice. She looked at the ice and slowly it revealed itself. . . .
“Here are your boots, Amma.”
Nazneen turned round. To get on the ice physically—it hardly seemed to matter. In her mind she was already there.
She said, “But you can’t skate in a sari.”
Razia was already lacing her boots. “This is England,” she said. “You can do whatever you like.” (492)

Doubleness and in-betweenness are also the tenets in the lives of Jhumpa Lahiri's fictional identities. The writer, in one of her essays, introduces herself as “an American author, an Indian-American author, a British-born author, an Anglo-Indian author, an NRI (non-resident Indian), an ABCD author (ABCD stands for American born confused desi—desi meaning Indian)” (Lahiri, “Intimate Alienation” 114). Lahiri looks at her subjectivity as a bilingual and bicultural identity who occupies an in-between space:

I have always lived under the pressure to be bilingual, bicultural, at ease on either side of the Lahiri family map. The first words I learned to utter and understand were my parents' native tongue, Bengali. Until I was old enough to go to school, and my linguistic world split in two, I spoke Bengali exclusively and fluently. Though I still speak Bengali, I have lost this extreme fluency. . . . While English was not technically my first language, it has become so. (114–15)

The American-Bengalese writer sustains that translation is essential to the construction of a migrant identity in a host country. Immigrants, she explains, are “translators, insofar as they must make sense of the foreign in order to survive” (119), insofar as they must prevent their lives from getting marginalized in the host country. In the short-story collection *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri exploits metaphorical translation to represent her characters' identity, such as rendering certain native gestures, customs, anxieties and regrets in the language and culture of the adopted country, and also to show how her Indian characters can be transformed into American citizens as part of a process of natural assimilation.

In the short story “Interpreter of Maladies,” which is set in India, Mr Kapasi, a Bengali English speaking tourist guide, works for a second-generation family of Bengali descent living in New Jersey. The contrast between Kapasi and the young couple, whose Indian roots are soon revealed to the tourist guide, is clear both on a linguistic and cultural level. They do not seem to be proud of their native culture, which they probably look at as minor in their adopted country. The Indian emigrated identities behave as perfect foreigners in India: they take pictures and comment on the Indian landscape as Western tourists would do. The children, Tina, Bobby and Ronny, are American and have American names. The English language is the only instrument which makes the communication between the tourist guide and the American family possible. Kapasi's knowledge of several languages and dialects, as Palusci points out, is somehow a form of “allegory of a faceless nationality” (127). It is Kapasi's interest in languages that gives him the chance to have more than one job in his country. He is also an interpreter in a doctor's office:

“What a doctor need an interpreter for?”

“He has a number of Gujarati patients. My father was Gujarati, but many people do not speak Gujarati in this area, including the doctor. And so the doctor asked me to work in his office, interpreting what the patients say.” (Lahiri, “Interpreter of Maladies” 50)

This revelation turns the genuine tourist guide into a subject finding himself in-between languages; his complex linguistic identity permits

him to scrutinize the Americanized family, who “looked Indian” but wore Westernized clothes and spoke a language whose accent was the one “[he] heard on American television programs” (49). The most conventional and stereotyped image of India is indeed recorded from the American-Indian Mr and Mrs Das’ perspective as the consequence of a conventional process of assimilation into the host country.

The immigrant characters’ adaptation to the language and culture of the host country is a topic that Lahiri also investigates in the short story “The Third and Final Continent,” which is set in America. Whereas the second-generation immigrant Mrs Das in the “Interpreter of Maladies” can only speak English and is tied up with American culture, Mala, the first-generation immigrant female character in “The Third and Final Continent,” marries a man from India living in the States but is strongly connected with Indian culture. However, she is soon asked to make an effort to become assimilated into the culture of the host country. The English language and American culture will become indispensable to Mala’s new life, although the woman from India will never permit her native roots to be eroded. The point of view of Mala’s husband, whose name is never mentioned by the novelist, testifies to the slow changes in his wife’s attitude towards the language and culture of the host country. The heroine transforms her conservative attitude in resisting the new culture and necessarily turns into a radically diverse Indian subject who welcomes the benefits the host country can offer her. Mala’s husband asserts:

At the airport I recognized Mala immediately. The free end of her sari did not drag on the floor, but was draped in a sign of bridal modesty over her head, just as it had draped my mother until the day my father died. Her thin brown arms were stacked with gold bracelets, a small red circle was painted on her forehead, and the edges of her feet were tinted with a decorative red dye. I did not embrace her, or kiss her, or take her hand. Instead I asked her, speaking Bengali for the first time in America, if she was hungry. (Lahiri, “The Third and Final Continent” 191)

The words pronounced by Mala’s husband are but an attempt to “translate” the Indian female culture made up of “sari,” “gold bracelets,” a “small red circle” on the forehead and “feet . . . tinted with a decorative red dye.” At the beginning Mala seems as distant from her husband as from the host country. She does not feel like betraying her Indian identity: “Mala rose to her feet, adjusting the end of her sari over her head and holding it to her chest. . . . Mala had traveled far from home, not knowing where she was going, or what she would find” (195). Later on, she will learn foreign rules as necessary instruments to make a success of her life abroad:

We are American citizens now, so we can collect social security when it is time. Though we visit Calcutta every few years, and bring back more drawstring pajamas and Darjeeling tea, we have decided to grow older here. I work in a small college library. We have a son who attends Harvard University. Mala no longer drapes the end of her sari over her head, or weeps at night for her parents, but occasionally she sweeps for our son. So we drive to Cambridge to visit him, or bring him home for a weekend, so that he can eat rice with us with his hands, and speak in Bengali, things we sometimes worry he will no longer do after we die. (197)

The characters talk in Bengali, though Mala and her husband fear that their son might sooner or later forget his native origins. They do not look on their host country in terms of dispossession, foreignness and exile but as a place where they can live with dignity and find “pieces of the old culture in the simplest things like traditional Indian spices such as bay leaves and cloves” (Ian 234). Here, the English language is not a predominant linguistic tool in terms of communication among Indians and Americans. The Bengali dialect and culture are always constitutive elements in the lives of first-generation immigrants, whereas the English language is particularly associated with the immigrant’s survival in a foreign land.

In Lahiri’s *The Namesake*, a novel whose setting shifts from Calcutta to American metropolises, the question of language becomes even more important, especially in relation to bilingualism as far as second- and third-generations of immigrants are concerned. Ashima’s son, Gogol, soon realizes that his name is not “inscribed in the geography of the place” (Kral 138). He will change his name from Gogol to Nikhil, a name which does not label him as a foreigner. One day Gogol is invited to attend a lecture on the question of identity in Asian-American minorities:

One day he attends a panel discussion about Indian novels written in English. . . . Gogol is bored by the panelists, who keep referring to something called “marginality,” as if it were some sort of medical condition. . . . “Teleologically speaking, ABCDs are unable to answer the question ‘Where are you from?’” the sociologist on the panel declares. Gogol has never heard the term ABCD. He eventually gathers that it stands for “American-born confused deshi.” In other words, him. . . . all their friends always refer to India simply as desh. But Gogol never thinks of India as desh. He thinks of it as Americans do, as India. (Lahiri, *The Namesake* 118)

This quotation is an implicit example of Gogol’s newly-acquired Americanness and also represents a reflection on bilingualism as a limitation on

immigrant subjects, who often perceive their second newly-learned language as an inadequate linguistic tool that might otherwise provide them with a sense of total cultural fulfilment. This thought reminds us of Julia Kristeva's idea of the mother tongue as the exclusive linguistic resource, whose power is such as to fortify one's own identity. This also reinforces the theory according to which, as Jacques Derrida puts it, languages are intrinsically untranslatable, although the French philosopher does also believe that each language functions in specific contexts and historical epochs. Therefore, each language spoken by an immigrant subject is rooted and operates in the context of immigration in one specific moment in time. Here, Lahiri places an emphasis on a perfect juxtaposition of an assimilated American existence and a traditional Indian way of life, where duality characterizes the immigrants' lives, as in the cases of the American-born Gogol and his sister Sonia. Gogol's name recalls his hybrid condition whilst Lahiri "identifies the practice of naming people as a real linguistic problem" (Balirano 91), which she explains by making clear reference to the importance for Bengali subjects of having both a *bhalonam* and a *daknam*. The writer explicitly translates and clarifies what the Indian concepts represent:

In Bengali the word for pet name is *daknam*, meaning, literally, the name by which one is called by friends, family, and other intimates, at home and in other private, unguarded moments. Pet names are a persistent remnant of childhood, a reminder that life is not always so serious, so formal, so complicated. They are a reminder, too, that one is not all things to all people. They all have pet names. . . . Every pet name is paired with a good name, a *bhalonam*, for identification in the outside world. Consequently, good names appear on envelopes, on diplomas, in telephone directories and in all other public places. (Lahiri, *The Namesake* 25–26)

To conclude, hybrid identities in Ali's and Lahiri's immigrant writing are reinvented identities exploiting English, translation and bilingualism as techniques for survival and integration in a diasporic setting. They live in two cultures and languages through a process of renegotiation, which is not only an unequal mixing of languages and cultures. Languages and cultures are "accommodated in different capacities because each diasporic subject assigns each language to a specific task for the simple reason that he cannot relate to the two languages in the same way" (Král 136). The Anglo-American setting in second-generation diasporic fiction becomes the geographical context where identities acquire the language of the host country as a way out of predefined native models and as a means of recreating one's own self.


 WORKS CITED

Ali, Monica. *Brick Lane*. London: Black Swan, 2003. Print.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Austin: U of Texas P, 1981. Print.

Balirano, Giuseppe. "Indian Diasporic Aesthetics as a Form of Translation." *Anglistica* 12.2 (2008): 87–96. Print.

Chamber, Iain. *Migrancy, Culture, Identity*. London: Routledge, 2004. Print.

Cronin, Michael. *Translation and Identity*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2006. Print.

Hutcheon, Linda, and Marion Richmond, eds. *Other Solitudes: Canadian Multicultural Fictions*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1990. Print.

Král, Françoise. *Critical Identities in Contemporary Anglophone Diasporic Literature*. London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2009. Print.

Lahiri, Jhumpa. "Interpreter of Maladies." *Interpreter of Maladies*. London: Flamingo, 1999. 43–69. Print.

---. "Intimate Alienation: Immigrant Fiction and Translation." *Translation, Text and Theory: The Paradigm of India*. Ed. Rukmini B. Nair. New Delhi: Sage, 2002. 113–20. Print.

---. *The Namesake*. New York: Houghton, 2003. Print.

---. "The Third and Final Continent." *Interpreter of Maladies*. London: Flamingo, 1999. 173–98. Print.

Levi, André, and Alex Weingrod, eds. *Homelands and Diasporas: Holy Lands and Other Places*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005. Print.

Malena, A. "Presentation." *TTR*. 16.2 (2003): 9–13. Print.

Palusci, Oriana. "The Elephant and the Refrigerator: Jhumpa Lahiri as Interpreter of Maladies." *Anglistica* 12.2 (2008): 121–31. Print.

Skinner, John. *The Stepmother Tongue: An Introduction to New Anglophone Fiction*. New York: St Martin's, 1998. Print.

Tan, Kathy A. "'Caught between Worlds': The Clash of Cultures and of Generations in the Work of Monica Ali, Jhumpa Lahiri and Zadie Smith." *Territorial Terrors Contested Spaces in Colonial and Postcolonial Writing*. Ed. Gerhard Stilz. Würzburg: Königshausen, 2007. 227–28. Print.