

Ambivalence, Anxiety and Acceptance: A Postcolonial Study of *In Other Words*

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Abstract

Diasporic consciousness remains a central concern among immigrant writers, and this sensibility permeates their literary productions. As a diasporic author, Lahiri engages deeply with themes of displacement, cultural ambivalence, and identity fragmentation. Such writers frequently articulate experiences of geographical dislocation, social alienation, and the absence of a stable centre. Memory and nostalgia often function as tenuous links to their homeland and past associations. Lahiri's *In Other Words* encapsulates these concerns, particularly in its exploration of linguistic transition and cultural relocation. Salman Rushdie observes that immigrant writers are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. This sense of loss underscores the diasporic condition, wherein individuals attempt to reconstruct connections to their origins, often through imaginative or symbolic means, resulting in what Rushdie terms 'invisible ones, imaginary homelands'.

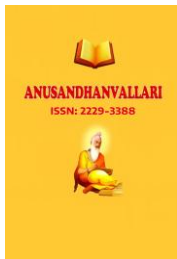
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Content:

Jhumpa Lahiri is an eminent writer of diasporic literature and is popular among contemporary writers. She published her first nonfiction work, initially written in Italian. Before relocating to Rome, Lahiri undertook a deliberate preparation for her linguistic transformation by committing herself exclusively to Italian. She consciously distances herself from English, describing this process as entering 'another land, unexplored, murky—a kind of voluntary exile'.(29) Even while physically present in America, she experiences a psychological displacement, as if she already inhabits another linguistic space. Reading in Italian, she feels both pleasure and disorientation, likening herself to a guest who is welcomed yet not entirely at home.

Upon settling in Rome, Lahiri intensifies this commitment by reading and writing solely in Italian. She deliberately attempts to suppress English to fully immerse herself in the new language. Her disciplined approach includes maintaining a personal lexicon, recording vocabulary, meanings, and contextual usage, and subsequently integrating these into her writing. This method reflects a systematic and immersive strategy for adult language acquisition. Her profound attachment to Italian is evident in her declaration: 'When you're in love, you want to live forever ... I don't want to die because my death would mean the end of my discovery of the language'. (30) The search for identity remains a persistent and dominant theme throughout the text. Lahiri reflects on her fragmented sense of self:

I consider myself an incomplete, deficient person because of my divided identity, or perhaps by disposition. Maybe there is a linguistic reason – the lack of a language to identify with. As a girl in America, I tried to speak Bengali perfectly, without a foreign accent, to satisfy my parents and, above all, to feel that I was ultimately their daughter. But it was impossible. (31)



This passage vividly articulates her internal conflict and the psychological burden of inhabiting multiple, yet incomplete, identities. Her sense of inadequacy is closely tied to her linguistic and cultural dislocation. Although Lahiri had previously explored questions of identity in her fiction, *In Other Words* marks a significant shift as she engages with these concerns in the first person. Her reflections reveal that identity is not a stable or resolved category but rather an ongoing process marked by uncertainty and negotiation. Lahiri acknowledges that achieving native-like proficiency in Italian may be unattainable, yet she persists in her pursuit. She describes her experience of reading and writing in Italian with striking honesty:

When I read in Italian, I feel like a guest, a traveller. Nevertheless, what I'm doing seems a legitimate, acceptable task. Writing in Italian makes me feel like an intruder, an impostor. The work seems counterfeit and unnatural. I realise that I've crossed a boundary and feel lost in flight. I'm a complete foreigner. (33)

This dual perception—of legitimacy and imposture—captures the complexity of her linguistic position. While she accepts her role as a learner, she remains acutely aware of her outsider status. Reflecting further on her identity as a writer, she observes: 'Before I became a writer, I lacked a clear, precise identity. It was through writing that I was able to feel fulfilled. But when I write in Italian, I don't feel that. (34)

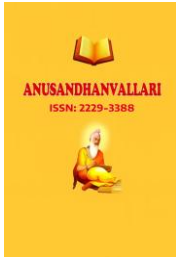
Writing in English had provided her with a stable literary identity, whereas writing in Italian destabilises that sense of self. This transition is metaphorically expressed as moving from a palace to the street, suggesting a voluntary relinquishment of comfort and status. At times, Lahiri questions the feasibility of her linguistic ambition. She cites Carlos Fuentes: 'It's beneficial to know that there are certain heights one will never be able to reach' (36). This acknowledgement of limitation resonates with her own realisation that complete mastery of Italian may remain elusive. She further reflects: 'The better I understand the language, the more confusing it is. The closer I get, the farther away ... Because a language isn't a small lake but an ocean'. (37) This metaphor underscores the vastness and complexity of language, reinforcing the sense of both aspiration and inadequacy.

Yet, Lahiri interprets this awareness of limitation as integral to the creative process: 'I think that an awareness of impossibility is central to the creative impulse'. (38) She further asserts: 'Imperfection inspires invention, imagination, creativity. It stimulates. The more I feel imperfect, the more I feel alive ... In a certain sense, writing is an extended homage to imperfection. (39) These reflections position imperfection not as a deficiency but as a generative force that fuels artistic creation. Her engagement with translation further deepens her understanding of language. She observes:

When I write in Italian, I think in Italian; to translate into English, I have to wake up another part of my brain'.⁴⁰ Translation, for Lahiri, is not merely a technical exercise but an intimate intellectual and creative act. She elaborates: 'I think that translating is the most profound, intimate way of reading. A translation is a beautiful, dynamic encounter between two languages, texts, and writers. (41)

This perspective highlights the transformative potential of translation as a site of dialogue and interaction. In the chapter 'The Triangle', Lahiri reflects on her evolving relationship with Bengali, English, and Italian. Each language represents a distinct phase of her life, forming a triangular dynamic that shapes her identity. Interestingly, during a visit to America while residing in Rome, she experiences a sense of longing for Italy, expressing frustration that Italian is not spoken around her: 'When I go to restaurants, to shops, to the beach, I'm irritated: Why aren't people speaking Italian?'⁽⁴²⁾ This reaction indicates the depth of her immersion in the new language. Lahiri also invokes Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to conceptualise her transformation, particularly through the figure of Daphne. Her experience culminates in what she describes as a 'double crisis':

Now, I feel a double crisis. On the one hand, I'm aware of the ocean, in every sense, between Italy and me. On the other hand, there is a separation between English and me. I'd already noticed it in Italy, so I translated it



myself. But I think that emotional distance is always more pronounced, more piercing, when, despite proximity, there remains an abyss. (43)

This crisis reflects both her distance from Italian and her estrangement from English, producing a profound sense of dislocation. *In Other Words* ultimately emerges as an intensely personal and introspective work. Lahiri acknowledges its autobiographical nature: '*In Other Words* is different. Almost everything in it happened to me. I've already explained that it began as a sort of diary, a personal text. It remains my most intimate book but also the most open. (44) The text embodies both vulnerability and openness, reflecting her ambivalence toward her own creative process.

She concludes with a universal reflection: 'I hope that every book in the world belongs to everyone, or no one, nowhere'. (45) This statement encapsulates the fluid and borderless nature of literature. Lahiri further articulates her motivation for writing: 'Why do I write? To investigate the mystery of existence. To tolerate myself. To get closer to everything that is outside of me. (46) These lines reveal her philosophical engagement with writing as a means of self-exploration and existential inquiry. Through its exploration of linguistic transformation, cultural displacement, and identity formation, *In Other Words* captures the universal struggle of individuals seeking meaning, belonging, and self-definition. Lahiri's journey reflects not only a personal evolution but also a broader human experience of navigating between languages, cultures, and identities.

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