www.TLHjournal.com Literary Herald ISSN: 2454-3365
An International Refereed/Peer-reviewed English e-Journal
Impact Factor: 7.825

Linguistic Hybridity and Cultural Negotiation: Code-Switching in Diasporic Literature with Special Reference to Kiran Desai's *Inheritance of Loss.*

Dr. Jaswinder Kaur Aulakh
Assistant Professor
P.G. Department of English
Khalsa College
Amritsar

Abstract

This research tries to investigate the role of code-switching in diasporic literature, focusing on how multilingual expression functions as a narrative, cultural, and political device. Diasporic writers often navigate hybrid identities, blending languages to reflect emotional memory, preserve heritage, and resist linguistic assimilation. The study will analyse Kiran Desai's, *Inheritance of Loss,* through close textual analysis and an interdisciplinary framework combining postcolonial theory and sociolinguistics. This research paper aims to reveal how code-switching enhances authenticity, constructs cultural hybridity, and creates layered reader engagement. Ultimately, this research will contribute to a deeper understanding of how language in diasporic writing operates as a space of negotiation—between home and host cultures, past and present, identity and belonging.

Keywords: Code-switching, Diaspora, Culture, Identity, Postcolonial, Multilingual

Introduction

Language has never been merely a tool for communication; it is also a symbol of identity, power, and cultural memory. The emerging relationship between immigrants and their homelands is a subject of profound interest. The previously established sense of stability has given way to a contemporary narrative in which immigrants embrace the demands of global citizenship. The phenomenon of migration has given rise to rich and diverse diasporic literatures, which portray the challenges of negotiating identity across cultural boundaries. Diasporic literature has emerged as one of the most dynamic fields in contemporary literary studies, reflecting the experiences of migration, displacement, and cultural negotiation. Writers from diasporic backgrounds often navigate between multiple languages, identities, and cultural frameworks.

Etymologically, the term 'Diaspora' originates from Greek word *diaspeirein*- "to scatter about, disperse", from *Dia* means 'about, across' *speiren* means 'to scatter' and so gradually it came to mean "dispersion of people from their homeland."

A key feature of these writings is code-switching—the blending of languages, dialects, and cultural registers. This practice mirrors the everyday reality of diasporic individuals who

navigate between heritage and host cultures. This paper originates from the need to understand how such linguistic shifts not only enhance narrative authenticity but also function as markers of cultural belonging and resistance.

Despite growing interest in multilingualism within literary studies, a comprehensive exploration of how code-switching operates in diasporic literature as a creative and political tool remains underdeveloped. While existing studies acknowledge the role of multilingualism in diasporic writing, there is limited research on how code-switching specifically functions to construct hybrid identities, resist cultural assimilation, and enhance authenticity. Moreover, critical frameworks for analysing code-switching often remain fragmented—linguistic studies focus on mechanics, while literary analyses emphasize symbolism. This study seeks to bridge that gap by exploring how diasporic authors use code-switching as a tool of cultural expression, identity preservation, and narrative innovation. There are many such texts like, Sadhu Singh Dhami's *Maluka,* Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake,* Junot Diaz' *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao,* Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children, The Satanic Verses,* Zadie Smith's *White Teeth,* Swaran Chandan's *Nave Rishte* etc. But for this research paper, Kiran Desai's *Inheritance of Loss,* winner of the Man Booker Prize, has been chosen.

Kiran Desai was born in Delhi in 1971, educated in India, England, and the United States, and writes from an inherently diasporic position. This biographical context is not incidental: Desai's own linguistic experience — navigating between Indian languages, British English, and American English — informs her literary sensibility. In an interview, Desai has noted that she wanted the language of the novel to 'feel like translation,' to capture the experience of people whose emotional lives exist in one tongue while their public, economic, and political lives must be conducted in another.

Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* is a clear presentation of the psychological and emotional trauma which has far-reaching effects on the lives of both the individuals and the communities. Various characters are depicted dealing with various issues, including colonial rule, personal trauma of loss, and the Gorkha revolt for greater autonomy. It stands as one of the most linguistically rich and culturally complex novels in contemporary diasporic fiction. Set against the backdrop of the Gorkhaland insurgency in the Himalayan foothills as well as the immigrant experience in New York City, the novel weaves together multiple narrative threads and, crucially, multiple languages and registers. Characters slip between English, Hindi, Nepali, and Bengali, their language choices mapping their social positions, colonial inheritances, and diasporic longings.

The novel's dual narrative structure reinforces this linguistic duality. The story of Judge Patel and his granddaughter Sai in Kalimpong, India, is contrasted with the story of Biju, the cook's son, who is struggling as an unauthorised immigrant in New York City. These two worlds are not just geographic poles; they are also separate linguistic universes, each with its own hierarchies, exclusions, and desires. The novel's constant switching between these worlds is like how it switches between languages and registers.

This paper tries to analyse that Desai employs code-switching not merely as a stylistic technique but also as a sophisticated narrative strategy that enacts the very cultural negotiations her characters undergo. Drawing on Homi Bhabha's concept of the 'Third Space,' Gloria Anzaldúa's theory of borderlands, and John Gumperz's sociolinguistic framework of

conversational code-switching, the study demonstrates how the alternation between different languages in the novel reflects the diasporic condition of liminality, belonging, and displacement.

Code-Switching and Its Literary Value

Poplack (1980) defined code-switching, a key idea in sociolinguistics, as the use of two or more languages or language varieties in the same conversation or utterance. Scholars differentiate among inter-sentential switching (between sentences), intra-sentential switching (within a sentence), and tag switching (incorporating tags or phrases from another language). Gumperz (1982) stressed how important code-switching is for understanding conversations, expressing identity, and negotiating social situations. John Gumperz (1982), in Discourse Strategies, characterizes code-switching as 'the juxtaposition within the same speech exchange of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems or subsystems' (p. 59). He differentiates 'situational' code-switching, which reacts to alterations in social context, from 'metaphorical' code-switching, which serves symbolic or expressive purposes. Both types work in Desai's novel, but the metaphorical one, which is full of social meaning, is the one that best shows what is going on inside her characters.

Linguistically, code-switching is defined by Myers-Scotton (1993) as the alternation between languages within a single discourse. In literature, this practice becomes a stylistic choice that communicates the layered realities of diasporic life. Gloria Anzaldúa, in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), argues that multilingual expression resists cultural erasure, framing it as an act of survival and self-definition.

In recent times, researchers like Penelope Gardner-Chloros (2009) have stressed that code-switching shows that someone is not bad at languages, but rather they are very good at both. In literary contexts, it transforms into a conscious aesthetic and ideological decision. Dohra Ahmad (2007) contends that the multilingual text challenges the monolingual presuppositions of both the colonial language and the literary marketplace, inserting itself as a hybrid form that demands new reading practices.

Postcolonial and Cultural Theories

Homi Bhabha (1994) conceptualizes diasporic experience as existing within a "Third Space" where cultural hybridity flourishes. Code-switching exemplifies this hybridity by destabilizing monolingual conventions. Similarly, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) see linguistic plurality as a form of decolonizing literary practice, wherein indigenous and minority languages interrupt dominant colonial narratives.

Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity, articulated in *The Location of Culture* (1994), offers an essential theoretical framework. Bhabha posits that the colonial encounter does not yield pure identities on either side; instead, it generates a 'Third Space of enunciation' where cultural meanings are negotiated, translated, and transformed. Bhabha posits that language serves as the principal domain of negotiation: 'It is in the emergence of the interstices — the overlap and displacement of domains of difference — that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nation-ness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated' (p. 2).

Desai's characters exhibit such a Third Space — caught between Indian vernaculars and English, between the colonial past and the postcolonial present, between the homeland and the host country. Their code-switching linguistically illustrates this in-between condition. As Bhabha writes, the hybrid is always 'in-between,' and it is this in-betweenness which generates new cultural meanings which are not reducible to either original term.

Scholars such as Shuang Liu (2010) argue that code-switching serves a dual function—creating intimacy for readers familiar with the languages used while simultaneously challenging monolingual readers to engage with unfamiliar cultural contexts. This dual effect—intimacy for some readers and estrangement for others—mirrors the diasporic condition of belonging and alienation.

Linguistic Features

In the novel, the most striking thing is Desai's observation of minute details of characters at every nook and corner of their living space. The sustained vigour of her narrative keeps the reader spell bound and involved. The exposition of the novel's setting and characters in the background of Kanchenjunga and its grand pinnacle is a fascinating portrayal of Nature's beauties and bounties. The readers of Kiran Desai recapture this colourful picture in the first paragraph of chapter one. The metaphors light up in the locale of mountains and shadows. The description of natural scenery at the beginning of the novel brings freshness of thought and metaphor in the novel. Kiran Desai writes:

All day, the colours had been those of dusk, mist moving like a water creature across the great flanks of mountains possessed of ocean shadow and depths. Briefly visible above the vapour, Kanchenjunga was a far peak whittled out of ice, gathering the last of the light, a plume of snow blown high by the storms at its summit. (Desai 1)

Her use of Hindi language and songs and mention of Indian actors give a touch of authenticity to the characters. She uses both gentle (*Namaste*, *Dhanyawad*, *Shukria* etc) and sometimes vulgar (*behenchoots*) colloquial, vernacular expressions in Hindi. Postcolonial writers often take this liberty to have the flexibility of using English language along with borrowed words according to the socio-cultural situations where their characters are put in.

The most striking instance of code-switching in the novel revolves around the figure of Judge Patel, whose relationship with English is central to his identity and his alienation. Educated at Cambridge, the Judge has so thoroughly internalised English — its syntax, its cultural references, its emotional register — that he is rendered mute in his native languages. The novel presents his English not as emancipation but as a colonial wound: 'He'd been brought up on Shakespeare, Swift and Dickens, but he'd never felt comfortable in the language' (Desai, 34).

The Judge's code-switching — his incapacity to sustain the vernacular — is presented as a symptom of colonial damage. When he attempts to speak Hindi or Bengali, the words feel foreign, borrowed from a self he has been trained to disclaim. Desai here engages with what Frantz Fanon theorised in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) as the colonial subject's internalisation of the coloniser's tongue at the cost of self-alienation. For the Judge, English is

both his greatest achievement and his deepest loss: it has made him, and in making him, has unmade him.

The cook and the household servants in Kalimpong, on the other hand, live in a lively linguistic world where Hindi and Nepali are used as community, resistance, and real selfhood languages. Desai's portrayal of these characters' dialogue, replete with colloquial expressions, enacts a political inversion: the ostensibly inferior languages of the 'lower' classes serve as conduits of warmth, solidarity, and survival.

In addition to these, characteristic features of language is full length Hindi expressions in different contexts: *"Humara kya hoga,hai hai,humara kya hoga"(IL8), "Bar bar karta rahata hai" (IL 11), "O!Yeh ladki zara deewani lagti hai..." (IL 51), "Angrez ki tarah,Angrez Jaise,"(IL 105), "rasta rook"(IL 107), "Gas maar raha hai" (IL 217), "jai Gorkha"(IL 7),*etc.In fact, a society attuned to 'facebook' and 'internet' communication feels quite at home with such expressions used in different ethnic societies. Abuses and vulgar expressions: "*Sooar ka bachha*", "*uloo ka patha*" (IL 23), "*sala*" (IL 148), "*bephkuph*" (IL 182), "*bhenchoot*" (IL 287), "*sala machoot*" (IL 289), and "*gadhas*" (IL 297), etc.

Indian imagery and metaphors are also used: "*cheeks like two Simla apples*" (IL 262); the technical terms also find place, i.e. "*24 k*" (IL 45).

Apart from all this, she uses a wide range of words and expressions to enrich the communicative context of a multicultural society. The use of popular slangs, abuses of various regions, and frequently used Indian expressions are: *nakhara, pakora, huzoor, chhang,mia-bibi, mithai, pitaji, Angrezi Khana, salwars, kamalahai, Baapre! ladoos, dhotis, jhora, pallu, Budhoo, choksee, Neps, Namaste, aiyiye, baethiye, khaiye, dhanayawad, shukuria,chapattis, jalebi, haveli, tika, chokra,murga-murgi, bania, dhobi, hubshi, haat, atta, srikhand, kundan, peepal,chholah,rasta rook, phata phat, Bilkul Bekar, Jai Gorkha, Saag, bhai, Goras, ghas phoos, goondas, sukhtara, susu fucking oil, ber, chooran, jamun, tatti, roti, namak, gadhas, murdabad, parathas, tamasha, chappals, desi,* etc. The use of terms like these and such as *arre*, *kya*, and *bhai* without translation enacts what Mary Louise Pratt (1992) calls the 'contact zone' — a space of asymmetrical cultural encounter in which the subaltern voice refuses to make itself transparent to the dominant reader. Desai's choice not to explain or translate these words is a political statement in and of itself. It forces the reader, who is assumed to be an English speaker, to do the same kind of work that the vernacular speaker has to do every day in a world that is built around English.

Biju's Linguistic Liminality in New York

Perhaps the most complex site of code-switching in the novel is Biju's experience in New York. As an unregistered immigrant who works in restaurant kitchens, Biju becomes part of the people who speak non-standard language and are placed in the lowest status of American linguistic hierarchy. His English in terms of function and accent, is a source of shame in America and is paradoxically a source of pride when he imagines himself returning home. The novel tracks the subtle shifts in Biju's language use: when he is with his South Asian co-workers, he switches to Hindi or regional dialects; with American employers, he attempts

Standard American English; in his interior monologue, he drifts between registers, none of which fully contains him.

Linguistic liminality manifests itself in terms of what experts in diaspora studies describe as “double consciousness” (Du Bois, 1903). This is a situation where a person feels themselves always seen by a dominant other and being an outsider to all available forms of languages. Code-switching for Biju is not an act of hybrid triumph but one of agony and improvised struggle since every move into another language is another instance of failure in which Biju is forced to realize that there is no form of language in which he can completely be himself.

The language of Sai and Gyan

The sexual and political use of code-switching becomes apparent through the romantic relationship between Sai and Gyan. Both Sai, an English-educated girl, and Gyan, who is attracted to the idea of becoming educated and joining the Gorkhaland nationalist cause, are caught up in an affair defined by linguistic fault lines. The shift from English, used during their tender moments, to Nepali, the language of politics in which Gyan is involved, is foreshadowing of their impending separation.

This example helps to demonstrate the gender-related aspect of code-switching in the postcolonial context. According to Sara Mills, language choice in the postcolonial setting is inevitably gender-related: women are supposed to stick to the prestige language as a symbol of modernism and higher education, whereas men may be motivated by the need to affirm their nationalism and masculine identity through the use of their own language.

English as Dominant Code

In the novel, English represents a dominant code — a marker of courts, academia, class and global mobility. However, what Desai illustrates is that English is not available to everybody and everyone equally. There is a certain hierarchy associated with English and its mastery. For the Judge, English makes him superior; for Biju, English signifies his immigrant and subaltern status; for the cook, speaking limited English means that he does have access to the lower strata of society but nothing more.

This particular kind of relationship with the English language brings to mind the idea of 'linguistic imperialism' proposed by Robert Phillipson (1992). As such, the use of English can be seen both as an aspiration and as something that is a legacy of colonisation. Those characters who can "switch up" to English will receive certain benefits; those who cannot "switch up" will lose out on them.

The Unspoken and the Untranslatable

No less important than the act of translation in the novel is its omission. With every shift between vernaculars and English, a specific mode of expression becomes unavailable to the speaker. In this way, the cook's profound love for Biju can only be articulated through the medium of food preparation, through broken songs, and through Hindi utterances that Desai reproduces but does not necessarily translate. Such untranslatability indicates the boundaries of linguistic hybridity, indicating that there are emotions that cannot be contained within the colonial language.

This can be seen as a reflection on the theory of Gayatri Spivak (1988), who asks in her essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' whether the subaltern voice can speak within colonial representations. While Desai does not romanticize such silence, she nevertheless renders it visible by including untranslated vernaculars in her text.

Hybridity as a Strategy and a Scar

One such paradox in the novel, and diaspora studies in general, revolves around the dichotomy between celebratory and melancholic views of hybridity. The Third Space, developed by Bhabha, has come under severe criticism (by Aijiz Ahmad and Benita Parry) for romanticizing the notion of hybridity, ignoring the practical aspects of its production, its pain, and its asymmetrical relations of power. Both views are presented in Desai's novel.

On the one hand, instances of switching between languages create productive linguistic possibilities, producing a different form of expression that cannot be reduced into either language. For instance, Sai's thoughts are presented using English grammar and syntax but with idioms from Hindi and words from Nepali. It represents the use of linguistic hybridity as an instrument of creativity.

On the contrary, Desai shows a relentless emphasis on the trauma of hybridity. This is seen in The Judge's lack of proficiency in English or Hindi, Biju's shame over his accent in English, and the cook's language being excluded from the world of his son in New York. All these are not a celebration of hybridity but its price. Through her narrative, Desai criticizes the post-colonial cosmopolitan for having a propensity for romanticizing the very displacements that lead to the ruination of regular lives.

Desai in the Tradition of Diasporic Writing

The practice of code-switching used by Desai can place her in line with other significant authors from the South Asian diaspora, such as Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Rohinton Mistry, who all negotiate their relationships with the language issue in their own distinct manner. The quotation by Rushdie about the stereoscopic vision possessed by the immigrant writer could be pertinent here; however, Desai's attitude to it is highly sceptical – double vision might become disorientating rather than productive for an author.

Unlike the English-focused prose by Lahiri, whose texts are predominantly realist, Desai's writing is more complex and politically loaded. Unlike the highly polyphonic narratives of Rushdie, whose maximalist style creates a complex network of voices, Desai's practice of code-switching is much more intimate and psychological. Desai's unique contribution to the literary genre is the depiction of the consequences of colonial language policies on the scale of everyday life – at home, in courtrooms, and during night shifts at restaurant

Conclusion

In this paper, it has been demonstrated that the code-switching employed by Kiran Desai in her novel The Inheritance of Loss is not merely decorative or realistic but reflects the very complexity of the intercultural struggles which characterize diaspora. In analyzing this process of language selection in Desai's work through the theories offered by Bhabha, Gumperz, Hall, Spivak, and Anzaldúa, it has become evident how every utterance in the novel speaks to issues of power, class, gender, and colonial past.

The paralysis of the Judge between English and his native language, Biju's linguistic struggle in New York, the linguistic richness of the cook, and the negotiation of language between Sai and Gyan — all these indicate that in Desai's narrative every linguistic gesture is also a gesture of self-identity, of complicity and resistance. In diasporic literature, this truth becomes acute. The act of shifting between cultural and linguistic spaces simultaneously, reflects the fractured, hyphenated identities of those who live between worlds, belonging fully to none and partially to all.

Finally, the paper has situated Desai's achievement within the broader tradition of diasporic writing, suggesting that her distinctive contribution is to ground the grand themes of postcolonial theory in the intimate textures of language — the daily negotiations of people trying to speak themselves into existence in a world not made for them. In doing so, *The Inheritance of Loss* makes a powerful case that language is not merely a tool of the diasporic condition but its very substance.

Works Cited:

- Ahmad, D. (2007). Rotten English: A Literary Anthology. Norton.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). The Location of Culture. Routledge.
- Desai, K. (2006). The Inheritance of Loss. Atlantic Books.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (1903). The Souls of Black Folk. A. C. McClurg & Co.
- Fanon, F. (1952). Black Skin, White Masks. Trans. C. L. Markmann. Grove Press.
- Gardner-Chloros, P. (2009). Code-Switching. Cambridge University Press.
- Gumperz, J. J. (1982). Discourse Strategies. Cambridge University Press.
- Hall, S. (1990). 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora.' In J. Rutherford (Ed.), Identity: Community, Culture, Difference (pp. 222–237). Lawrence & Wishart.
- Mills, S. (1992). Discourse of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism. Routledge.
- Parry, B. (1994). 'Signs of Our Times: Discussion of Homi Bhabha's The Location of Culture.' Third Text, 28–29, 5–24.
- Phillipson, R. (1992). Linguistic Imperialism. Oxford University Press.
- Pratt, M. L. (1992). Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation. Routledge.
- Rushdie, S. (1991). Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991. Granta Books.
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.