

Writing Between Worlds: Linguistic Displacement, Identity, and the Search for Belonging in Jhumpa Lahiri's *In Other Words* and *Whereabouts*

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Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri's literary oeuvre has frequently been examined through the frameworks of diaspora, cultural identity, migration, hybridity, and displacement. However, her later linguistic transition from English to Italian offers a distinctive dimension through which her understanding of belonging and identity can be reconsidered. This qualitative research paper examines the relationship between language, displacement, and selfhood in Lahiri's *In Other Words* (In altre parole, 2016) and *Whereabouts* (Dove mi trovo, 2018). Rather than treating language merely as a medium of literary expression, the study conceptualizes language as a space in which identity is negotiated and reconstructed. Through qualitative textual analysis, the paper investigates how Lahiri's movement into Italian produces experiences of estrangement, vulnerability, freedom, and renewed self-discovery. The analysis further considers how translation becomes both a linguistic practice and a metaphor for the diasporic condition. Lahiri's choice to write *Whereabouts* originally in Italian complicates conventional understandings of immigrant literature by demonstrating that belonging does not necessarily emerge from recovering an ancestral language or assimilating into a dominant culture. Instead, it may develop through inhabiting linguistic uncertainty. The paper argues that Lahiri transforms linguistic displacement from a condition of loss into a creative strategy for constructing an alternative self. Her work consequently expands the conceptual boundaries of diasporic literature by presenting belonging as an ongoing process rather than a fixed geographical or cultural destination.

Keywords: Jhumpa Lahiri, linguistic displacement, diaspora, identity, belonging, Italian, translation, multilingualism, qualitative research

1. Introduction

Migration frequently produces a complex relationship between geographical location, cultural identity, and language. For diasporic writers, language can function simultaneously as a connection to home, a marker of difference, a source of alienation, and a means of self-expression. Jhumpa Lahiri occupies a particularly significant position within this literary landscape because her relationship with language has undergone a remarkable transformation. Born in London to Bengali parents and raised in the United States, Lahiri initially became widely recognized for writing in English about the experiences of Bengali

immigrants and their children in America. Her early works, including *Interpreter of Maladies*, *The Namesake*, and *Unaccustomed Earth*, explore questions of migration, cultural inheritance, generational conflict, and belonging.

Yet Lahiri's later linguistic trajectory challenges a conventional reading of her as simply an Indian-American or diasporic English-language writer. Her decision to learn Italian, relocate partly to Italy, and eventually write creatively in Italian represents a significant shift in both her literary practice and her understanding of identity. In *Other Words* records this linguistic journey, while *Whereabouts* demonstrates the extent to which Italian became a language of literary creation.

This linguistic transition raises an important question: What happens to diasporic identity when a writer voluntarily enters a language that is neither the language of ancestral heritage nor the dominant language of childhood?

The question is important because Lahiri's relationship with Italian differs from the traditional immigrant experience. Italian is not presented simply as a language imposed upon her by migration. Instead, it is a language she actively chooses. Her movement toward Italian therefore creates a form of self-imposed linguistic displacement.

This paper argues that Lahiri's engagement with Italian can be understood as a deliberate attempt to inhabit a space of uncertainty. Rather than seeking a stable linguistic home, Lahiri appears to embrace the discomfort of being linguistically "in between." Her later work suggests that identity need not depend upon complete linguistic mastery or cultural rootedness. Instead, the experience of not fully belonging may itself become productive.

2. Research Problem

Existing discussions of Lahiri's literature have extensively examined themes such as diaspora, immigrant identity, cultural hybridity, assimilation, generational conflict, Bengali-American identity, home and homelessness, cultural memory, and the relationship between parents and children.

Although these themes remain important, Lahiri's transition from English to Italian provides an opportunity to reconsider her work from another perspective. The central problem addressed in this study is that linguistic displacement in Lahiri's later writing cannot be adequately explained through conventional immigrant or postcolonial models of language.

For many diasporic writers, language is associated with ancestral inheritance or cultural loss. Lahiri complicates this pattern by choosing a language that is neither her family's Bengali nor the English in which she established her literary career.

Her linguistic journey consequently raises questions about whether language determines belonging or whether individuals can deliberately construct new forms of belonging through language.

3. Research Questions

1. How does Jhumpa Lahiri represent linguistic displacement in *In Other Words* and *Whereabouts*?
2. How does the adoption of Italian influence her representation of identity and belonging?
3. How does Lahiri transform linguistic uncertainty into a source of creative and personal freedom?
4. What role does translation play in negotiating linguistic and cultural identity?
5. How does Lahiri's linguistic transition challenge conventional understandings of diasporic identity?

4. Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the representation of linguistic displacement in Lahiri's selected works.

2. To analyse the relationship between language and identity.
3. To explore the connection between linguistic uncertainty and belonging.
4. To investigate translation as a metaphor for diasporic existence.
5. To demonstrate how Lahiri's Italian writing complicates conventional definitions of immigrant and diasporic literature.

5. Significance of the Study

The study is significant for three principal reasons.

First, it moves beyond the frequently discussed theme of cultural displacement and focuses on linguistic displacement.

Second, it examines Lahiri's relatively less explored Italian phase, thereby extending literary scholarship beyond her earlier English-language works.

Third, the study proposes that belonging may not necessarily require linguistic or cultural rootedness. Lahiri's work instead suggests that uncertainty itself can become a space of belonging.

This perspective is particularly relevant in contemporary societies characterized by migration, multilingualism, transnational mobility, and hybrid identities.

6. Review of Literature

Jhumpa Lahiri's work has generated substantial critical attention because of its engagement with migration and identity. Scholars have frequently positioned her within the broader tradition of diasporic literature. Diaspora studies generally emphasize the tension between homeland and hostland. Traditional models of migration often imagine identity as divided between two locations: the place from which an individual originates and the place in which the individual currently resides. Lahiri's early fiction clearly engages with this tension. Her characters frequently negotiate between Bengali cultural traditions inherited from their parents and American social environments.

However, such a binary framework becomes insufficient when examining Lahiri's later linguistic journey. The concept of hybridity, associated particularly with postcolonial scholarship, provides another useful framework. Hybridity challenges the idea that identities remain culturally pure and instead emphasizes the emergence of identities through cultural interaction. Lahiri's writing similarly demonstrates that identity can exist between cultures.

Nevertheless, *In Other Words* introduces an additional complication. Lahiri does not merely occupy a hybrid position between Bengali and English. She deliberately enters Italian, creating a linguistic triangle involving Bengali, English, and Italian. This development suggests that Lahiri's identity cannot simply be understood as a negotiation between home and host. Instead, it becomes a continuous movement among languages.

The scholarship on multilingualism and translation is therefore particularly relevant. Translation can be understood not merely as transferring meaning from one language to another but as an encounter between different systems of thought and identity. Lahiri's fascination with translation reflects her broader interest in occupying the space between linguistic systems.

Her work thus allows the researcher to reinterpret diaspora not simply as geographical displacement but as linguistic inhabitation.

7. Theoretical Framework

The study combines three interconnected theoretical perspectives.

7.1 Diaspora Theory

Diaspora theory provides the foundation for understanding displacement, migration, cultural memory, and belonging. The study particularly considers the idea that diasporic identities are not fixed but continuously reconstructed.

7.2 Linguistic Identity

Language is treated as more than a communication system. It functions as a site of identity formation. A person's relationship with a language can influence how they perceive themselves and how they are positioned by others.

7.3 Translation and In-Betweenness

Translation theory provides an especially productive framework for reading Lahiri. Translation involves movement between linguistic systems without necessarily achieving perfect equivalence. Similarly, Lahiri's diasporic identity exists between languages without necessarily resolving into one stable linguistic identity.

The study therefore conceptualizes linguistic in-betweenness as a condition in which an individual simultaneously experiences distance from and connection to multiple languages.

8. Research Methodology

8.1 Research Design

The study employs a qualitative research design based on interpretive textual analysis. Rather than collecting numerical data, the research investigates meanings, patterns, symbols, narrative strategies, and linguistic experiences represented in the selected texts.

8.2 Primary Texts

Two works by Jhumpa Lahiri have been selected:

- In Other Words (2016)
- Whereabouts (2018)

These texts have been selected because they represent different stages of Lahiri's relationship with Italian. In other words, functions largely as a reflection on her attempt to enter Italian, whereas *Whereabouts* demonstrates her creative engagement with the language.

8.3 Data Collection

The primary data consist of passages, narrative descriptions, reflections, metaphors, linguistic observations, and recurring thematic patterns in the selected texts. Secondary material includes scholarly articles, books on Lahiri, diaspora studies, multilingualism studies, translation theory, and literary criticism.

8.4 Method of Analysis

The study employs thematic textual analysis. The texts are examined for recurring patterns relating to linguistic alienation, linguistic desire, vulnerability, translation, silence, identity reconstruction, geographical displacement, belonging, and freedom. These categories are subsequently interpreted in relation to the theoretical framework.

9. Analysis and Discussion

9.1 Language as a Chosen Form of Displacement

One of the most distinctive aspects of Lahiri's linguistic journey is that her displacement into Italian is voluntary. Unlike migrants who are forced to abandon their native language because of political, economic, or social circumstances, Lahiri actively chooses to enter an unfamiliar language.

This distinction is crucial.

The unfamiliarity of Italian initially creates vulnerability. Lahiri cannot express herself with the same confidence that she possesses in English. Her linguistic limitations consequently disrupt the authority normally associated with being an established writer.

The established English-language author becomes a beginner again. This reversal is significant because it destabilizes the relationship between language and authority. In English, Lahiri possesses literary confidence. In Italian, she experiences linguistic dependence and uncertainty. Her decision to remain within this discomfort suggests that linguistic displacement can be deliberately embraced rather than merely endured.

9.2 The Foreign Language as a Space of Freedom

Paradoxically, the foreign language that makes Lahiri vulnerable also provides her with freedom. A familiar language carries memories, expectations, social identities, and cultural associations. A new language can create distance from those inherited meanings. Italian consequently becomes a space in which Lahiri can experiment with another version of herself. This phenomenon can be described as linguistic reinvention. Rather than asking, "Which language truly belongs to me?" Lahiri's work asks a more complicated question: Can I create another self through a language that does not originally belong to me? The answer emerging from her work appears to be affirmative.

9.3 Translation as a Metaphor for Diaspora

Translation occupies a central conceptual position in understanding Lahiri's work. A translated text exists between languages. It belongs simultaneously to the source language and the target language while never being completely identical to either. This condition closely resembles diasporic identity. The diasporic subject similarly exists between cultural locations.

Lahiri's linguistic practice therefore transforms translation into a metaphor for identity.

The translated self is not necessarily an incomplete self. Instead, it can be understood as a self continually reconstructed through movement between linguistic worlds.

9.4 The Body and the Foreign Language

Language in Lahiri's later work is not merely intellectual. It is embodied. Learning another language involves the mouth, ear, memory, rhythm, pronunciation, gesture, and physical experience. The foreign language therefore becomes something that must be physically inhabited.

This dimension is important because it shifts the understanding of language from something one simply "knows" to something one lives. Lahiri's relationship with Italian consequently demonstrates that linguistic identity is not determined solely by grammatical competence.

A person may belong to a language emotionally, imaginatively, and creatively even while remaining imperfect within it.

9.5 From Linguistic Mastery to Linguistic Vulnerability

Lahiri's literary career began with considerable command over English. Her transition to Italian reverses this relationship.

She deliberately chooses a language in which she cannot initially communicate with the same level of precision.

This creates an unusual literary condition: the writer chooses not to remain within the language in which she is already successful.

Such a choice challenges the conventional relationship between literary success and linguistic mastery. Instead of pursuing greater authority, Lahiri pursues greater vulnerability.

This suggests that creativity can emerge from limitation.

The inability to express everything perfectly may encourage the writer to become more attentive to silence, ambiguity, rhythm, and absence.

10. Whereabouts: The Geography of Belonging

Whereabouts provides an important extension of the linguistic concerns developed in *In Other Words*.

The novel follows an unnamed female protagonist through an unnamed Italian city. The absence of precise geographical identification is significant.

The protagonist occupies spaces such as streets, cafés, shops, parks, offices, and homes without establishing a conventional sense of rootedness.

The city becomes less a fixed homeland than a temporary field of experience.

This geographical ambiguity parallels Lahiri's linguistic displacement.

Just as she inhabits a language without fully possessing it, the protagonist inhabits a city without completely claiming it.

The result is a literary representation of belonging without ownership.

Belonging is therefore presented not as possession of a place but as participation in everyday experiences.

11. Silence and the Unspoken

Another significant feature of Lahiri's later writing is the importance of silence.

When language becomes uncertain, silence becomes meaningful.

In conventional narratives of migration, language acquisition is often presented as successful integration: the migrant learns the dominant language and therefore becomes socially included.

Lahiri challenges this linear model.

Her writing suggests that complete linguistic assimilation is neither necessary nor necessarily desirable.

Silence, hesitation, and linguistic incompleteness can themselves represent identity.

The absence of complete expression becomes a form of expression.

12. Belonging as a Process Rather Than a Destination

The central argument emerging from the qualitative analysis is that Lahiri reconceptualizes belonging.

Traditional understandings often associate belonging with homeland, nationality, family, ethnicity, language, or geographical permanence.

Lahiri complicates each of these categories.

Her Bengali heritage does not provide a complete linguistic home.

English provides literary success but does not entirely resolve questions of identity.

Italian is foreign but becomes creatively intimate.

Italy provides geographical space but not necessarily absolute belonging.

Consequently, Lahiri's work suggests that belonging is processual rather than permanent.

One does not necessarily arrive at belonging.
Instead, one continually creates it.

13. Major Findings

The qualitative analysis produces five major findings.

Finding 1: Linguistic displacement can be voluntary

Lahiri's movement toward Italian differs from conventional migrant linguistic displacement because it is consciously chosen.

Finding 2: Foreignness can become creative

Her limited familiarity with Italian produces vulnerability but simultaneously enables experimentation and self-reinvention.

Finding 3: Translation represents diasporic identity

The condition of moving between languages provides a metaphor for the experience of living between cultures.

Finding 4: Belonging does not require linguistic mastery

Lahiri's work challenges the assumption that one must completely master a language to belong to it.

Finding 5: In-betweenness becomes an identity

Rather than resolving her linguistic displacement, Lahiri transforms "between-ness" into a productive identity position.

14. Conclusion

Jhumpa Lahiri's later literary trajectory offers a particularly important intervention into contemporary discussions of diaspora, language, and identity. Her movement from English into Italian cannot be understood simply as a linguistic experiment. It represents a deeper engagement with the question of what it means to belong.

Through *In Other Words* and *Whereabouts*, Lahiri transforms the foreign language from a barrier into a space of possibility. Italian initially produces estrangement because it removes the linguistic confidence she possessed in English. Yet this very vulnerability enables a form of creative freedom.

Her work demonstrates that linguistic identity is not necessarily inherited. It can also be chosen, constructed, inhabited, and continually revised.

Most importantly, Lahiri challenges the assumption that diasporic subjects must eventually resolve their cultural or linguistic displacement. Her work instead embraces uncertainty. She does not necessarily seek a final linguistic home; she explores what it means to live between languages.

In this sense, Lahiri's Italian writing represents more than a change of literary language. It represents a reconceptualization of belonging itself.

The study therefore concludes that Lahiri's later work expands diasporic literature from a narrative of displacement toward a narrative of creative in-betweenness. Language becomes not simply the marker of where one comes from but a space through which one can imagine who one might become.

15. Limitations of the Study

The study has several limitations.

First, it focuses primarily on two works and therefore does not provide a comprehensive analysis of Lahiri's entire literary corpus.

Second, the study is interpretive and therefore involves the researcher's reading of literary texts.

Third, because the study focuses specifically on linguistic displacement, other important dimensions of Lahiri's work—such as gender, class, sexuality, political identity, and family relationships—receive comparatively limited attention.

Future research could address these dimensions through comparative studies involving Lahiri and other multilingual writers.

16. Scope for Future Research

Future researchers may examine:

- Lahiri's Italian writing alongside her English writing;
- Bengali, English, and Italian as three stages of identity formation;
- translation and self-translation in Lahiri's works;
- gender and linguistic displacement;
- multilingualism and female authorship;
- silence and linguistic failure in diasporic fiction;
- the relationship between language choice and literary identity; and
- Lahiri alongside other multilingual writers such as Vladimir Nabokov, Samuel Beckett, or Eva Hoffman.

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