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NARRATIVE VOICE: CONSTRUCTING LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN POSTCOLONIAL NARRATIVES

Mahira Hajiyeva,

*Doctor of Philological Sciences, Professor,
Azerbaijan University of Languages (Baku, Azerbaijan)
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-6922-4286*

Abstract. This article examines the role of narrative voice in the construction of language and cultural identity within postcolonial narratives. Drawing upon the theoretical perspectives of Frantz Fanon, Edward Said and Bill Ashcroft, the study explores how postcolonial writers employ narrative strategies to articulate displacement, hybridity, fragmented identity, and cultural resistance. Particular attention is given to the relationship between narration, linguistic hybridity, memory, and historical trauma. Through the analysis of works by Mohsin Hamid, Kamila Shamsie, Bapsi Sidhwa, Sorayya Khan, and Bina Shah, the article demonstrates that narrative voice functions not only as a literary technique but also as a cultural and linguistic space where identity, belonging, and resistance are negotiated. The study further argues that contemporary postcolonial dystopian fiction expands these discussions through the representation of gender identity, surveillance, and ideological control. Ultimately, the article emphasizes that postcolonial narrative voice reconstructs marginalized cultural experiences while simultaneously challenging the ideological legacy of colonial discourse.

Key words: narrative voice, cultural identity, linguistic hybridity, postcolonial theory, cultural memory.

Introduction. Postcolonial narratives occupy a significant place within contemporary literary studies due to its engagement with colonial history, cultural displacement, migration, identity formation, and resistance to imperial discourse. Emerging from societies shaped by colonial domination, postcolonial literature frequently examines the psychological, linguistic, and cultural consequences of colonialism while simultaneously reconstructing silenced histories and marginalized perspectives.

Within this framework, narrative voice becomes one of the central literary mechanisms through which cultural identity is represented and negotiated. Narrative voice refers not only to the perspective through which a story is told, but also to the ideological, linguistic, and cultural position embedded within narration itself. In postcolonial fiction, narration often carries traces of displacement, hybridity, memory, and resistance, transforming storytelling into a space where individual and collective identities are reconstructed.

The relationship between narrative voice and cultural identity is particularly significant because postcolonial writers frequently reconstruct colonized experience through language itself. Rather than using English as a neutral medium, postcolonial authors reshape and hybridize the language of the colonizer through local expressions, untranslated words, oral storytelling traditions, and culturally specific forms of narration. Consequently, linguistic hybridity becomes an essential aspect of identity formation, reflecting the fragmented and negotiated condition of postcolonial subjectivity. Narrative voice therefore functions not merely as a stylistic device, but also as a linguistic space where cultural memory, resistance, and belonging are articulated.

This article aims to examine the role of narrative voice in constructing language and cultural identity in postcolonial narratives. The study employs a comparative and interdisciplinary methodological approach grounded in postcolonial theory, drawing upon the works of Frantz Fanon, Edward Said and Bill Ashcroft. Through the analysis of selected postcolonial novels, particularly from Pakistani English literature, the article explores how narrative voice reflects hybridity, fragmented identity, cultural memory, linguistic resistance, and gendered subjectivity within both realist and dystopian contexts.

Discussion. One of the major consequences of the postcolonial condition, namely mass displacement, migration, and assimilation, is a significant factor influencing the construction of cultural identity. These processes lead the postcolonial subject to confront problems of belonging, self-perception, and cultural affiliation, which are reflected through narrative voice in literary texts. We can analyze this issue through the theoretical perspectives of Frantz Fanon and Edward Said, whose approaches emerge as responses to colonial discourse grounded in the “us” versus “them” dualism. Edward Said characterizes the age as “the age of refugees, displaced persons, and mass migration” (Said, 2016) emphasizing that migration and displacement are inseparable aspects of the postcolonial condition. Within this context, narrative voice becomes a literary medium through which fragmented cultural experience, alienation, and the search for identity are articulated.

The emergence of displacement, migration, assimilation, and fragmented cultural identity within postcolonial societies cannot be examined separately from the ideological foundations of colonial discourse itself. The roots of this condition lie in the Eurocentric worldview that constructed hierarchical oppositions between the colonizer and the colonized and legitimized cultural, political, and intellectual domination through the “us” versus “them” binary.

European missionaries, intellectuals, scholars, and literary figures, who assumed the “burden” of bringing civilization and progress to the non-European world, simultaneously engaged in religious, educational, and medical activities while also studying local cultural traditions outside Europe. However, alongside these seemingly humanitarian activities, they contributed to the dissemination of colonial ideology and the dominant belief in the intellectual and cultural superiority of Europeans. In this way, colonial discourse legitimized not only political domination but also the physical and cultural exploitation of colonized peoples. Even after the collapse of the colonial system and the achievement of political independence by former colonies, the ideological foundations of colonialism continued to persist. As George Lamming observes, colonialism transformed into “a subtle and deeply rooted myth” (Ashcroft, 1995, p. 13) that could not easily be dismantled. The persistence of this dominant racial and cultural perception reveals that colonial ideology survived beyond formal imperial rule.

The formation and preservation of this ideology relied heavily on the “us” versus “them” dualism that became central to colonial discourse. Within this framework, the non-Western “other” was represented as racially, culturally, and historically inferior, yet simultaneously portrayed as fully knowable and classifiable through Western systems of knowledge. Such representations remained strikingly stable regardless of geographical or historical differences, reducing non-Western societies to fixed stereotypes. The works of Fanon and Said demonstrate that Orientalism and colonial representation functioned through this polarized perception, where the colonized world was viewed both as an object of scientific exploration and as a source of fantasy, myth, and obsession. Consequently, literature, journalism, science, and later cinema actively reinforced these binary oppositions and contributed to the normalization of imperial domination and discrimination.

The emergence of postcolonial thought in the second half of the twentieth century marked a significant challenge to these dominant Eurocentric narratives. Decolonization processes following the Second World War, including the independence movements in Asia and Africa, created a pluralistic intellectual environment that encouraged the rise of anti-colonial and postcolonial theory. Thinkers such as Said, Bhabha, Spivak, Robert J. C. Young, and Bill Ashcroft questioned not only colonial practices but also the philosophical foundations that sustained them. Their approaches emphasized hybridity, cultural interaction, resistance, and the instability of fixed identities. Rather than understanding culture within rigid binaries such as native/foreign or colonizer/colonized, postcolonial theory interprets cultural identity as hybrid, dynamic, and constantly shaped through interaction and negotiation.

Within this context, postcolonial literature became one of the principal spaces in which these tensions were articulated. Narrative voice, in particular, emerged as a significant literary strategy for expressing displacement, alienation, fragmented identity, and cultural resistance. The postcolonial

writer attempts simultaneously to rediscover historical roots, examine present realities, and reveal the colonial processes that shaped them. Both the colonial and postcolonial periods are therefore represented through narratives of physical, psychological, and cultural dislocation accompanied by struggles for survival, resistance, and self-definition. As a methodological approach rather than a unified theory, postcolonialism investigates the shared cultural experiences of societies shaped by colonial history while also emphasizing their distinctive historical and cultural conditions. In this sense, narrative voice becomes a medium through which postcolonial fiction reconstructs cultural and linguistic identity while simultaneously challenging the ideological legacy of colonial discourse through the transformation of language itself.

Within this system of controlled representation, where colonial discourse defined both the content and the limits of knowledge about the “Other,” literature becomes a crucial site of resistance. Bill Ashcroft emphasizes that “The most persistent, widespread and effective revival of postcolonial resistance is the appropriation and transformation of dominant technologies for the purpose of reconstructing and re-presenting postcolonial identity, resisting erasure” (Ashcroft, 2001, p. 14). In this sense, postcolonial narrative strategies often involve the adoption and reconfiguration of the colonizer’s language, forms, and thematic structures as a counter-discursive response to imperial representation. A clear illustration of this dynamic can be found in the contrast between Joseph Conrad’s depiction of Africa in “Heart of Darkness” and Chinua Achebe’s reconfiguration of Africa as a complex cultural and historical space in “Things Fall Apart”, where the same discursive field is re-signified from within. In this process, narrative voice functions as an “answering back” to colonial discourse, directly engaging with and challenging the authority of imperial representation rather than remaining a passive site of description. Within this framework, narrative voice becomes closely connected with questions of power, cultural authority, and identity construction, as postcolonial writers resist Eurocentric narratives, reinterpret historical experience from the perspective of the colonized subject, and transform previously silenced voices into central agents of literary and cultural expression.

This resistance is not only thematic but also formal, as it becomes embedded in the structure of narrative voice itself, producing hybrid and fragmented modes of storytelling that reflect the instability of postcolonial identity. In this sense, narrative form moves beyond representation and begins to embody the very condition it describes, where identity is constructed through discontinuity, multiplicity, and cultural negotiation. Consequently, postcolonial narrative strategies foreground linguistic hybridity, fragmented selfhood, nonlinear narration, multiplicity of perspectives, and a persistent sense of cultural in-betweenness, all of which emerge as defining features of postcolonial subjectivity.

These aspects are clearly illustrated in “The Reluctant Fundamentalist” and “Burnt Shadows”. In both novels, protagonists embody fragmented selfhood shaped by “cultural in-betweenness”, where identity is continuously negotiated rather than firmly established.

In “The Reluctant Fundamentalist”, Changez’s fragmentation is particularly intense and ultimately unresolved. His identity evolves through several stages: initially, he is captivated by success in the United States and strives to assimilate into American society; however, after the events of 9/11, the increasing suspicion directed toward individuals of his racial and cultural background forces him into a position of conscious differentiation. In response, Changez attempts to assert his difference from Americans, most visibly through a change in his appearance – his beard – which becomes a symbolic marker of identity and a response to widespread stereotyping. It is therefore no coincidence that the novel begins with the lines: “Excuse me, sir, but may I be of assistance? Ah, I see I have alarmed you. Do not be frightened by my beard: I am a lover of America” (Hamid, 2007, p. 1). Within the “us” versus “them” dualism, the latter has consistently been stereotyped as the negative side. However, this overt act of resistance does not resolve his identity crisis; instead, it intensifies his sense of dislocation both in America and upon his return to Pakistan, where he still cannot fully locate a stable sense of belonging. As Fanon observes, “This culture, abandoned, sloughed off, rejected, despised, becomes

for the inferiorized an object of passionate attachment. There is a very marked kind of overvaluation that is psychologically closely linked to the craving for forgiveness" (Fanon, 1964, p. 41).

In contrast, "Burnt Shadows" presents a broader historical and transnational canvas in which identity is shaped through repeated displacement and global conflict. The novel follows characters across major historical ruptures, including the atomic bombing of Nagasaki, the Partition of India, and post-9/11 America. Within this shifting historical framework, the protagonist is repeatedly forced to adapt to new cultural environments, yet each transition is marked by loss, rupture, and reconfiguration of identity. Alongside her, her son Raza – born to a Japanese mother and a Pakistani father and raised in a multicultural environment – struggles to define a stable sense of self when confronted with global political suspicion, particularly in the United States, where he is racialized and perceived as a potential terrorist: "There was something that she learned to recognize after Nagasaki, after Partition: those who could step out from loss, and those who would remain mired in it. Raza was the miring sort, despite the inheritance he should have had from both his parents, two of the world's great forward-movers" (Shamsie, 2009, p. 146).

In both novels, identity is not presented as a unified essence but as a fractured and unstable process shaped by historical violence, migration, and cultural encounters. While Changez's fragmentation leads to unresolved internal and external conflict, Raza's trajectory similarly reflects the impossibility of fixed identity within a globalized postcolonial world. Together, these texts demonstrate how narrative voice constructs identity as inherently hybrid, unstable, and continuously negotiated within spaces of cultural in-betweenness.

In postcolonial fiction, narrative voice functions not merely as a means of storytelling but as a medium through which cultural experience, memory, and belonging are preserved and communicated. In this regard, literature possesses what scholars describe as the "ideological power of literature as a part of cultural process which may serve to create liberal or on the contrary, conservative outlook" (Hajiyeva, 2015, p. 51). Through narrative strategies, linguistic choices, and representations of identity, postcolonial writers participate in shaping cultural consciousness and social values. Rather than presenting culture through direct explanation, postcolonial authors frequently embed local traditions, forms of address, expressions, and untranslated words into narration itself, allowing the native voice to emerge from within the linguistic structure of the text. In this way, narration carries traces of collective memory and cultural experience that cannot be fully reproduced through standardized language alone. Bill Ashcroft emphasizes that the use of untranslated words performs an important function in expressing cultural difference because "they signify a cultural experience which can no longer be recreated, but whose existence is validated by the new situation" (Ashcroft, 2001, p. 78).

This approach is particularly visible in the works of Bapsi Sidhwa, where English becomes a literary space shaped simultaneously by Urdu, Gujarati, and local cultural traditions. In her fiction, local expressions and culturally specific forms of address are preserved within English narration, transforming language into a hybrid narrative medium capable of carrying multiple cultural experiences at once. A similar narrative strategy can be observed in "Noor" and "Burnt Shadows", where native linguistic forms are retained particularly in the representation of family relations and emotional intimacy. In "Noor", Sorayya Khan describes the encounter between Sajida and her unborn child through the words: "Ammi", she called in a high pitched voice of a young child registering an all consuming need for her mother" (Khan, 2003, p. 11). Similarly, in "Burnt Shadows", Kamila Shamsie writes: "Yes, Aba," Raza said automatically. "Every father in this neighbourhood of migrants, each with stories of all they had lost and all they had started rebuild after Partition, made a similar speech to his son" (Shamsie, 2009, p. 136). In both examples, the use of the Urdu words "Ammi" and "Aba" instead of their English equivalents "mother" or "father" is far from accidental. These expressions carry profound semantic and emotional meanings rooted in cultural memory, intimacy, and collective experience, preserving dimensions of identity that cannot be fully conveyed through direct translation.

The same narrative voice also carries the historical trauma of displacement and Partition. Describing the division of the subcontinent, Bapsi Sidhwa writes: “Playing British gods under the ceiling fans of the Falettis Hotel – behind Queen Victoria’s garden skirt – the Radcliffe Commission deals out Indian cities like a pack of cards. Lahore is dealt to Pakistan, Amritsar to India. Sialkot to Pakistan, Pathankot to India” (Sidhwa, 1989, p. 140). The ironic and emotionally charged narrative tone transforms political history into lived cultural experience, demonstrating how postcolonial narration intertwines personal memory with collective historical trauma. In this sense, narrative voice becomes a space where displacement, belonging, and cultural continuity are negotiated through the persistent presence of the native voice within the language of the colonizer.

The fragmentation of identity in postcolonial fiction becomes particularly visible in the representation of gender within dystopian settings. While hybridity reflects cultural and historical division, dystopian narratives intensify these tensions by placing gender identity under systems of ideological, political, and patriarchal control. As a result, narrative voice becomes a significant medium through which female subjectivity, resistance, and psychological conflict are articulated.

In many postcolonial dystopian texts, women occupy contested spaces between tradition and autonomy, visibility and erasure, and collective morality and individual identity. The dystopian environment frequently transforms the female body into a site of regulation and symbolic control, reflecting broader anxieties surrounding nationalism, cultural preservation, and patriarchal authority. Through subjective narration and psychologically charged perspectives, these works reveal how gender identity is shaped not only by colonial histories but also by internal social structures that continue forms of domination in postcolonial societies.

Contemporary Pakistani dystopian fiction particularly demonstrates this intersection between gender identity and narrative fragmentation. “Before She Sleeps” by Bina Shah presents a society in which women’s identities are politically regulated and reduced to social function. The psychological consequences of such control are reflected through narrative voice and the suppression of memory itself: “You wouldn’t survive if you couldn’t accept where you were, if you kept clinging to the past like a life jacket. You had to somehow override the memories, otherwise they would seep into your dreams and torture you in your sleep” (Shah, 2018, p. 29). Here, memory becomes both a source of identity and a psychological burden, illustrating how dystopian systems attempt to erase personal history in order to sustain ideological authority.

At the same time, contemporary dystopian narratives increasingly move beyond traditional representations of hopelessness. As critics observe, such works “Redefine the conventional notion of dystopia from merely a bleak and inhospitable place to one characterized by struggle and optimism” (Hajiyeva, 2024, p. 252). Rather than portraying passive suffering, these narratives emphasize resilience, empowerment, and the emergence of resistant subjectivities. This transformation is especially important in narratives centered on women, where dystopian oppression simultaneously exposes the mechanisms of patriarchal control and creates space for the reconstruction of female agency.

The relationship between dystopian fiction and gender identity becomes even more significant within postcolonial contexts. Although dystopian fiction traditionally relies on imagined futures and speculative worlds, Pakistani English dystopian narratives often require limited imaginative distance because many of the issues they explore – gender inequality, surveillance, social restriction, and cultural pressure – already exist within contemporary social realities. In this regard, dystopian settings function less as distant fantasies and more as intensified reflections of existing societal anxieties.

Furthermore, as professor V. Aghabayli has emphasized, “...gender equality knows no geographical or cultural boundaries” (Aghabayli, 2024, p. 337). She further highlights the “...enduring importance of diverse voices in shaping our understanding of gender in literature and society” (Aghabayli, 2024, p. 4013). From this perspective, the exploration of narrative voice and identity formation within postcolonial dystopian fiction contributes a new dimension to contemporary gender studies.

Such narratives demonstrate how female voices negotiate cultural fragmentation, historical trauma, and patriarchal systems while simultaneously reconstructing identity through storytelling itself.

Finally, dystopian fiction also foregrounds the relationship between identity and the construction of space and time. As it is noted, “Within the realms of utopia/dystopia, where authors’ imaginations run free, the creation of an imaginary world inherently involves the construction of space and time” (Hajiyeva, 2024, p. 4003). In postcolonial dystopian narratives, however, these imagined spaces often mirror recognizable social realities, allowing authors to critique existing gender structures through speculative forms. Consequently, narrative voice becomes not only a tool of personal expression, but also a means of exposing the cultural and ideological conditions that shape gendered identity in postcolonial societies.

Conclusion. Narrative voice occupies a central position in postcolonial narratives as a literary strategy through which language, cultural identity, and historical experience are reconstructed. The analysis demonstrates that postcolonial narration extends beyond the function of storytelling and becomes a space where displacement, hybridity, fragmented identity, memory, and resistance are articulated. Through subjective perspectives, multilingual narration, and culturally specific linguistic forms, postcolonial writers reshape the language of the colonizer and transform it into a medium capable of expressing local histories and collective cultural experience.

The study further reveals that narrative voice functions as a form of ideological resistance against colonial discourse and its binary constructions of identity. By challenging Eurocentric representations and restoring marginalized perspectives, postcolonial fiction reconstructs the voices historically excluded from dominant narratives. In this context, hybridity and fragmentation emerge not as signs of cultural loss alone, but also as expressions of negotiation, adaptation, and identity formation within postcolonial societies.

Moreover, the inclusion of dystopian fiction expands contemporary discussions of narrative voice by foregrounding questions of gender identity, surveillance, and ideological control. Pakistani English dystopian narratives particularly demonstrate how female subjectivity is shaped within structures of political and patriarchal domination while simultaneously creating possibilities for resistance and self-definition. Consequently, narrative voice becomes both a reflection of postcolonial reality and a mechanism through which cultural identity is continuously reimagined.

Furthermore, the transformation and hybridization of English within postcolonial narration demonstrates how language itself becomes a site of cultural negotiation and identity formation. Ultimately, postcolonial fiction contributes significantly to global literary discourse by presenting diverse cultural experiences through innovative narrative forms. The role of narrative voice in constructing language and cultural identity therefore remains essential for understanding how literature negotiates memory, belonging, and resistance in postcolonial societies.

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