IQRO JURNALI , IQRO JOURNAL, ИКРО ЖУРНАЛИ
ISSN:2181-4341| wordlyknowledge.uz/index.php/iqro
Volume 23 Issue 01 AVGUST 2026

NARRATIVE VOICE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF CULTURAL IDENTITY IN DIASPORIC LITERATURE

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https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22169924

Abstract

Diasporic literature has emerged as a significant field of contemporary literary studies, foregrounding questions of migration, displacement, hybridity, and cultural belonging. Central to these concerns is the role of narrative voice, which functions not merely as a storytelling device but as a site where cultural identity is constructed, negotiated, and reimagined. This article examines how narrative voice contributes to the construction of cultural identity in selected diasporic texts by Jhumpa Lahiri, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Hanif Kureishi. Drawing on narratological theory and postcolonial cultural studies, particularly the works of Stuart Hall and Homi K. Bhabha, the study argues that narrative voice operates as a mediating structure through which diasporic subjects articulate hybrid identities shaped by movement across cultural and linguistic borders. Through close textual analysis, the article demonstrates that Lahiri's introspective narrative voice, Adichie's transnational and socially reflective narration, and Kureishi's ironic and hybrid narrative style construct distinct yet interconnected models of diasporic identity. The study concludes that narrative voice is a central mechanism through which diasporic literature transforms cultural displacement into narrative self-construction.

Keywords: migration, hybridity, cultural belonging, narrative voice, diasporic literature

DİASPOR ƏDƏBİYYATINDA TƏHKİYƏ VƏ MƏDƏNİ KİMLİK

Xülasə

Diaspor ədəbiyyatı miqrasiya, məcburi köç, hibridlik və mədəni mənsubiyyət kimi məsələləri ön plana çıxaran müasir ədəbiyyatşünaslığın mühüm tədqiqat sahələrindən birinə çevrilmişdir. Bu problemlərin mərkəzində yer alan narrativ səs yalnız hekayənin nəql olunması vasitəsi deyil, həm də mədəni kimliyin formalaşdırıldığı, müzakirə edildiyi və yenidən təsəvvür olunduğu bir məkan kimi çıxış edir. Bu məqalədə Cumpa Lahiri, Çimamanda Nqozi Adiçi və Hənif Kureyşinin seçilmiş əsərlərində narrativ səsin mədəni kimliyin qurulmasındakı rolu araşdırılır. Naratologiya nəzəriyyəsinə və postkolonial mədəniyyət tədqiqatlarına, xüsusilə Stuart Hall və Homi K. Bhabhanın nəzəri yanaşmalarına əsaslanaraq, tədqiqat göstərir ki, narrativ səs diaspor subyektlərinin mədəni və dil sərhədlərini aşmaqla formalaşan hibrid kimliklərini ifadə etdikləri vasitəçi struktur kimi fəaliyyət göstərir. Mətnlərin müqayisəli və dərin təhlili nəticəsində müəyyən edilir ki, Lahirinin introspektiv narrativ səsi, Adiçinin transmilli və sosial refleksiv təhkiyəsi, eləcə də Kureyşinin ironik və hibrid narrativ üslubu diasporik kimliyin fərqli, lakin bir-biri ilə əlaqəli modellərini formalaşdırır. Tədqiqatın nəticəsi olaraq vurğulanır ki, narrativ səs diaspor ədəbiyyatında mədəni yerdəyişməni narrativ özünükonstruksiya prosesinə çevirən əsas mexanizmlərdən biridir.

Açar sözlər: miqrasiya, hibridlik, mədəni mənsubiyyət, narrativ səs, diaspor ədəbiyyatı.

НАРРАТИВНЫЙ ГОЛОС И КОНСТРУИРОВАНИЕ КУЛЬТУРНОЙ ИДЕНТИЧНОСТИ В ДИАСПОРАЛЬНОЙ ЛИТЕРАТУРЕ

Аннотация

Диаспоральная литература стала одним из значимых направлений современных литературоведческих исследований, акцентируя внимание на проблемах миграции, перемещения, гибридности и культурной принадлежности. Центральное место в осмыслении этих вопросов занимает нарративный голос, который выступает не только средством повествования, но и пространством, в котором культурная идентичность формируется, переосмысливается и подвергается постоянному процессу конструирования. В данной статье рассматривается, каким образом нарративный голос способствует формированию культурной идентичности в избранных произведениях диаспоральной литературы Джумпы Лахири, Чимаманды Нгози Адичи и Ханифа Курейши. Опираясь на достижения нарратологии и постколониальных культурных исследований, прежде всего на теоретические концепции Стюарта Холла и Хоми К. Бхабхи, автор доказывает, что нарративный голос функционирует как медиирующая структура, посредством которой представители диаспоры выражают гибридную идентичность, сформированную в результате пересечения культурных и языковых границ. На основе детального текстуального анализа показано, что интроспективный нарративный голос Лахири, транснациональное и социально-рефлексивное повествование Адичи, а также ироничный и гибридный нарративный стиль Курейши создают различные, но взаимосвязанные модели диаспоральной идентичности. В заключение делается вывод, что нарративный голос является одним из ключевых механизмов, посредством которых диаспоральная литература преобразует культурное смещение в процесс нарративного самоконструирования.

Ключевые слова: миграция, гибридность, культурная принадлежность, нарративный голос, диаспоральная литература.

Introduction. Contemporary global mobility has reshaped literary production, giving rise to a wide range of diasporic narratives that reflect the lived realities of migration, exile, and cultural transformation. Diasporic literature, as a distinct field of study, is characterized by its engagement with issues of identity formation in contexts where cultural, linguistic, and national boundaries are constantly negotiated. In such texts, identity is rarely presented as stable or singular; instead, it emerges as a fluid and evolving process shaped by movement, memory, and cultural interaction.

Within this literary framework, narrative voice plays a central role. It is through narrative voice that diasporic subjects interpret their experiences, articulate their sense of belonging, and construct meaning out of cultural displacement. Narrative voice, therefore, becomes more than a technical element of storytelling; it functions as a representational space where identity is actively produced.

This article investigates the relationship between narrative voice and cultural identity in diasporic literature. It focuses on three major contemporary writers: Jhumpa Lahiri, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Hanif Kureishi. Although these authors emerge from different cultural and geographical contexts, their works share a common concern with the experience of cultural dislocation and the search for identity in transnational spaces.

The central argument of this article is that narrative voice in diasporic literature functions as a dynamic site of identity construction. Rather than simply representing pre-existing identities, narrative voice actively shapes and transforms them through processes of linguistic mediation, memory reconstruction, and cultural reflection.

Theoretical Framework. The concept of narrative voice has been extensively theorized within narratology. Classical narratological models distinguish between who sees and who speaks in a narrative, often conceptualized through focalization and narration. This distinction allows for a more precise understanding of how stories are told and mediated. Genette emphasizes that narrative meaning emerges through a communicative process involving both narrators and audiences, noting that "The real author of the narrative is not only he who tells it, but also, and at times even more, he who hears it. And who is not necessarily the one it is addressed to: there are always people off to the side." (Gennete, 1980, p.262) This observation broadens the concept of narrative voice by highlighting the active role of listeners and unintended audiences in shaping the interpretation and circulation of narratives.

Similarly, Seymour Chatman expands this model by emphasizing the distinction between story and discourse, highlighting how narrative voice structures the presentation of events. For Chatman, narrative communication involves more than the perspective from which events are perceived; it also concerns the medium through which those perceptions are conveyed. As he explains, "When we speak of 'expression,' we pass from point of view, which is only a perspective or stance, to the province of narrative voice, the medium through which perception, conception, and everything else are communicated." (Chatman, 1978, p. 154). This distinction shifts attention from the question of who perceives to that of how perceptions are articulated within the narrative. In doing so, Chatman underscores the role of narrative voice as a crucial mediating mechanism between story and discourse, shaping the reader's access to and understanding of narrative events.

In the context of diasporic literature, narrative voice becomes particularly significant because it often reflects fragmented, hybrid, or multiple perspectives. The instability of voice in such texts mirrors the instability of identity experienced by diasporic subjects, whose sense of self is shaped by migration, displacement, and the negotiation of multiple cultural affiliations. Consequently, narrative voice serves not only as a formal narrative device but also as a means of expressing the complexities of cultural identity. This relationship between voice and identity can be understood through Stuart Hall's influential conception of identity as a dynamic rather than fixed phenomenon. Hall argues that cultural identity is "a production" that is always in process, never complete, and continually constituted within representation, "Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation." (Hall, 1990, p.222) This view is particularly relevant to diasporic literature, where identity is shaped by historical rupture, cultural displacement, and ongoing processes of self-definition. The fragmented and shifting narrative voices often found in diasporic texts therefore become literary manifestations of identities that are themselves fluid, hybrid, and continuously evolving.

The concept of hybridity, as developed by Homi K. Bhabha, is central to understanding diasporic identity. Bhabha's notion of the "Third Space" (Bhabha, 1994, p.38) describes a liminal cultural zone where new identities emerge through the interaction of different cultural systems. In this space, meaning is neither fixed nor singular but negotiated and ambivalent. Diasporic literature frequently reflects this hybrid condition. Narrative voice in such texts often occupies this "in-between" space, articulating identities that are neither fully rooted in the homeland nor entirely absorbed into the host culture.

Narrative Voice and Diasporic Identity.

Diasporic literature places particular pressure on narrative voice because it is fundamentally concerned with fractured belonging, cultural transition, and identity negotiation. Unlike conventional realist narration, where voice often serves to stabilize meaning, diasporic narrative

voice tends to expose instability, contradiction, and multiplicity. It becomes a space where cultural identity is not simply represented but actively produced through storytelling. In diasporic texts, narrative voice frequently operates as a form of mediation between competing cultural systems. The narrator is rarely situated within a single, unified cultural framework; instead, they inhabit what Homi K. Bhabha describes as the "Third Space". Within this space, identity is neither inherited intact from the homeland nor fully absorbed into the host culture. Rather, it is reconstructed through narrative articulation.

One of the most significant functions of narrative voice in this context is the translation of experience. Diasporic subjects often move between languages, cultural codes, and symbolic systems. Narrative voice becomes the mechanism through which these transitions are made intelligible to both the self and the reader. This act of translation is not neutral; it involves selection, omission, reinterpretation, and emotional framing. As a result, narrative voice actively shapes how cultural identity is perceived and understood.

Another key dimension is memory construction. Diasporic narration frequently relies on recollection—of homeland, family, childhood, and collective history. However, memory in these texts is not presented as stable or archival. Instead, it is fragmented, selective, and emotionally inflected. Narrative voice structures these fragments into a coherent or semi-coherent identity narrative, even when coherence remains provisional. In this sense, identity is not discovered but narrated into existence.

Language plays an equally important role. As Stuart Hall emphasizes, identity is constructed within representation, and language is the primary medium of representation. In diasporic literature, language often carries cultural tension: the use of dominant languages (such as English) coexists with embedded cultural expressions, idioms, or untranslated terms from heritage languages. Narrative voice manages this linguistic hybridity, sometimes smoothing it for accessibility, and at other times foregrounding it as a marker of cultural difference.

Thus, narrative voice in diasporic literature performs at least three interrelated functions: It mediates cultural contradiction, allowing coexistence of multiple cultural perspectives; It constructs memory as narrative identity, transforming lived experience into structured self-understanding; It negotiates linguistic hybridity, reflecting the tension between assimilation and cultural retention. Taken together, these functions demonstrate that narrative voice is not simply a technical feature of storytelling but a constitutive element in the formation of diasporic identity.

Jhumpa Lahiri: Narrative Voice and Cultural In-Betweenness.

The fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri is particularly significant for understanding the subtle and often internalized dimensions of diasporic identity. Her narrative style is characterized by restraint, introspection, and psychological depth, often focusing on the emotional and cultural dislocations experienced by first- and second-generation immigrants.

In "The Namesake", Lahiri employs a third-person narrative that is closely aligned with the consciousness of her characters, particularly Gogol Ganguli. This form of limited focalization creates a narrative voice that is both external and deeply internal, allowing readers to experience the protagonist's shifting sense of identity from within. The narrative does not impose a fixed interpretation of cultural identity; instead, it presents identity as a gradual and often uncertain process of becoming.

Gogol's struggle with his name functions as a symbolic axis around which questions of identity revolve. The narrative voice carefully traces his discomfort with cultural inheritance and his desire for self-definition within an American context. Yet this desire is never fully separable from his Bengali heritage. The narrative voice, therefore, does not resolve this tension but sustains it, reflecting the ambivalence of diasporic identity.

A key feature of Lahiri's narrative technique is its emphasis on emotional understatement. Cultural conflict is rarely dramatized in overt or sensational terms. Instead, it is expressed through subtle shifts in tone, silence, and internal reflection. This restrained narrative voice mirrors the psychological condition of in-betweenness, where identity is experienced as quiet tension rather than open conflict.

Language also plays a significant role in constructing identity in Lahiri's work. Although written in English, the text incorporates Bengali cultural references, names, food, and customs. These elements are not always translated, which positions the reader within the same space of partial understanding experienced by the characters. The narrative voice thus enacts cultural hybridity at the level of discourse.

Scholarly discussions of Lahiri's fiction often emphasize its representation of second-generation immigrant identity as fluid and evolving rather than fixed. The narrative voice in "The Namesake" supports this interpretation by refusing closure. Instead of offering a definitive resolution to Gogol's identity crisis, it presents identity as an ongoing negotiation between competing cultural frameworks.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: Narrative Voice and Transnational Identity.

The fiction of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie offers a distinct articulation of diasporic identity in which narrative voice becomes a vehicle for transnational awareness, racial consciousness, and cultural translation. Unlike the restrained interiority of Lahiri's narrative mode, Adichie's narrative voice is often expansive, socially engaged, and analytically reflective. It situates individual experience within broader structures of race, migration, and global inequality.

In "Americanah", narrative voice operates through shifting focalization that alternates between private reflection and social observation. This dual movement allows the novel to construct cultural identity not only as an internal psychological process but also as a socially produced phenomenon shaped by race and geography. The narrator frequently moves between Nigeria and the United States, and this spatial mobility is mirrored in the narrative voice itself, which continuously translates cultural meaning across contexts.

A defining feature of Adichie's narrative technique is its self-reflexive clarity. The narrative voice often pauses to interpret cultural differences explicitly, particularly in relation to race and identity in the United States. This interpretive dimension transforms the narrative voice into a mediating consciousness that makes visible the mechanisms through which cultural identity is formed and perceived.

Race plays a central role in shaping diasporic identity in Adichie's work. The narrative voice highlights the moment when racial identity becomes newly legible in a transnational context, particularly for characters who have not previously defined themselves in racial terms within their home culture. This shift is not merely thematic but is embedded in the structure of narration itself, which frequently contrasts different cultural systems of categorization.

Language is another crucial element in Adichie's construction of narrative voice. While English remains the dominant narrative medium, the text incorporates Nigerian English expressions, idioms, and cultural references. These linguistic features are not ornamental; they function as markers of cultural identity and resistance to homogenization. The narrative voice thus becomes a site where linguistic hybridity is normalized rather than explained.

Unlike Lahiri's understated emotional tone, Adichie's narrative voice is often analytical and socially conscious. It does not merely represent identity crisis but actively interrogates the social structures that produce it. This is particularly evident in Americanah, where the blog-like commentary embedded in the narrative voice reflects a critical awareness of race, gender, and migration.

From a theoretical perspective, Adichie's narrative voice aligns closely with Stuart Hall's understanding of identity as positional and constructed within discourse. Identity in Americanah is not fixed but constantly reshaped through movement, comparison, and reflection. The narrative voice therefore becomes an instrument of comparison between cultures, exposing how identity is reorganized across transnational spaces.

In this sense, cultural identity in Adichie's fiction is not only experienced but also interpreted through narration. The narrative voice functions as both participant and analyst, simultaneously embedded within experience and distanced enough to evaluate it. This dual positioning allows the novel to construct diasporic identity as a dynamic process of cultural negotiation rather than a static condition.

Hanif Kureishi: Narrative Voice and Hybrid Cultural Subjectivity.

The work of Hanif Kureishi introduces a more disruptive and ironic dimension to diasporic narrative voice. In contrast to Lahiri's introspective subtlety and Adichie's analytical clarity, Kureishi's narrative voice is often marked by satire, irreverence, and stylistic hybridity. It reflects the fragmented and often contradictory experience of multicultural Britain, where identity is continuously reconfigured through race, class, sexuality, and cultural performance.

In "The Buddha of Suburbia", narrative voice constructs cultural identity through irony and self-conscious performance. The narrator frequently resists fixed interpretations of identity, instead presenting it as fluid, unstable, and context-dependent. This instability is not portrayed as a problem to be resolved but as a defining condition of contemporary urban life.

A key feature of Kureishi's narrative voice is its anti-essentialist orientation. Cultural identity is not presented as rooted in origin or tradition but as something constructed through interaction, desire, and social positioning. The narrative voice often exposes the performative nature of identity, particularly in relation to ethnicity and race in British society.

Language in Kureishi's work is similarly hybrid and dynamic. The narrative incorporates colloquial speech, multicultural urban slang, and shifting registers that reflect the diversity of postcolonial Britain. This linguistic multiplicity is not standardized or smoothed out; instead, it is presented as part of the texture of lived experience. The narrative voice thus becomes a site of linguistic experimentation, reflecting the heterogeneity of diasporic life.

Humor and irony are central to Kureishi's narrative strategy. These elements allow the narrative voice to destabilize authoritative definitions of culture and identity. By refusing seriousness in moments where identity might otherwise be fixed or essentialized, the narrative voice opens space for ambiguity and reinterpretation. Identity, in this framework, becomes something provisional rather than definitive.

From the perspective of Homi K. Bhabha, Kureishi's narrative voice exemplifies the logic of hybridity. The "Third Space" is not only a theoretical concept but is enacted in the stylistic and tonal instability of the narrative itself. The voice occupies multiple positions simultaneously, refusing closure and resisting cultural categorization.

Thus, Kureishi's narrative voice constructs cultural identity as fragmented, mobile, and continuously in formation. It does not seek coherence but embraces contradiction as a constitutive feature of diasporic existence.

Conclusion. This article has examined the role of narrative voice in constructing cultural identity in diasporic literature, focusing on the works of Jhumpa Lahiri, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Hanif Kureishi. Through narratological and postcolonial frameworks, it has demonstrated that narrative voice functions as a central mechanism through which diasporic identities are articulated, negotiated, and transformed.

Drawing on the theoretical perspectives of Stuart Hall and Homi K. Bhabha, the study has shown that cultural identity is not a fixed essence but a process of continuous construction within discourse. Narrative voice plays a crucial role in this process by mediating between memory, language, and cultural belonging. A comparative reading reveals that narrative voice functions as a dynamic mediating structure through which diasporic subjectivity is articulated. However, each author constructs this mediation differently, producing distinct models of diasporic identity. The study argues that narrative voice should be understood not only as a formal literary device but as a cultural mechanism through which diasporic subjects make sense of displacement and belonging. In this sense, diasporic literature reveals that identity is not something that is simply lived, but something that is continually narrated into existence.

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