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Sociolinguistic Study: The Select Diaspora Novels

Language is rooted in culture, history, society, polity, art and aesthetics of the land. Language, with the wings of “fancy” and “imagination” (to borrow the words from ST. Coleridge), travels across the geographical boundaries. Language is not limited only to its four basic components - speaking, listening, reading and writing. It is more about the art of conveying, convincing, persuading, influencing and also impressing. It is through these arts that the personality of a speaker can be understood. Language is a strong vehicle to transport feelings and emotions, exchange ideas and thoughts and thus to address and awaken the souls from slumbers. A person’s name, attire or behaviour may be found deceiving but language, more particularly the spoken language can never deceive. It becomes a strong medium to introduce a speaker’s socio-cultural background, knowledge and also the temperamental aptitude. In some special cases, the linguistic behaviour of a speaker demystifies the complexities of a personality. Thus, language is a tool that helps know the culture of a speaker. The lexicography (vocabulary) exhibits how linguistically rich and vast a particular society is. The co-relation between the lexicography and culture can be attained through a contextual reference. Context gives uniqueness to the linguistic variety of/at semantic and syntactic levels. Language is rooted in culture and culture is exemplified through idioms, proverbs, satires, humours and different ideologies of society. This paper highlights strong connection between language and culture through the sociolinguistic study of the select diaspora novels.

According to the Constitution of India, English language alongside Hindi shall be used for all the official purposes. In the gamut of the multiple Indian official languages and dialects, with a purpose to widen the scope for international connectivity, English is given the special constitutional status of associate official language. The nation of India has varieties of languages, cultures, culinary arts, apparels and living patterns. The Indian diaspora abroad keeps this heritage intact by sharing the stories of India, either from their own memories or from the memories protected from their parents' lives. Thus, the multiplicity of India gets reflected in the writings of Indian diaspora writers.

In his Explanatory Notes to Aristotle's *Politics*, the translator Earnest Barker explains that by announcing "man is by nature a political animal", Aristotle does not mean that man naturally engages in political activity. By using the word "political" for other animals (ants and bees), Aristotle seems to be advising human beings not only to live but also to "work together for a common goal" (321). Human beings can better contribute to society as they have in addition the ability to speak and reason. Human being is thus a political animal of higher degree as he or she can get engaged in a common goal through language and rationality. Barker further explains Aristotle's intention behind the selection of the phrase "political animal" and says that Aristotle intends to say that man is made by nature to live in *Polis* — city, or more briefly he is a *polis*-animal. Thus participation and contribution in/to the *polis* is a nature of a human being who is additionally gifted with the ability to articulate the feelings. Language, the most distinguished and precious gift to human beings, performs the fundamental role in constructing the identity. Love and respect for mother language is strongly connected to human mind and heart.

Looking at the vast spread of English language all over the world, we can say that English is a common lingua franca that can be used either as the main, subordinate or a linking language. In the linguistically and culturally pluralistic Indian subcontinent, Indian

English writing has, profusely, used loan translations or word borrowings from regional languages, firstly as a tribute to the mother tongue and secondly to savour the regional-linguistic aroma. The widespread use of English in Indian subcontinent can be attributed to several factors. The most predominant among them are:

- More than 200 hundred years of colonial rule in India created relationship of superiority of English as a language with the rest of all other Indian languages including Hindi.
- Even after the departure of English, the colonial mind set considers English as a superior language.
- In the post-globalizing era, India has emerged noticeably as a service economy nation as compared to the erstwhile agrarian economy nation. This has further necessitated the use of English to secure better jobs prospect. Here the utilitarian aspect of English overweighs all other languages in India.

At this turn of writing, it must be considered that Indian diasporic writing has globalized a vast range of Indian voices that would have remained unheard if not written or translated in English language. One such voice is of the author MG Vassanji who shares the stories of Indians in East Africa and their life in diaspora.

On the land of adoption, a diasporic tries to bridge over the linguistic gap between the indigenous and host language/s. It is not only linguistic difference but also the socio-cultural and ethnic differences that one needs to understand and accept. It is difficult to forget the past and to live in isolation. A diasporic's emotional need — to create the atmosphere of his heritage within which he could feel “at home” and the practical need — to survive on the “other land” — demand from him diligence and patience to learn the nuances of new living standards.

Language is an integral part of any tradition, culture and society and it is also a strong link for human development and survival. It is indeed significant to highlight the connection between language, emotions and culture. Language appears to have emotional leanings as it acts as a bridge between culture and society. Language is riding on the medium of emotions to connect to culture and society. In fact, close observation of Indian culture and society would reveal that the majority of Indian festivals have a strong emotional connect that gets reflected in the form of active participation of family in all the rituals and festivals. Despite all commodification in a globalized era of our festivals and rituals, the basic inherent themes revolve around the emotional satisfaction of people.

Three Basic Linguistic Impressions

Three major linguistic impressions are noticed in the multilingual diaspora societies. The first is the language of inheritance. The inherited language has a unique emotional conditioning since the formative time of infancy and childhood. It has stronger and inseparable connection to the identity of the speaker. Along with the inherited language, the second is acquired language, the language of the surrounding. This language has certain objectives to be fulfilled and certain reasons to be pursued. The process of language acquisition demands certain amount of planning, rationale as it has a goal to be achieved. This can be seen in professional atmosphere where a regional speaker acquires the language of the surroundings. This language acquisition is more purpose based than emotion based. It has its own virtues in terms of creating a sustainable ambience. In addition to the mother and acquired languages, the third type of language is the utilitarian language. The speaker of the utilitarian language comprehends the overall environment and reciprocates accordingly. Thus, along with the mother tongue, acquired and utilitarian languages also occupy the linguistic space in human life. This may result into a long-lasting dilemma in the mind and behavioural patterns of the speaker. The quest for the comfort will always be

intense and there would be an effort of balancing between all the three languages. There is an element of compliment to a speaker who respects and attains fluency over acquired as well as utilitarian language without any disconnection to the mother language. This linguistic transition will facilitate the social and psychological integration of the diasporic on the adopted land. These divisions of language—inherited, acquired and utilitarian—seem to be based on the “languages *lived* and languages *learned*” (Bhabha Introduction X). These divisions create a multi lingual identity of the speaker.

Multilingualism

Multilingualism is particularly observed in diasporic communities where the ethnic linguistic legacy is preserved as well as a new language is also adopted. On the land of adoption, one would certainly try to bridge over the linguistic gap between the indigenous and adopted languages. It is not only linguistic difference but also the socio-cultural and ethnic differences that one needs to understand and accept as a challenge. It is difficult to forget the past and to live in isolation. A diasporic’s emotional need—to create the atmosphere of his heritage within which he could feel “at home” and the practical need—to survive on the “other land”—demand from him diligence and patience to learn the nuances of new living standards. In case of adverse situations, the diasporic might start missing the culture, tradition and language that is left behind. This looking back homeward—being nostalgic—is consequential to the guilt conscience for moving out to a new world and also the fear of getting disconnected to the home/homeland. These features of human emotions are not, as Wilce says, “and never have been, purely personal or biological. Always social in context” (Hudson 8).

Language is certainly a part of one's ancestral memories. The sociolinguist James M Wilce says that language has an indelible code of emotion in keeping the ancestral memories alive. He says:

All speaking and writing is inherently emotional to a greater or lesser extent; ...emotion is not confined to the outskirts of linguistic civilization but pervades its core ...every dimension of [nearly] every language at least potentially encodes emotion, and that this language emotion relationship is crucial to what we call "culture" (Hudson 3).

The role of language is fluid, all-inclusive and responsive to the situation. This may be a complex and surprisingly hard process to understand, but it is important for a researcher to explore the dynamics of the nature of language in general and its relation to society in particular. To further enhance the argument pertaining to linguistic processes and dynamics, it is imperative to understand the linguistic behaviour in a multilingual society.

The British sociolinguist R.A Hudson (1980) in his book *Sociolinguistics*, presents an extensive study of the integral role of language behaviour and the varieties existing in culture and society. The linguistic varieties Hudson talks about, are registers, dialects, diglossia, code-switching, code-mixing, borrowing, pidgins, and creoles. These varieties of language are "[non]technical" (Hudson 23) as they do not have a "consistent basis for making the distinctions" (Hudson 23). Out of these linguistic varieties, Vassanji amply employs code switching and code mixing in his novels.

Code Switching

Code switching is the inevitable consequence of bilingual or multilingual speaker who speaks more than one language. To maintain the kernel point of the discussion, the

speaker switches from one to the other language. The speaker considers the comprehensibility of the listener and accordingly formulates the selection of the linguistic shifts. In multilingual communities, the different languages are used in different circumstances, and the choice is always controlled by social rules. Typically one language is reserved for home and another is used in the wider community. More precisely, this kind of code-switching is called situational code switching. Hudson says, “A speaker changes his code of language as per the listener’s knowledge of the language” (Hudson 52).

Code Mixing

Code mixing takes place when a fluent bilingual shifts from one language to the other without any change in the situation. This is also known as conversational code mixing. Here the speaker changes his code to get the right effect of the idea that he wants to convey. Sometimes, this is to put emphasis on the thought that the speaker wants to convey. To get the right effect the speaker balances both the languages against each other as a kind of “linguistic cocktail – a few words of one language, then a few words of the other, then back to the first for a few more words and so on (Hudson 53).

Thus it may not be wrong to say that code-switching and code-mixing are the needs of the situation. And as explained by the sociolinguist, James Wilce, language is attached to human emotions. Vassanji portrays the atmosphere of East African multi-cultural diasporic society where code-switching and code-mixing are inevitable parts of daily communication. Vassanji’s fictional world has the communities of immigrants that keeps the ethnic linguistic identity alive and also accept the language of the land of adoption. It is the very first line of *The Book of Secrets* that uses a Swahili sentence, “They called it the book of our secrets, kitabu cha siri zetu” (Vassanji 1). By juxtaposing the Swahili translation adjacent to the English sentence, Vassanji feels the satisfaction of using the

indigenous language. Vassanji does not feel a need to specify the difference between English and Swahili, as he does not show any difference through the writing style. Vassanji frequently uses Swahili words to accurately express his ideas, emotions and sensitivities. It speaks about the author's inseparable connection to the mother tongue and also the lack of the appropriate equivalent in the adopted language. This predicament is perfectly portrayed by Meena Alexander in her Memoir *Fault Lines*. About the pain of translating and putting her organic emotions into an acquired language, she says:

Sometimes words flee from me. And I fall through a dark door, into a zone where consonants and vowels vanish, when syntax bends into broken hooks, like so many pieces of jagged metal.

I feel at such times as if I were walking in between the tracks of languages, much as one might walk between the rails of a train line and touch the stone beneath, bloody dirt over which the lines of transport are laid.

Sometimes I have felt that I was translating from a place of no words – translate in the early sense, of transporting across the border.

An art of negativity, translation seems to me akin to the labour of poetic composition in precisely this: it reaches beneath the hold of a given syntax, beneath the rocks and stones and trees of discernable place to make sense. (259)

Language is a medium to express a set of ideas. This expression culminates into linguistic orientation which may further be magnified as the art of orality. Language is the first step on the ladder that leads to the floors, first to the culture's and finally to the

society's. The art of orality, as said by Prof Toyin Falola (2019) in his book *In Praise of Greatness*,

. . . recognizes the organic relationship between the environment and human beings, as humans use the powerful animals in the jungle to describe themselves. Human beings developed a strong understanding of everything around them, from insects to trees, and call upon the resources of the environment to organize their religions and rituals. This vibration with the environment can be characterized as sensing nature itself, and in doing so, using a language that draws heavily on all available objects and elements and working them into idioms, proverbs, and parables. (121)

In Vassanji's novels, English and Swahili are juxtaposed. The use of Swahili in the running English language makes the narration more conversational. The juxtaposing of English and Swahili words is done so naturally that it enriches the flow of orality. The frequent presence of Swahili words, phrases and proverbs embellish the author's overall expression of emotions. Vassanji's novels share a deep connection with the indigenous language. His stories are related to the time and history of Africa. In his novels, he enjoys employing the native African words and thus preserving and presenting the rich essence of his native language. As Garry Leonard says, "poetry, [here literature] is the essence of language and language is the mirror of the soul". Native language has natural property, propensity and potency that presents the flora and fauna of the land in which it (native language) originates. Writers like Vassanji would keep the native way of life, its morals, values and attitudes intact by not experimenting with the translation of the ethnic words.

Vassanji's creative features of code switching and code mixing are predominantly persistent in his novels which substantiates that "The meaning of a word is its use in the

language” (Wittgenstein 20). In *The Assassin’s Song*, Vassanji amply uses Gujarati words like *gaadi-varas*, *garbi*, *garba*, *sahib*, *pir*, *ginan*, *bapuji*, *bol*, *sansar* etc. These words show his strong connection to his indigenous language. The repetitive mention of Gujarati hymns like *Hoon re piyaasi* (I thirst for the sight of you) (137), *Swamirajo Aave* (when my lord arrives) (137) *Ji re vala dhan re ghadi* (oh dear! This moment is blessed) (153) shows how indigenous language is an inseparable part of his life and also a part of his ancestral memories. The sociolinguist, James M Wilce, elaborates the concept further and finds that language has an indelible code of emotion in keeping the ancestral memories alive. He says:

All speaking and writing is inherently emotional to a greater or lesser extent; ...emotion is not confined to the outskirts of linguistic civilization but pervades its core ...every dimension of [nearly] every language at least potentially encodes emotion, and that this language emotion relationship is crucial to what we call “culture” (Hudson 3).

Prof. Berry says, “Ethnographers have described many emotions that are culture-specific in the sense that no clear equivalent can be found in other languages. These have been termed culture-specific emotion concepts” (Berry 164). Prof. Berry quotes Catherine Lutz who studies, “emotional meaning is fundamentally structured by particular cultural systems and particular social and material environments. The claim is made that emotional experience is not precultural but preeminently cultural” (Berry 165). About his love for his heritage languages—Gujarati and Swahili—Vassanji (2014) writes in his memoir *And Home Was Kariakoo*,

There is something about Tanzania and its lingua franca, Swahili. There’s a certain way to speak it that identifies you, and when there’s a chance to

... speak it, you can't keep your mouth shut. You love to banter in it, it's your possession. (14-16).

In Vassanji's novels, native words and proverbs are used as vehicles to show that emotional attachment to the language is at the centre. Vassanji enchants his readers through the proverbs rooted in African culture. The Swahili proverb "When two elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers" (Book of Secrets 149) is used to capture the chaotic condition of East Africa when Germany and Britain, the main rivals fought for power over East Africa and how the Africans and the Asians were victimized by them.

CONCLUSION

Vassanji uses Gujarati, Cutchi, Hindi, Punjabi and Swahili in his writing and thus presents a picture of prevalent socio-cultural practices. In his Author's Note for *The Gunny Sack* (1989), Vassanji proclaims: "The non-English words—which are mostly in Swahili or Cutchi-Gujarati—are intended to be integral to the text" (6). Thus, he voices his joys and hopes, his worries and tensions, his love and anguish through both the heritage languages – Indian and Swahili and thus creates a wonderful cultural milieu for his novels and its readers.

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