



Code Switching as a Diasporic Marker in the Works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

Anupama G George¹ & Dr. B. Jeyanthi²

¹Assistant Professor of English, RMK.College of Engineering, Gummidipoondi, Tiruvallur, Tamil Nadu

²Assistant Professor of English, Anna University Regional Campus, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu



Manuscript ID:
BIJ-SPL1-OCT25-ML-021

Subject: English

Received : 10.07.2025

Accepted : 29.07.2025

Published : 31.10.2025

DOI: 10.64938/bijsi.v10si1.25.Oct021

Copy Right:



This work is licensed under
a Creative Commons Attribution-
ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a prominent Indian-American author known for her exploration of the complexities of the immigrant experience, particularly within the Indian diaspora. Her literary works engage deeply with themes of identity, displacement, and cultural challenges faced by individuals navigating the delicate balance between their heritage and their new environments.

Keywords: code switching, code mixing, lingual heritage, bi-cultural

The experience of being either a first- or second-generation immigrant, or having immigrant roots, is often a source of identity crisis at best. The unitary identity of immigrants, who are often from post-colonial educational backgrounds in English, exhibits many diasporic markers, of which code switching and code mixing are significant indicators. This bicultural identity has a rather porous quality in that the thinking may be primarily in English, but certain words in the mother tongue tend to be the primary choice in the vocabulary or for expanding on the explanation of certain words or situations. Chitra Banerjee

Divakaruni has Bengali roots and is now an American citizen. However, her fiction is an ode to

her roots, culturally connecting her motherland to her adopted country. It is but natural that her protagonists and characters blur the geographical demarcations in their speech and thinking. Her position is exceptional even in the context of a migrant writer living in an adopted homeland. For most migrants, the sentimentality behind using their mother tongue in conjunction with English is part of who they have evolved into. This hyphenated identity is sometimes a source of consternation and embarrassment because the Indian identity is consciously subsumed in Western cultural interactions. In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's writing, the usage of English and Bengali is like a textural weave that elevates the content and keeps the authenticity of the characters.



Code switching or code mixing are linguistic devices that create an intimate and stylistic way of writing. Speakers alternate between languages either in their entirety or by interspersing the appropriate words to regulate the intended meaning. Code switching primarily refers to when the speaker alternates languages at sentence or clause boundaries. An example would be a conversation where the speaker initially speaks in English but then lapses into Bengali to emphasise the exact relationship by names. There is no single English word for mother's brother, etc. This is a reflection of multicultural societies, and the intimacy of usage shows the link to the mother tongue. Code mixing, on the other hand, is the mixing of languages in the tighter framework of a shorter phrase or a single word. For example, the word "Uncleji" infuses the Indian element of respect as well as the English usage of the word 'uncle.' Sometimes grammatical structures from another language are directly transposed into English, almost like a literal translation. When this happens, the imagery shifts to a person who isn't quite fluent in the English language but prefers to mentally translate from the speech patterns that he thinks is the correct communication.

A critical aspect of her narratives is the phenomenon of code-switching, which serves as both a linguistic tool and a cultural marker, reflecting the intricate dynamics of bicultural existence. Through her characters, Divakaruni illustrates the emotional and psychological ramifications of immigration, capturing the duality of belonging to multiple worlds. Divakaruni's stories, such as *The Mistress of Spices* and *Arranged Marriage*, exemplify how code-switching articulates the tensions between tradition and modernity, as characters oscillate between their native languages and English. This linguistic fluidity not only enhances communication among bilingual individuals but also signifies their ongoing negotiation of identity in a multicultural landscape. By incorporating code-switching into her narratives, Divakaruni enriches the reader's understanding of her characters lived experiences and the complexities of their cultural realities.

The evolution of diaspora literature has shifted from narratives of forced migration to the voluntary movements associated with globalization, allowing contemporary authors like Divakaruni to explore nuanced themes of identity preservation and cultural negotiation.

Critics have noted that her adept use of code-switching acts as a powerful commentary on the pressures of assimilation and the desire for cultural authenticity. Through her nuanced portrayal of characters, Divakaruni not only reflects her own experiences as an immigrant but also resonates with broader themes relevant to diasporic identity formation, making her work a significant touchstone in discussions of cultural representation and linguistic identity. Despite the critical acclaim for her exploration of code-switching, Divakaruni's works also engage with prominent controversies, such as the challenges faced by the immigrant community post-9/11 and the societal expectations imposed on women within diasporic contexts.

Through her literary contributions, Divakaruni fosters a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding identity, cultural heritage, and the experiences of those straddling multiple worlds, thus situating her narratives as vital contributions to the discourse on diasporic literature.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a prominent Indian-American author, is renowned for her exploration of the complexities of immigrant experiences, particularly those of the Indian diaspora. Her literary works often delve into themes of identity, displacement, and the cultural challenges faced by individuals navigating between their homeland and their new environments.

The notion of code-switching and code-mixing emerges as a significant linguistic and cultural marker in her narratives, illustrating the intricate dynamics of bicultural existence. In the context of the Indian diaspora, literature frequently captures the emotional and psychological ramifications of immigration, including feelings of alienation and nostalgia for one's homeland. Divakaruni's writings, such as "Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter" and "Clothes,"



poignantly highlight the struggles of characters caught between two cultures.

Her stories reflect the realities of adaptation and assimilation, where code-switching becomes a vital tool for expressing cultural duality and negotiating identity. The evolution of diaspora literature has witnessed a shift from the early, often forced migrations associated with the Old Diaspora to the voluntary movements of the New Diaspora, characterized by self-advancement and globalization. This transformation allows contemporary writers like Divakaruni to explore nuanced themes of identity preservation and cultural negotiation within their works.

The characters in her stories frequently embody the tension between tradition and modernity, grappling with societal expectations while striving for personal fulfillment in a foreign land. Thus, Divakaruni's literary contributions not only reflect her own experiences as an immigrant but also resonate with broader themes relevant to the Indian diaspora, making her work a significant touchstone for discussions on code-switching and its implications for identity formation in diasporic contexts.

Code-switching plays a crucial role in literature, particularly within the context of ethnic and diasporic narratives. It serves as a powerful tool for writers to reflect the complexities of their cultural identities, as it allows them to navigate between different languages and dialects that represent their multifaceted experiences. For instance, in the works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, code-switching is employed to convey the nuanced realities of her characters, who often straddle the line between their Indian heritage and their American surroundings. This linguistic transition enables writers to highlight the tensions and interactions between various cultural affiliations, as seen in her narratives where characters switch between English and various Indian languages, thereby illustrating their struggles and connections to their cultural roots.

The Role of Code-Switching in Identity Formation

Code-switching is closely tied to the formation of identity in literature, particularly in how characters express their cultural and personal complexities.

Writers like Divakaruni utilize code-switching to articulate the intricate relationship between cultural heritage and the pressures of assimilation in a new environment. In her stories, characters often navigate their identities by employing code-switching, which reflects their attempts to maintain their cultural authenticity while adapting to their surroundings. This phenomenon not only showcases their inner conflicts but also emphasizes the diverse cultural landscapes they inhabit.

Code-Switching and Cultural Representation

The impact of code-switching on cultural representation in literature cannot be overstated. It allows writers to create authentic representations of their characters' experiences, effectively challenging dominant cultural narratives. By incorporating code-switching, writers can depict the intricacies of their cultural realities, thereby enriching the reader's understanding of the characters lived experiences. In Divakaruni's works, the use of code-switching serves to elevate the voices of immigrant characters, providing them with a platform to assert their identities and articulate their experiences in a manner that resonates with authenticity and complexity.

Analysis of Code Switching in Divakaruni's Works

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's literary works frequently explore the complexities of diasporic identity, utilizing code-switching as a key narrative device. This linguistic phenomenon, characterized by the fluid transition between languages within a single conversation, serves to reflect the characters' multifaceted cultural identities and their struggles to navigate between their heritage and their new environments.

Code-Switching as Identity Expression

In novels such as *The Mistress of Spices* and *Arranged Marriage*, Divakaruni illustrates how code-switching acts as a means for characters to express their cultural identity and negotiate their place within a multicultural society. The characters often switch



between English and their native languages, showcasing their bilingualism as a natural and integral aspect of their communication. This practice not only facilitates connection with other bilingual individuals but also signifies a deeper engagement with their cultural roots.

Types of Code-Switching in Divakaruni's Narratives

Divakaruni employs various types of code-switching, including intrasentential, intersentential, and tag switching. Intrasentential code-switching is particularly prominent, where characters might incorporate phrases from their native language into English sentences, thereby enriching the dialogue and providing cultural context. For instance, the spontaneous mixing of languages often occurs in emotional contexts, reinforcing the characters' ties to their heritage while navigating the challenges of diaspora.

The Role of Code-Switching in Cultural Conflict

Through code-switching, Divakaruni effectively conveys the tensions inherent in diasporic life. Characters often face conflicts between traditional values and contemporary societal expectations, and their use of multiple languages reflects this dichotomy. The fluidity of their speech mirrors the fluidity of their identities as they oscillate between their past and present selves. This linguistic interplay can also serve as a protective mechanism, allowing characters to communicate sensitive ideas or emotions discreetly, thereby reinforcing their connections with others who share similar cultural backgrounds.

Case Studies of Characters

Bilingualism and Identity

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's narratives often centre around characters whose bilingualism and experiences with code-switching serve as pivotal elements in their identity formation. The exploration of language in her works highlights how these characters navigate their cultural landscapes, allowing for a nuanced understanding of self and

belonging. For instance, characters frequently engage in code-switching as a means to articulate their feelings and negotiate their identities across different social environments. This fluidity in language not only enhances communication but also fosters a deeper connection to their cultural roots, often reflected in their names and how they choose to present themselves.

The Role of Code-Switching

Divakaruni's characters exhibit varied approaches to code-switching, which can be seen as both an instinct and a conscious choice. One character observed in a study described the act of code-switching as happening "naturally without much thought," while another emphasized the intentionality behind it, using different languages to better articulate specific concepts or to create rapport within cultural contexts. This duality illustrates the complexities of identity among bilingual individuals, where language becomes a tool for both self-expression and social connection.

Emotional Landscapes

The emotional weight of code-switching is further explored in Divakaruni's character portrayals, as they often reveal the underlying struggles of navigating multiple cultural identities. The characters' dialogues, rich with language-switching, not only reflect their multifaceted identities but also enrich the narrative texture, inviting readers to engage with their emotional landscapes. Through this linguistic dance, the characters articulate their dilemmas and joys, highlighting the impact of cultural expectations and the challenges of belonging in a diasporic context.

Gender and Cultural Context

Divakaruni also examines how gender influences the dynamics of code-switching among her characters. In particular, female characters may use code-switching as a strategy for empowerment or to challenge societal norms. For example, in one analysis of educational materials, gender representations were scrutinized to reveal the broader cultural narratives at play, indicating that language use in these texts often



mirrored the lived experiences of young women navigating their identities in hybrid cultural spaces. The interplay of language and gender underscores the multifaceted nature of identity, suggesting that code-switching serves not only as a communication method but also as a means of negotiating power and status within diverse cultural environments.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's exploration of code-switching and its implications for identity has garnered significant critical attention within literary circles. Scholars have noted that her characters' food practices reflect their diasporic experiences and highlight their struggles with cultural identity. For instance, Asha's reminiscences of traditional Bengali dishes juxtaposed against Dinesh's preference for fast food serve to illustrate the tensions between maintaining one's cultural heritage and adapting to a new environment.

This interplay is indicative of broader themes in diasporic literature, where food becomes a symbol of nostalgia and identity construction. Furthermore, Divakaruni's work has been acknowledged for its nuanced portrayal of female characters navigating the complexities of diaspora. Critics argue that characters such as Sita and Mandodari are rendered with depth, highlighting their emotional struggles and societal pressures within the framework of Indian mythology.

These characterizations challenge stereotypical narratives and encourage a more empathetic understanding of women's experiences in diasporic contexts. The discourse surrounding identity in Divakaruni's works often aligns with the scholarly exploration of gender and cultural dynamics. Research emphasizes the transformative nature of identity, particularly in the aftermath of events like the 9/11 attacks, which altered the perception of diasporic communities in America.

Critics point out that the emotional resonance of her narratives serves not only to entertain but also to

educate readers on the lived realities of immigrant life. Additionally, Divakaruni's use of language, particularly her adeptness at code-switching, has been praised as a crucial tool for character development and cultural commentary. This linguistic strategy allows for a richer exploration of identity, where dialogue reflects the characters' internal conflicts and external societal pressures. Thus, her works are positioned as vital contributions to the understanding of diasporic literature and the intricacies of cultural identity in a globalized world.

References

1. Brubaker, Rogers. 2005. "The 'Diaspora' Diaspora." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28 (1): 1–19. doi: 10.1080/0141987042000289997
2. View (Open in a new window) Web of Science @Brubaker, Rogers, and Frederick Cooper. 2000. "Beyond 'Identity'." *Theory and Society* 29: 1–47. Doi: 10.1023/A:1007068714468
3. View Cohen, Robin. 2008. *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*. London: Routledge.
4. View (Open in a new window) Google Scholar
5. (Open in a new window)Web of Science @https://www.academia.edu/49860873/Changing_Betwixt_Worlds_Negotiating_Diaspora_Conflict_in_Chitra_Banerjee_Divakarunis_Mrs_Dutta_Writes_a_Letterhttp://impressions.org.in/jan07/ar_beena.html
6. <https://iiste.org/Journals/index.php/JLLL/article/view/46953>
7. http://impressions.org.in/jan07/ar_beena.html
8. https://rntujournals.aisect.org/assets/upload_https://www.academia.edu/24758514/The_Unfolding_of_Korobi_A_Critical_Analysis_of_the_Gradual_Growth_of_the_Central_Character_in_Oleander_Girlfiles/articles/afad2c5d09c172dcf3510cb49a09436c.pdf