



## REFRAMING THE MONOLINGUAL 'FAMILY ROMANCE': METAPHORS AND LINGUISTIC KINSHIPS IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *IN OTHER WORDS*

**By Maya Hillebrand**

The faculty of language – expressing, reading, and understanding complex sentences and words – is one of the key features of humanity and human culture. Paradoxically, languages do not just unite humans in this ability, but can also set us apart from one another or even create divisions within us if we speak more than one language.

Such is the case for American novelist and short story writer Jhumpa Lahiri, who grew up bilingually with English and Bengali. In her autobiographical work, *In Other Words*, she describes her relationship with the two languages and the changes in her linguistic identity when she adopts a third language and moves to Rome to learn Italian. Even though she had established herself as an Anglophone writer, Lahiri began to write exclusively in this new and foreign tongue during her time in Italy. With *In altre parole* (*In Other Words*), she published her first Italian book which was not just a documentation of her linguistic journey but, first and foremost, a testament of her love for Italian. In an interview with *Mondiaal Nieuws*, Lahiri explained the value of multilingualism, saying that “someone who speaks more than one language [...] knows that there is more than a single way to be human” while “[someone] who lives in a monolingual universe, looks at the world through one eye only. You lack perspective” (Goris).

The importance of being proficient in several languages is widely recognized in our globalized world and it is through globalization that we are constantly surrounded by a multitude of languages. Considering these linguistic developments, monolingual concepts of “self-contained national languages and exclusive mother-tongues” are questioned (Guldin 1). Can I as an individual or part of a “social formation” still possess only “one ‘true’ language,” a ‘mother tongue’ (Yildiz 2)? Does this possession still form an organic link “to an exclusive, clearly demarcated ethnicity, culture, and nation” (2) as the monolingual paradigm dictates it?

According to Yasemin Yildiz, profound changes in European politics, philosophy, society, and culture in the 18th century led to the displacement “of previously unquestioned practices of living and writing in multiple languages” and, consequently, to the emergence of monolingualism (6). Along with these thought processes, the notion of the ‘mother tongue’ gained significance as it became “a vital element in the imagination and production of the homogenous nation-state” (7). The word ‘mother’ within the expression alludes to “a unique, irreplaceable, unchangeable biological origin that situates the individual automatically in a kinship network and by extension in the nation” (9). The mother tongue thus “constitutes a condensed *narrative* about origin and identity” (12). Drawing on Freud’s description of origin fantasies as “family romances,” Yildiz introduces the term “linguistic family romance” for these imagined narratives about languages (12).

### **Multilingualism Gains More Visibility**

She argues further that the monolingual paradigm “has functioned to obscure from view the widespread nature of multilingualism” and that multilingualism is therefore not a recent development but has existed all along and has only failed to be acknowledged (Yildiz 2). As “monolingualizing pressure” is easing due to globalization, multilingualism has gained a “new *visibility*” (3). However, it is still perceived through a monolingual framework. Monolingualism and multilingualism are thus inextricably linked. This ostensible paradox of the two coinciding paradigms is described as the “postmonolingual” condition by Yildiz (4). On the one hand, this term has a temporal meaning in the sense that it “signifies the period since the emergence of monolingualism as dominant paradigm” (4). But postmonolingualism can also express criticism as it “refers to the opposition to the term that it qualifies and to the potential break with it” (4). In this way, it points out the “struggle *against* the monolingual paradigm” (4).

This struggle does not only occur in society but has to be considered on the individual level. Where in this “field of tension” (Yildiz 5) between the paradigms are multilingual people located? Rainer Guldin argues that “[multilingual] speakers [...] are seen as multiple monolingual speakers reunited in one and the same person” (2). But what does that mean for their linguistic family romance?

*In Other Words* captures the divisions of Lahiri’s multilingual identity, the contradictions of language, and her personal struggle with the monolingual paradigm while embarking on an Italian language journey. The chapter “The Triangle” is an attempt at reconciling the different linguistic sides of her identity using the titular shape. Lahiri writes: “I think that this triangle is a kind of frame. And that the frame contains my self-portrait. The frame defines me, but what does it contain?” (157). Along with the triangle, she introduces concepts of kinship that go beyond the mother tongue. Because of her parents’ migration to England and later to the United States, English is established as a stepmother language next to her mother tongue, Bengali.

With Italian, Lahiri experiences an unfathomable connection that resembles maternal affection. At the same time, the process of acquiring a foreign language makes her feel childlike. These metaphors of kinship are connected within the shape of the triangle. It establishes relations between them and thus serves as a linguistic family tree.

However, it deviates from the traditional form and questions monolingual notions that languages belong to one specific region, that they are organically linked to us and our nationality, or that there is an exclusive mother tongue for each of us.

For this reason, Lahiri’s triangle metaphor functions as a reframing of the linguistic family romance which qualifies her writing as postmonolingual criticism.

## **Without a True Mother Tongue**

Looking at each of the three sides of the shape, Bengali establishes the first. Jhumpa Lahiri grew up as a daughter of Indian immigrants in London and Rhode Island, speaking only the Indo-Aryan language for the first four years of her life. While Bengali may be classified as her mother tongue, Lahiri claims to “wander the world [...] without a homeland or without a true mother tongue” (133). At the same time, she does refer to it as such and explains that she “wanted to go home, to the language in which [she] was known, and loved,” when she first encounters English as a student in America (147). At this time, Bengali was still her “locus of affection” and she maintains a strong paternal association with it (Guldin 91). She draws this first line of the triangle only with pencil, fearing it might be erased when her parents, the embodiment of Bengali, are no longer with her (Lahiri 157).

In fact, it seems to already start fading as English takes the role of stepmother in her life and teaches her to read and write in school (147). The new metaphor of kinship, the stepmother, implies a conflicting relationship like it is often found in European fairy tales (Guldin 160). This holds true for Lahiri’s first experiences with English in nursery school, which she found to be “harsh and unpleasant” and even traumatizing (Lahiri 147).

Her parents, too, face “the consequences of not speaking English perfectly, of speaking with a foreign accent” (151) and therefore form a difficult relationship with the language. In contrast to their daughter, they distance themselves from English. They “didn’t want to give in” (149) to English, deciding to restrict the language use to Bengali at home.

For Lahiri, however, it is not necessarily her relationship to English that is difficult, but the apparent incompatibility of her English side with her Bengali side, which leaves her “torn between the two” and “like a contradiction in terms [herself]” (149). Despite this feeling of inner disunity, she forms a relationship of affection to English because “it has given [her] a clear, correct voice [...]” and ignited the passion for literature in her (157). Interestingly, this newfound voice that she uses to mediate for her mother and father lets her feel “as if [she] were the parent” (151). In consequence, the emotional and familial bond to Bengali is loosened. Lahiri seems to find trust and comfort in the permanence of her ‘stepmother’ and knows that she “won’t abandon [her]” (157). It is now “the base, the most stable, fixed side” of her triangle (157).

Ultimately, it is also the language in which she has established herself as an award-winning writer and author. She completely identifies herself with English – the language of her writing – but because of her outward appearance and Indian name, she is forced to justify her linguistic identity and is faced with a “wall [that] keeps [her] at a distance” (143). This wall is upheld by outdated but tenacious stereotypes that disregard reality. “English [...] is readily associated with whiteness and the United States or Great Britain. This notion ignores that there are People of Color living in these countries [...]” (Von Rath par. 4). Before her success as an Anglophone writer unveiled the association of her name and skin color with her work, Lahiri was able to remain invisible behind her words. “When I write, my appearance, my name have nothing to do with it. I am heard without being seen, without prejudices, without filter” (Lahiri 145). To free herself from the pressure to conform to a linguistic ideal (Von Rath), but also in a “flight from the [...] clash between English and Bengali” and as “[a] rejection of both the mother and stepmother,” she finally adopts a whole new language: Italian (Lahiri 1-2, 153).

Italian and her move to Rome complete the linguistic triangle, but at the same time, complicate Lahiri’s narrative of a linguistic family romance even more. In Italian, she is a child and a mother at the same time. On the one hand, she feels protective of her Italian like a mother of her newborn (Lahiri 117-18). She emphasizes that “[it] comes

from [her]”, not from her other linguistic sides. Thinking further about the distances between them, however, she acknowledges that all three have Indo-European roots. Additionally, English and Italian share “many words of Latin origin” and while the Bengali and Italian vocabulary strongly differ, they are phonetically similar (Lahiri 155). Hence, the triangle starts to resemble a family tree. On the other hand, her Italian motherhood will never be an organic one, not in the way Bengali holds the status of a mother tongue. “Italian belongs mainly to Italy,” Lahiri writes, reaffirming the monolingual concept of the mother tongue in which “[every] language belongs to a specific place” (Lahiri 19). For this reason, “[it] remains [an] external language” in which she feels “like a child, a little clumsy” (Lahiri 157). Nonetheless, ever since she first encountered Italian on vacation, she has felt a yearning, as if in a linguistic exile, which suggests a sense of belonging after all (Lahiri 21).

Eventually, “her love for [Italian] evolves into a kind of literary self-liberation: she allows herself to acknowledge that there is room in her life for multiple languages [...] and that languages can take on different roles in her life at different times” (Von Rath). In her acceptance of the contradictions, the changing roles, and the challenges of her multilingual identity, Lahiri reframes the monolingual family romance and the descent from one true mother tongue. The triangle is not a family tree with clear lines, but a rough shape that holds together familial ties. It is an unstable form because of the possibility that two sides, the Bengali and the Italian, could be erased. The void that remains within the triangular frame is not definite either, but is what inspires and liberates her in the end as “[her] origin and also [her] destiny” (Lahiri 159). Some monolingual concepts remain in her writing, and her notions of language offer a glimpse of the persisting framework and locate Lahiri within the postmonolingual condition. The contradictions and changes of linguistic roles, however, imply a reconsideration of monolingual notions. The fact that she chose to write *In Other Words* in Italian and to have it translated into English by Ann Goldstein – despite her own ability – also speaks of a new take on the concept. Therefore, Jhumpa Lahiri’s *In Other Words* is also postmonolingual in the critical sense as it attempts to overcome the monolingual paradigm.

**This wall is upheld by  
outdated but tenacious  
stereotypes that  
disregard reality.**

Finally, it proves the value that lies in multilingualism and the multiple ways to be human by showing the connections that we can establish between languages and our own identity.

---

## Works Cited

Goris, Gie. “Jhumpa Lahiri: ‘In a monolingual universe, you see the world through one eye only. You lack perspective.’” translated by Andy Furnière, *Mondial Nieuws*, 2018. <https://www.mo.be/en/interview/jhumpa-lahiri-unilingual-universe-you-look-world-through-one-eye-only-you-lack-perspective>. Accessed 1 Mar 2022.

Guldin, Rainer. *Metaphors of Multilingualism: Changing Attitudes Towards Language Diversity in Literature, Linguistics and Philosophy*. Routledge, 2020.

Lahiri, Jhumpa. *In Other Words*. Bloomsbury, 2016.

Von Rath, Anna. “Where Jhumpa Lahiri finds herself linguistically.” translated by Lucy Gasser, *poco.lit.*, 2021. <https://pocolit.com/en/2021/06/09/where-jhumpa-lahiri-finds-herself-linguistically/>. Accessed 1 Mar 2022.

Yildiz, Yasemin. “Introduction.” *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition*, Fordham UP, 2012.

