

**REWRITING THE SELF: INTERSECTIONALITY OF LANGUAGE, IDENTITY,
AND CULTURE IN ENGLISH VINGLISH*****Pooja Sehgal and Yamini Kashyap**

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Abstract

English Vinglish (2012) has often been analyzed as a narrative of linguistic empowerment and self-discovery. However, this study explores a new vision by examining the film through the lens of Linguistic Othering (Gayatri Spivak), Cultural Capital (Pierre Bourdieu), Postcolonial Identity (Homi K. Bhabha), and Orientalism (Edward Said) to highlight an undiscovered sides of this movie-Shashi's subversion of linguistic hierarchies and the new version of a hybrid identity. This research argues that Shashi's transformation is not just about acquiring English proficiency and Speaking fluently in front of her family and friends but she also resist cultural and redefining her position within an occidental and oriental postcolonial patriarchal society. By using intersectional feminism and linguistic theory, this paper explores how English Vinglish critiques the linguistic imperialism that also shows equally use of language with intelligence, exposing deep-seated biases that marginalize non-English speakers within their cultural spaces. This new analysis shows that how language, rather than a tool of oppression, becomes a negotiation of identity, culminating in Shashi's self-reclamation without complete assimilation in the occidental setting.

Keywords: Self-discovery, Linguistic imperialism, Cultural spaces, English proficiency, Colonial identity.

INTRODUCTION

Language is not just used for communication with others but it also makes our identity, it enhances our self-worth, and makes people easily acceptable in the society and helps them communicate effectively. It becomes a source of confidence and empowerment sometimes the language can also creates a wall which isolates and excludes the person from their family. The 2012 Bollywood film English Vinglish is seen as striking and heart touching which is totally based on language othering and the film is depicting Shashi's (Sri Devi) journey, highlighting how societal language hierarchies shape people with respect and they are acknowledged in the society, often reducing one's intelligence and worth to their ability to speak English fluently. This paper examines the movie through various theoretical perspectives such as linguistic imperialism, postcolonial hybridity, cultural capital, intersectional feminism, and psychoanalytical theory. English Vinglish challenges the traditional notion that fluency in English is the ultimate show of success and self-worth. Instead, it challenges the deeply rooted belief that one's intelligence and social value depend on language proficiency and skills. The film highlights as how non-English speakers are often ridiculed or underestimated, even by their own families, while also depicts how language can function as both a tool of oppression and a means of liberation and leading path to empowerment. The protagonist, Shashi, plays excellent role as a wife, as a mother, as a sister, she does not seek any validation from her family but she searches her own identity beyond her roles as a mother and wife. Homi K. Bhabha in his postcolonial identity theory, exposes the hegemony of English and how language is showing deep connection with power structures. In English Vinglish, English is used as a symbol of power and modernity, while Hindi is confined to domesticity and tradition.

Shashi's journey challenges this hierarchy she proves that intelligence and dignity transcend linguistic proficiency.

"The authority of colonial discourse depends on the fixity of a concept like the English book and the English book is the sign of the book in general the discourse of civility itself." "Signs Taken for Wonders (1985)"

Bhabha critiques how colonialism imposes its authority through language and texts, using English literature as a mark of "civilization." The protagonist, Shashi, in the movie, is seen as an uncivilized person by her family, in the context of the English Language. Shashi is seen learning the English language, which becomes a linguistic capital for her. According to Bourdieu, "language is not just a means of communication but a marker of social status". As Shashi learns English, she accumulates new cultural capital, which enters the family dynamics. This transformation is symbolized by her growing confidence and her eventual speech at the wedding. By acquiring this linguistic skill, Shashi gains symbolic power and earns the respect of those who previously belittled her. Shashi, as a middle-class woman with traditional values, lacks the linguistic capital to fit into the upper-middle-class world that values English fluency. Her struggles reflect the broader class-based exclusion faced by non-English speakers in a postcolonial, globalized India. Hybridity disrupts the narratives of authority and opens up new forms of meaning. Shashidefies the traditional colonial authority by showing that the "third space" that she creates is a space where identity can be fluid and dynamic. Her skill for "making laddoos" is dismissed as a domestic skill with low cultural capital. Her talent is considered as a skill with little value only rather than English working class as her husband always makes fun of her by saying that "ye to laddoobnanekeliye hi paidahuihai" The film critiques this marginalization, showing how patriarchal structures devalue women's contributions which redefining their roles with both Western and Eastern Patriarchal

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frameworks. Bhabha's concept of hybridity refers to the blending of cultural identities that occurs when colonized and colonizer cultures meet and interact. In English Vinglish, Shashi always shows this hybridity as she navigates between traditional Indian values and Western culture. Her decision to learn English is not just about language but it is an effort to bridge these two worlds, creating a "Third Space" where she redefines herself beyond rigid cultural boundaries.

"Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal". Homi K. Bhabha's (The Location of Culture (1994).

Bhabha argues that colonialism is not just about domination but also about constant adaptation. The colonizer tries to impose power, but in doing so, it creates something new hybridity which disrupts that power. Hybridity is a "strategic reversal" because it undermines the authority of colonial rule. The colonized people do not simply accept domination; they reinterpret and transform colonial influences into something different.

This "Third Space" emerges as Shashi gains confidence while she adopts aspects of Western culture (language and independence), she retains her Indian identity (family values, culinary skills). Also, it is important to recognize the idea of intersectionality here, how identities like race, class, and sexual orientation intersect with gender to shape women's experiences in space. Hybridity creates something new not just a reflection of the past but something unexpected and original. The hybridity also disrupts the power structure as Shashi disrupts the power structure of gendered identity

The film follows Shashi, a middle-class Indian woman, a responsible wife, a mother of two kids, and a skilled entrepreneur who makes and sells laddoos. Although Shashi is a skilled and accomplished woman in her own right, her lack of fluency in English becomes a source of mockery within her own home. Shashi, a talented and capable woman, often finds herself undermined by her own family due to her struggle with English. Her husband and daughter, rather than acknowledging her strengths, focus on her linguistic limitations, making her feel inadequate. However, when she travels to the United States for a family wedding, she takes a bold step toward self-improvement. Without informing anyone, she enrolls in an English language course, where she meets a diverse group of individuals facing similar challenges. Through this experience, she not only acquires a new skill but also regains her self-confidence, realizing that her worth is not defined by her fluency in a particular language. Over time Shashi's journey of language learning becomes one of self-discovery and empowerment. Rather than completely assimilating into Western culture, she finds a balance between tradition and modernity, asserting her worth in both personal and public spheres. Most of the people who have discussed English Vinglish have focused on themes of linguistic empowerment and feminist self-realization. However, a significant research gap in examining the film through the lens of linguistic othering, cultural capital (Pierre Bourdieu), postcolonial identity (Homi K. Bhabha), and Orientalism (Edward Said) to highlight how it subverts linguistic hierarchies and promotes hybrid identity formation Shashi's lack of English fluency positions her as having low cultural capital within her own family. Her daughter feels embarrassed because of her, and her

husband dismisses her intelligence. In contrast, characters who are fluent in English (like her husband and niece) seem to possess high cultural capital, giving them greater social legitimacy. This paper fills that gap by arguing that Shashi's transformation is not merely about learning English but about resisting cultural erasure and negotiating her identity within a postcolonial patriarchal society.

Methodology: Discourse and Qualitative Analysis

This research employs discourse analysis to examine the film's dialogue, visual metaphors, and power structures, uncovering its critique of linguistic discrimination and gender norms. Additionally, qualitative case studies on linguistic exclusion, gender identity, and cultural marginalization provide real-world context for the film's themes.

Real – World Case Studies

Workplace Discrimination – Studies show that English proficiency significantly influences career prospects, mirroring Shashi's struggles.

Immigrant Experiences- Research on immigrants emphasizes language barriers in getting employment and social integration, mirroring the challenges faced by Shashi's classmates.

Gender and Language Politics-Many Reports shows that women in India frequently face professional setbacks due to language barriers, underscoring the film's critique of language as a patriarchal control. **Psychological Effects of Linguistic Discrimination**- Psychological theories by Claude Steele (stereotype threat) and Albert Bandura (social learning theory) explain anxiety and self-doubt caused by language-based discrimination. **Economic Consequences of Linguistic Exclusion**- Research on wage disparity studies between fluent and non-fluent English speakers highlight the financial challenges of linguistic biases.

The Burden of Gendered Expectations: Shashi's Identity Beyond Motherhood

Shashi's struggles is deeply intertwined with gendered labour and patriarchal expectations. Shashi's role as a homemaker is deeply intertwined with her identity, symbolized through her skill in making laddoos, which serve as more than just a sweet treat- they represent her love, dedication, and contribution to the family. However, while her efforts are acknowledged within the household, they fail to earn her respect in broader social circles. Her difficulty with English turns into a cause of embarrassment, especially due to the dismissive attitude of her husband and daughter, who overlook her intelligence beyond language skills. This scenario reflects Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, which suggests that mastery of a dominant language provides access to social privilege and acceptance, whereas those who struggle with it often experience marginalization and a loss of confidence. One of the film's most emotionally charged moments unfolds when Shashi's daughter, Sapna, casually ridicules her mother's intellect to her unfamiliarity with the acronym "PTA" (Parent-Teacher Association). In a moment of quiet dignity, Shashi responds with a profound yet simple statement: "I may not know the meaning of PTA, but I certainly know the meaning of parent." With this remark, she subtly but powerfully challenges the assumption that intelligence is solely measured by English

fluency. Through her words, she reaffirms her self-worth, challenging the elitist mindset that equates language fluency with personal value. This moment reflects a wider societal shift, particularly in postcolonial countries, where English is perceived as a marker of intellect, sophistication, and progress. Younger generations, influenced by Western education and media, often internalize these ideas, leading to a growing disconnect from their parents' native language and cultural identity. The scene also underscores how generational divides contribute to diminishing respect, as traditional knowledge and emotional depth are overlooked in favor of linguistic superiority. From both a postcolonial and linguistic perspective, the film challenges the notion that language acts as both a bridge to inclusion and a barrier to exclusion, exposing how societal structures privilege certain languages while marginalizing others.

Shashi's experience exemplifies Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital- despite her fluency in Hindi and Marathi, her worth is constantly questioned because she does not speak English. The film sensitively portrays the emotional toll of such biases, revealing how linguistic discrimination affects self-perception, even within one's own family. Through Shashi's quiet resilience, the narrative challenges the deeply ingrained notion that intelligence and respect should be dictated by one's ability to speak a particular language.

The film poignantly illustrates how English, as a remnant of India's colonial past, continues to be wielded as a tool of social stratification, reinforcing the belief that those who cannot speak it fluently are somehow less capable, less modern, and even less worthy of respect. However, Shashi's response subverts this assumption. Her assertion that she understands the essence of being a parent- despite not knowing the technical jargon- directly challenges the colonial mindset that equates English fluency with intelligence, competence, or emotional depth. This moment aligns with Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybridity, as it exposes the friction between traditional cultural values and the imposed Western linguistic framework. Shashi refuses to conform to the idea that her worth as a mother is tied to her ability to operate within an English speaking institution. Instead, she redefines the discourse, emphasizing the lived experience of parenting over the arbitrary linguistic codes that attempt to delegitimize her role. This moment in the film powerfully reflects Judith Butler's theory of performativity, particularly in how societal norms shape gender roles. In many patriarchal cultures, mothers are expected to serve as the emotional and moral foundation of their families. However, their intellectual capabilities are frequently overlooked, particularly if they are not fluent in the dominant language. Shashi's experience is emblematic of this issue- despite her skills and emotional intelligence, she is primarily seen as a caregiver rather than as an individual with intellectual depth. By boldly articulating the true essence of parenthood, Shashi reasserts her authority in a space where she is frequently overlooked. Her words challenge the narrow lens through which is perceived, reinforcing that parenting is not confined to academic qualifications or linguistic ability but is deeply rooted in love, sacrifice, and emotional commitment. This moment also reflects Edward Said's theory of Orientalism, as Shashi, a woman from a non-Western society, is unfairly judged as lacking refinement or sophistication merely because of her struggles with English. The film subtly critiques this notion, illustrating how language barriers can reinforce hierarchies that unfairly position

Western ideals as superior while diminishing the intelligence and capabilities of those who do not conform to them. Just as colonial discourse depicted the "naive" as backward and dependent, Sapna- who has absorbed the subconscious influence of linguistic imperialism- perceives her mother as less capable simply because she does not speak the language of power fluently. The irony, however, is that Shashi possesses a depth of emotional intelligence and resilience that far surpasses the superficial superiority Sapna assumes through her language privilege. Ultimately, the PTA scene serves as a microcosm of linguistic hegemony and generational alienation in postcolonial societies. Shashi's quiet defiance not only challenges the arbitrary hierarchies that tie intelligence to language but also underscores the film's broader critique of how English has become a tool of intra-cultural exclusion. By asserting that parenthood transcends language, she dismantles the notion that legitimacy- whether as a mother, an individual, or a woman- is contingent on English proficiency. This moment reaffirms that self-worth is not granted by linguistic validation but by one's intrinsic value, a message that disrupts colonial and patriarchal constructs of power.

A striking example of linguistic othering occurs in the coffee shop scene, where Shashi, eager to order a simple cup of coffee, is met with dismissiveness and scorn from the cashier. His impatience and visible frustration stem not from an actual communication barrier- Shashi understands what she wants to say- but from a cultural bias that assumes non-English speakers are unintelligent or incompetent. This moment perfectly encapsulates Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, where the Western world constructs the "other" as backward, unrefined, and in need of Western validation. Shashi, in this instance, is not merely a customer struggling with a second language – she is a postcolonial subject being judged against the Eurocentric ideal of intelligence and sophistication.

However, English Vinglish does not follow the "traditional upliftment through English" narrative that many films in the postcolonial world embrace. Instead, it subverts the idea that English fluency is the ultimate measure of self-worth. Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity shows that identity is never singular or fixed but rather a constant negotiation between cultures. When Shashi becomes confident in English, it does not mean that she has fully assimilated into Western norms, but because she has reclaimed her identity on her terms. The film challenges this belief that English must replace native languages for one to be seen as competent or modern – Shashi's fluency in English does not delete her Indian identity her culture and roots, nor does it make her inherently more valuable than she already was.

Both Oppression and Resistance in Language

In addition to being a language barrier, Shashi's experience in English Vinglish highlights the larger problem of how society views fluency in the language as a sign of intelligence and self-worth. In many postcolonial countries, English is not just treated as a language such as India; it is a symbol of status, modernity, and respect. Speaking fluently is usually seen as a sign of superior skill and capability, while people who don't speak it are frequently ostracized and rejected from society and even in their own homes. The movie does a good job of illustrating the implicit but pervasive hierarchy in which people who do not speak English well are frequently unfairly regarded as less competent in spite of their intelligence and

abilities. This bias is particularly evident in Sapna, Shashi's daughter, who is continually disdainful towards her mother's inability to speak English fluently. Shashi's transformation is a real-life example of Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybridity. She incorporates her newfound confidence with her current strengths rather than letting go of her cultural identity in order to blend in with an English-speaking society. Shashi's journey is about creating her identity on her own terms, not about losing herself in a new culture. Shashi is determined to preserve her self-respect and make sure that language is never used to belittle her confidence again. This is what drives her to learn English, rather than because she needs approval from others. By showing how the Western world is constantly idealised and frequently presented as a place of opportunity and progress while also marginalising those who do not fit its linguistic norms, the movie also ties in with Edward Said's theory of Orientalism scene where Shashi struggles to place an order at a U.S. cafe poignantly illustrates this. Her limited communication skills and fluency in English make her appear inferior despite her intelligence and abilities, underscoring how language can be used as a tool of exclusion.

This highlights a significant problem of how colonial histories consistently prioritize English over other native tongues. By the end of the movie, it is causing systematic prejudice even in interpersonal relationships. Shashi's triumph comes from redefining her own sense of self-worth rather than from proving herself to people who doubted her. The film gives importance to Shashi's strengths by showing that intelligence, dignity, and respect should not be evaluated by fluency in any specific language. The challenges of a Pakistani classmate in his English class, who has trouble finding work since he doesn't speak English well, further illustrate this issue. His story is representative of the pervasive difficulties faced by immigrants around the world, where language barriers frequently result in discrimination and limited possibilities. The classroom setting serves as a representation of global linguistic hierarchies, where people try to find their identities and establish themselves in an English-dominated society. This includes many people from a diverse set of backgrounds, such as a Pakistani taxi driver, a Spanish nanny, a South Indian software engineer, and a cook from Paris. Robert Phillipson's linguistic imperialism argument, which condemns how English is frequently positioned as a dominant language, obscuring and undermining native linguistic identities, is consistent with this concept. Shashi mispronounces the word "gift," which is another instance of linguistic humiliation. A customer's minor correction illustrates how a mispronounced mark denotes a lower social rank. Her husband's mockery of her pronunciation of "jazz" as "jhaaz" also shows how language can be used as a means of exclusion and dominance in a patriarchal society.

Queer Theory and the Search for Identity

Another identity struggle is depicted by the character of Shashi's English teacher, who is subtly hinted as queer-coded. Since he, too, struggles with the challenges of his position in society and fitting himself into societal norms. His presence emphasizes the intricate intersections between language and identity. Beyond helping teach English to Shashi and other students, he also mentors her in self-acceptance and supports her, reflecting his quest for self-validation. Both Shashi and her instructor both use performance to negotiate social expectations Shashi through language and domesticity, and her teacher by suppressing identity in a heteronormative world

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity can be applied in this situation. The experiences of the English instructor in English Vinglish gently question the rigid norms of gender and sexuality by showing that identity is shaped by repeated social behaviors rather than natural and inherent traits. His struggle is compared with Shashi's struggle against linguistic discrimination, as he is also facing challenges to exist in a world where nonconformity is always met with resistance. His character emphasizes the notion that identity and language are socially constructed and influence how people behave in the world and how they are perceived. Just as gender is performed, language is more than a tool of communication that affects and determines social acceptance. His empathy with Shashi and understanding enhances his connection between them and enriches the broader theme of his personal experience of marginalization and goes beyond language training. He understands the silent hardships and struggles of marginalized people because his identity does not conform to the conventions of society. This shared understanding is an unsaid connection between them, highlighting the larger issue of finding solidarity in spaces where one feels invisible, overlooked or undervalued, or underappreciated. The teacher's role in the movie can also be examined in terms of Homi Bhabha's idea of hybridity. He is positioned at the crossroads of multiple identities. He is also from a different nation, his queerness, and his role as an educator-he navigates a space that demands balance between cultural expectations. Thus, his support of Shashi is an act of mutual acknowledgment as well as pedagogy, the teacher constantly mediates and imparts lessons between these intersecting aspects of his identity. He is teaching her English while simultaneously emphasizing the value of resilience and self-assertion, traits that he needs to exhibit in a society that frequently expects conformity.

Both Shashi and her teacher both are part of this system where English language is considered as a superior language, which is consistent with Robert Phillipson's notion of linguistic imperialism. However, the interplay of language and queerness makes the teacher's effort much more difficult. The film reinforces the idea that those who do not fit into these notions experience social marginalization by subtly criticizing how some identities are seen as more acceptable when they conform to language and cultural norms. Although the teacher's position as an educator places him within an authority-granting system, social standards continue to limit his personal identity. This contradiction supports Foucault's claim that power is both enabling and restrictive it gives people the capacity to influence others while also exposing them to outside authority. Shashi's mentorship by the teacher is, therefore, an act of subdued resistance, a means of recovering agency in a system that aims to diminish gender and language nonconformity.

In the end, English Vinglish offers an engaging investigation of identity by analyzing societal institutions via the prisms of language and queerness. According to the movie, empowerment stems from the capacity to manage several identities without erasing them rather than from integration. The teacher's presence continues to be a subdued yet potent metaphor of the continuous fight for visibility and acceptance, even as Shashi finds her voice by the end of the movie not just in English but also in her declaration of self-worth. Despite the differences in their paths, they both arrive at the same basic conclusion: identity must be regained and cherished on one's own terms rather than being given up to fit in. Sapna as a Sign

of Internalized Colonial Mindset and Linguistic alignment. Shashi's teenage daughter, Sapna, who represents the postcolonial generational split in English Vinglish (2012), draws attention to the unintentional integration of linguistic elitism and cultural alienation in metropolitan, English-speaking environments. As the movie goes on, Sapna's constant derision of her mother's poor command of English demonstrates how linguistic imperialism and postcolonial identity crisis connect. Her character contrasts with Shashi, demonstrating how, in modern postcolonial countries, English serves as a hierarchical instrument that establishes legitimacy and cultural belonging in addition to being a means of communication. Instead of being motivated by deliberate malice, Sapna's attitude toward her mother is the result of an internalized colonial mindset that views proficiency in English as a sign of intelligence, competence, and modernity. Her disdain reinforces Pierre Bourdieu's idea of cultural capital by reflecting the way society views people who lack language. According to Bourdieu's theory, language serves as a social stratification marker; people who speak English, the dominant language, can attain greater social status, while non-speakers are cast into a realm of inferiority and exclusion. Because she was raised in a wealthy, English-dominated school system, Sapna unwittingly internalizes these inequalities and replicates them in her household, elevating herself above her mother in the domestic hierarchy.

Language as a tool for empowerment

The movie English Vinglish challenges a long way problem of language proficiency, which is analyzed by people as a tool for intelligence and power dynamics. As for Shashi's trip demonstrates how colonial legacies still affect how language is perceived by people and continuously make a reason for systemic injustices. Her problem with the English language lower her value in her family, which is also illustrated by Pierre Bourdieu's idea of cultural capital, in which he also gives the same idea that social and economic mobility are also correlated with linguistic efficiency. Additionally, the movie challenges the Western perspective, which shows views on non-native English speakers as inferior, the same as demonstrating by Edward Said's idea of Orientalism. The film also reflects an idea of linguistic imperialism given by Robert Phillipson, showing how English acts as a barrier to chances through the hardships of Shashi's Pakistani classmate who faces discrimination at work because of his language barrier. This situation is the same for many immigrants, where they feel excluded due to their language only. Furthermore, Shashi's transformation in this movie is influenced by Judith Butler's performativity theory, by illustrates how acquiring a new language changes not only her perception of the world but also herself-identity. The film's classroom serves as a miniature reflection of the global linguistic hierarchy, highlighting the challenges and struggles faced by people from different backgrounds such as a South Indian software engineer, a Parisian cook, a Spanish nanny, and a taxi driver from Pakistan as they deal with dominance of English in both their personal and professional lives. However, merely assimilating into an English-speaking identity is not the source of Shashi's empowerment. Rather, her development aligns with Homi Bhabha's idea of hybridity, which enables her to adopt modernity and tradition without losing her cultural identity. her growth resonates with Homi's concept of hybridity, which shows the path to preserve her cultural roots while maintaining a balance between tradition and modernity. By the end of the

movie, Shashi's ability to communicate in English is truly a symbol of independence rather than a sign of submission, showing that true empowerment comes from claiming language as a means of self-expression rather than oppression and subjugation. In the end, English Vinglish challenges the notion that language efficiency is the only measure of proficiency and promotes a broader understanding of intelligence, dignity that goes beyond linguistic limitations. The movie proves that language makes a person more free, liberated rather than excluded when the same language is embraced on one's own terms. Through this movie, the colonial framework links and challenges the entrenched belief that language proficiency defines intelligence and social value. It also highlights how the English language becomes a source of empowerment when reclaimed with full confidence. By the end of the film, Shashi learns to negotiate the difficulties of tradition and modernity, linguistic authority and defiance, and family roles and personal aspirations without abandoning her cultural roots. The film conveys a strong message: a person's actual value and self-worth are determined by their capacity to create their own identity and command respect on their own terms, not by their proficiency in any particular language.

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