

RECONSTRUCTING IDENTITY THROUGH NARRATIVE VOICE: LANGUAGE, MEMORY, AND POWER IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH LITERATURE**Dr.B.Sumathi¹, Dr.T.Vishnupriyan², Dr. Baiju Krishnan³**¹Assistant Professor (Sl.G), Department Of English, KIT-Kalalaignar karunanidhi Institute of Technology, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, sumathibaluz@gmail.com² Assistant Professor of English, Department of English (S&H), KIT - Kalaignarkarunanidhi Institute of Technology, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, drvishnupriyaneng@gmail.com³Assistant Professor, Department of English, School of Applied Sciences and Humanities, Vignan's Foundation for Science, Technology & Research (Deemed to be University), Deshmukhi, Hyderabad Campus, Yadadri Bhuvanagiri, Hyderabad, Telangana, baijuk92@gmail.com, Orcid Id: 0000-0003-0314-1346**Abstract**

Narrative voice functions as a critical medium through which identity is constructed, negotiated, and reconstructed in contemporary English literature. In contexts shaped by globalization, migration, postcolonial legacies, gender politics, and socio-cultural fragmentation, literary narratives increasingly foreground voice as a site of memory, resistance, and power negotiation. This study examines how contemporary English literature reconstructs identity through linguistic strategies, narrative perspective, and memory articulation. Drawing from postcolonial theory, feminist narratology, and discourse analysis, the paper argues that narrative voice is not merely a stylistic device but a political and epistemological instrument that shapes subjectivity and challenges dominant power structures. By analyzing selected thematic patterns in contemporary texts, the study explores how fragmented narration, multilingual expression, unreliable narrators, and memory-based storytelling contribute to identity formation. The paper concludes that narrative voice serves as a transformative space where marginalized identities reclaim agency and contest hegemonic discourses.

Keywords: Narrative Voice, Identity Reconstruction, Memory, Power, Contemporary English Literature, Postcolonial Theory, Feminist Narratology, Language and Subjectivity

I. INTRODUCTION

Identity in contemporary English literature is increasingly represented as fluid, contested, and constructed rather than fixed or inherent. In a world marked by migration, postcolonial histories, racial politics, gender negotiations, and global cultural exchange, literary narratives have become critical sites for examining how identities are shaped, fractured, and reassembled. Central to this process is narrative voice the linguistic and structural mechanism through which stories are told and perspectives are framed.

Narrative voice operates not only as a stylistic element but as a vehicle of power and memory. Through first-person confession, fragmented storytelling, polyphonic narration, or unreliable perspective, contemporary authors reveal how subjectivity is mediated by language and shaped by socio-political structures. Memory, particularly traumatic or suppressed memory, often emerges as a narrative strategy for reclaiming identity. By revisiting personal and collective histories, characters

reconstruct selfhood against systems of marginalization or erasure.

Postcolonial and feminist literary theories have emphasized the relationship between voice and power. Historically silenced subjects' women, migrants, racial minorities, and diasporic communities use narrative voice to assert agency and resist dominant discourses. Language becomes both a tool of oppression and a means of empowerment. Multilingual expression, code-switching, and non-linear narrative structures further destabilize hegemonic norms of storytelling.

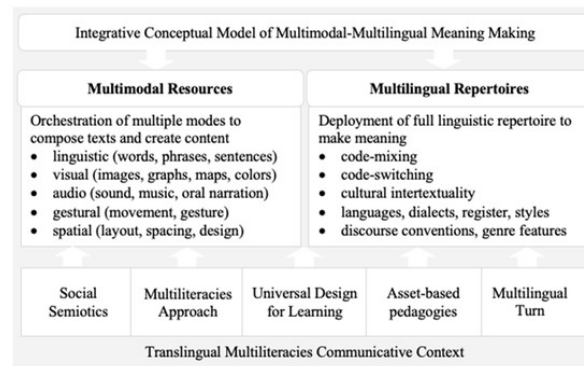


Figure 1: Multimodal writing [2]

This study explores how contemporary English literature reconstructs identity through narrative voice, focusing on the interplay between language, memory, and power. It argues that narrative voice functions as an epistemological space in which individuals negotiate belonging, resist silencing, and articulate alternative selfhoods within complex socio-cultural landscapes.

II. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To examine how narrative voice functions as a mechanism for reconstructing identity in contemporary English literature.
2. To analyze the relationship between language, memory, and subjectivity in shaping fragmented or marginalized identities.
3. To investigate how narrative strategies challenge dominant power structures and hegemonic discourses.
4. To develop a theoretical framework integrating postcolonial and feminist narratology to interpret identity formation through voice.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Narrative Voice and Identity Construction

Narrative voice has long occupied a central position in narratological theory, particularly in discussions concerning subjectivity, agency, and representation. Gérard Genette's structural model distinguishes between who speaks (voice), who sees (focalization), and when the narration occurs [1]. While Genette's framework provides a foundational structural taxonomy, it largely abstracts narrative voice from socio-political contexts. Contemporary scholarship, however, challenges this structural neutrality by foregrounding identity politics and cultural positioning.

Paul Ricoeur advances the concept of "narrative identity," arguing that identity is not a fixed essence but a temporal construction mediated through storytelling [2]. According to Ricoeur, individuals achieve coherence by configuring life events into narrative form. Identity emerges not as static

substance but as dynamic interpretation. This reconceptualization is crucial for contemporary literature, where characters frequently reconstruct fragmented selves through retrospective narration. Narrative voice thus becomes the mechanism through which temporal discontinuities are reassembled into provisional coherence.

However, Ricoeur's model assumes narrative integration as a stabilizing process. In contrast, contemporary literature often resists full integration, emphasizing fragmentation rather than unity. This tension reveals an important development: narrative voice no longer simply organizes identity but exposes its instability. The self is narrated not as continuity but as rupture.

"Mikhail Bakhtin's theory" of polyphony further complicates singular identity models [3]. In polyphonic texts, multiple voices coexist without being subordinated to an authoritative narrator. Such dialogism destabilizes the notion of unified subjectivity. In contemporary English literature, polyphony frequently mirrors diasporic or multicultural contexts in which identity is plural and negotiated. Rather than a single coherent "I," the narrative voice becomes a site of contestation among competing discourses.

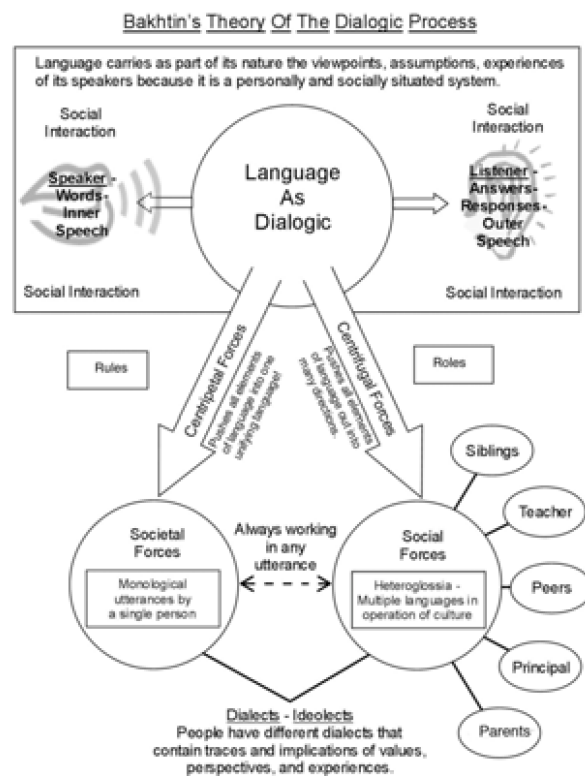


Figure 2: Mikhail Bakhtin's theory [5]

Recent scholarship suggests that polyphonic structures are particularly effective in representing marginalized identities because they resist hierarchical ordering of voices. However, critics also caution that polyphony does not automatically guarantee political resistance; narrative multiplicity may coexist with structural power asymmetries. Thus, voice must be analyzed not merely as multiplicity but as positionality within power structures.

3.2 Postcolonial Voice and Linguistic Resistance

Postcolonial theory situates narrative voice within histories of colonial domination and epistemic

violence. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question, "Can the subaltern speak?" foregrounds the structural silencing embedded in dominant discourse [4]. Spivak argues that subaltern voices are often mediated through hegemonic frameworks that distort or appropriate their speech. In this context, narrative voice becomes a struggle for representational agency.

Homi Bhabha introduces the concept of hybridity, suggesting that identity emerges in "third spaces" where cultural meanings are negotiated rather than fixed [5]. Linguistic hybridity in contemporary literature reflects this liminality. Code-switching, creolized English, and non-standard syntax disrupt colonial linguistic hierarchies and resist assimilation into standardized English norms.

Empirical literary analyses indicate that diasporic novels frequently incorporate multilingual passages at moments of identity assertion. Such strategies not only reflect cultural multiplicity but also challenge the authority of monolingual narration. However, the politics of linguistic resistance are complex. Some scholars argue that the commodification of hybridity in global literary markets risks neutralizing its subversive potential. What begins as resistance may become aestheticized diversity for consumption.

Nevertheless, narrative voice in postcolonial contexts consistently foregrounds memory as counter-history. Through retrospective narration, characters reconstruct suppressed histories and reclaim cultural agency. This interplay between voice and memory destabilizes official narratives of empire and nation.

Narrative Strategy	Identity Function	Power Implication
Code-switching	Cultural negotiation	Disruption of linguistic hierarchy
Nonlinear memory	Trauma reconstruction	Counter-history formation
Polyphonic narration	Plural subjectivity	Decentering colonial authority
Unreliable narration	Epistemic skepticism	Challenging narrative dominance

3.3 Feminist Narratology and Gendered Voice

Feminist literary theory emphasizes that voice is inseparable from gendered power relations. Elaine Showalter argues that women's writing historically emerged as a counter-discourse to patriarchal silencing [6]. Narrative voice becomes a means of reclaiming subjectivity within structures that have marginalized female experience.

Judith Butler's theory of performativity further reframes identity as constructed through repeated

discursive acts rather than biological determinism [7]. From this perspective, narrative voice performs identity rather than revealing a pre-existing self. Contemporary English literature frequently employs introspective or unreliable female narrators to expose internalized patriarchal norms.

Feminist narratology also critiques the supposed neutrality of first-person narration. The confessional “I” is not simply personal expression but a politically situated act. By articulating embodied memory, female narrators challenge dominant epistemologies that privilege objective authority.

However, critics note that feminist reclamation of voice must avoid universalizing women’s experience. Intersectional approaches emphasize race, class, and sexuality as intersecting determinants of narrative authority. Thus, gendered voice must be examined within broader matrices of power.

3.4 Memory, Discourse, and Power

Memory functions as both thematic content and narrative structure in contemporary English literature. Michel Foucault’s discourse theory posits that knowledge and power are mutually constitutive [8]. Official histories represent institutionalized discourse, while narrative memory can function as counter-discourse.

In trauma narratives, fragmented temporality reflects psychological rupture. Nonlinear storytelling disrupts chronological authority and mimics mnemonic processes. This narrative fragmentation often symbolizes resistance to imposed historical coherence.

Scholars argue that memory-based narration serves as epistemic resistance by foregrounding subjective truth over institutional authority. However, memory is also fallible and selective. Unreliable narration complicates the relationship between truth and storytelling, suggesting that identity is shaped as much by forgetting as by remembering.

Despite extensive theoretical work in narratology, postcolonial studies, feminist theory, and memory studies, few scholars integrate these frameworks systematically to analyze how narrative voice reconstructs identity across intersecting dimensions of language, power, and memory. This study addresses this theoretical fragmentation by synthesizing these perspectives into a unified interpretive framework.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive methodology grounded in theoretical triangulation. Rather than relying on quantitative frequency analysis, the research prioritizes close textual reading to uncover how narrative voice constructs identity within linguistic and socio-political contexts.

The methodology integrates five theoretical pillars:

1. Narrative Identity Theory (Ricoeur) – to analyze how storytelling configures selfhood through temporal reconstruction.
2. Dialogism and Polyphony (Bakhtin) – to examine multiplicity of voices and contested subjectivity.
3. Postcolonial Hybridity (Bhabha; Spivak) – to interpret linguistic negotiation and subaltern representation.
4. Performativity (Butler) – to understand identity as discursive enactment.
5. Discourse-Power Framework (Foucault) – to situate narrative voice within institutional

power structures.

Research Design

The research proceeds through structured close reading of selected contemporary English literary texts representing diasporic, gendered, and postcolonial contexts. Analytical criteria include:

- Focalization and narrator reliability
- Temporal structure and memory sequencing
- Linguistic hybridity and code-switching
- Polyphonic structure
- Discursive confrontation with authority

Each text is examined not in isolation but within theoretical dialogue. For instance, fragmented memory is analyzed simultaneously as trauma articulation (memory studies), identity configuration (Ricoeur), and power disruption (Foucault).

Interpretive Rigor

Theoretical triangulation ensures interpretive validity. Rather than privileging a single theoretical lens, the study cross-examines findings across frameworks. For example, a multilingual narrative passage is analyzed as linguistic hybridity (postcolonial), performative identity (Butler), and discursive resistance (Foucault).

This methodology foregrounds depth over breadth. It acknowledges subjectivity inherent in literary interpretation while grounding analysis in established theoretical models. Ultimately, the methodological framework positions narrative voice as a dynamic intersection of language, memory, and power, enabling a comprehensive understanding of identity reconstruction in contemporary English literature.

V. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Narrative Voice as Reconstruction of Fragmented Selfhood

Contemporary English literature frequently constructs identity as fractured rather than unified. Narrative voice becomes the mechanism through which this fragmentation is articulated and reassembled. Rather than presenting a coherent autobiographical continuity, many contemporary texts foreground instability, uncertainty, and retrospective reinterpretation.

Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* provides a paradigmatic example of narrative identity shaped through belated self-recognition. The first-person narration of Stevens initially appears controlled and authoritative; however, as memory unfolds, contradictions and omissions surface. Stevens' voice becomes a site of repression and delayed realization. The narrative structure aligns with "Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity" [2], where selfhood emerges through temporal reconfiguration. Yet Ishiguro complicates this model by demonstrating that narrative reconstruction does not guarantee coherence; instead, it reveals the limits of self-knowledge. The voice reconstructs identity not by achieving clarity but by exposing its incompleteness.

Similarly, in "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," narrative voice is fragmented across multiple perspectives and temporal disruptions. Memory does not function as linear recollection but as intrusive presence. The narrative shifts between first-person confession, third-person omniscience, and interior monologue. This polyphonic structure resonates with Bakhtin's dialogism [3], allowing suppressed historical voices to surface. Morrison's use of fragmented voice mirrors the trauma of slavery,

demonstrating how identity is shaped by historical violence. The self cannot be narrated without confronting collective memory. In both cases, narrative voice reconstructs identity through confrontation with suppressed pasts. However, the reconstruction remains provisional. The voice does not stabilize identity; it reveals its fragility.

5.2 Polyphony and the Politics of Multiplicity

Polyphonic narration in contemporary literature reflects increasingly plural identities shaped by globalization and migration. Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* exemplifies narrative multiplicity through shifting focalizations across generations and ethnic backgrounds. The novel does not privilege a singular authoritative voice; instead, it juxtaposes competing perspectives that challenge monocultural narratives of British identity.

Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia [3] is particularly relevant here. Each character's voice embodies distinct socio-cultural positioning. The polyphonic structure resists assimilation into a dominant ideological center. Identity emerges dialogically through interaction between voices rather than through singular self-definition.

However, polyphony is not inherently emancipatory. Multiplicity may expose diversity without dismantling structural inequality. Smith's narrative highlights generational tension, racial stereotyping, and cultural negotiation, suggesting that identity formation remains embedded within power hierarchies. Polyphonic voice creates space for negotiation but does not dissolve systemic constraints.

The significance of polyphony lies in its destabilization of narrative authority. By refusing a singular viewpoint, contemporary texts challenge epistemological certainty. Identity becomes relational rather than autonomous.

5.3 Linguistic Hybridity and Postcolonial Negotiation

Language operates as both medium and marker of identity. In postcolonial contexts, English itself carries historical power asymmetries. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* demonstrates how linguistic hybridity reconstructs identity within colonial aftermath. Roy incorporates Malayalam words, syntactic experimentation, and rhythmic fragmentation into English prose. This stylistic hybridity disrupts the standardization of English narrative voice.

Bhabha's theory of hybridity [5] frames this linguistic blending as a "third space" where identity is negotiated rather than inherited. Roy's narrative voice refuses linguistic purity, embodying postcolonial ambivalence. Language becomes a terrain of resistance.

Similarly, contemporary diasporic fiction frequently employs code-switching to assert cultural specificity. Such strategies resist linguistic homogenization and signal refusal of assimilation. However, the global literary marketplace often commodifies hybridity as exotic aesthetic. Thus, the politics of linguistic resistance remain complex.

Linguistic hybridity reconstructs identity by asserting multiplicity within language itself. The voice embodies cultural negotiation rather than singular belonging.

5.4 Gendered Voice and Performative Identity

Gendered narrative voice further complicates identity reconstruction. In many contemporary texts, female narrators reclaim agency through introspective or confessional structures. Yet this reclamation often occurs within patriarchal constraints.

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* illustrates narrative voice as performative survival. Offred's first-person narration oscillates between compliance and subversion. Butler's theory of performativity [7] illuminates how identity is enacted through repeated discursive acts. Offred's voice performs submission while subtly preserving resistance through storytelling. Language becomes both instrument of oppression and medium of agency.

Unreliable narration also plays a crucial role. Female narrators who question their own perceptions expose epistemic instability within patriarchal structures. By destabilizing narrative certainty, these voices challenge institutional authority.

However, feminist narrative voice must be examined intersectionally. Gender intersects with race, class, and nationality. Identity reconstruction cannot be reduced to singular axes of power.

5.5 Memory as Counter-Discourse

Memory in contemporary literature frequently functions as counter-history. Foucault's discourse-power framework [8] suggests that institutional narratives regulate knowledge production. Literary memory disrupts this regulation by foregrounding subjective testimony.

In Morrison's work, memory contests official historical silence regarding slavery. In postcolonial narratives, recollection reclaims erased cultural pasts. Fragmented temporality mirrors the instability of historical continuity.

Yet memory is not purely emancipatory. It is selective, shaped by trauma and desire. Unreliable narration complicates the authority of memory. Identity reconstruction thus emerges from negotiation between remembering and forgetting.

5.6 Synthesis: Narrative Voice at the Intersection of Language, Memory, and Power

Across these case illustrations, several patterns emerge:

Dimension	Narrative Function	Identity Outcome
Fragmented temporality	Trauma articulation	Unstable selfhood
Polyphonic voice	Dialogic multiplicity	Relational identity
Linguistic hybridity	Cultural negotiation	Hybrid subjectivity
Confessional narration	Gendered agency	Performative resistance

Memory reconstruction	Counter- history	Political self- assertion
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Narrative voice operates as the intersection where language encodes cultural belonging, memory reconstructs past trauma, and power structures shape representation. Identity is neither purely internal nor externally imposed; it emerges through narrative negotiation. Contemporary English literature thus transforms narrative voice into a political instrument. Rather than simply telling stories, these texts interrogate how stories shape subjectivity itself. Voice becomes a site of epistemic struggle.

VI. DISCUSSION

The analysis demonstrates that narrative voice in contemporary English literature functions not merely as a stylistic mechanism but as a structural site where identity, memory, and power intersect. What emerges across diverse textual contexts is not a unified theory of voice but a pattern of strategic deployment: fragmentation, hybridity, polyphony, and confessional interiority serve as tools for negotiating unstable subjectivities. The discussion therefore considers three broader implications: (1) the destabilization of unified identity, (2) the politicization of linguistic form, and (3) the epistemic role of memory in counter-discursive reconstruction.

6.1 The Destabilization of Unified Identity

Contemporary narrative voice consistently disrupts the classical model of coherent, autonomous selfhood. Rather than presenting identity as linear development, these texts foreground discontinuity and self-division. This reflects a broader philosophical shift away from essentialist conceptions of identity toward relational and performative models.

In many contemporary works, first-person narration does not guarantee authority. Instead, it exposes unreliability, repression, and partial self-knowledge. The narrating “I” becomes fractured, oscillating between confession and concealment. This destabilization challenges the Enlightenment notion of rational self-transparency. Identity is revealed as contingent upon narrative reconstruction, and that reconstruction is shaped by gaps, silences, and contradictions.

This shift is particularly visible in diasporic and postcolonial contexts, where identity is negotiated between cultural affiliations. The narrative voice often occupies liminal space—neither fully assimilated nor wholly rooted in origin. The instability of voice mirrors the instability of belonging. Rather than resolving this tension, contemporary literature frequently sustains it, suggesting that identity is a perpetual negotiation rather than a fixed endpoint.

6.2 Linguistic Form as Political Practice

Language in contemporary English literature functions as a terrain of power. Standard English historically carries colonial, institutional, and class authority. The strategic disruption of linguistic norms—through code-switching, syntactic experimentation, and incorporation of non-English lexicons—constitutes a deliberate political gesture.

Linguistic hybridity serves two simultaneous purposes. First, it affirms cultural specificity by embedding marginalized idioms within dominant linguistic structures. Second, it resists assimilation into homogenized literary norms. The narrative voice thereby becomes a space of cultural negotiation. Language does not simply represent identity; it enacts it.

However, the politics of hybridity are complex. In a global literary marketplace, multilingual aesthetics may be commodified as markers of diversity without altering underlying structural hierarchies. Thus, the subversive potential of hybrid narrative voice depends on context and reception. The discussion must therefore recognize that narrative resistance operates within economic and institutional constraints.

6.3 Memory as Counter-Discourse

Memory plays a central role in reconstructing identity within contemporary narrative voice. In trauma literature and postcolonial fiction, recollection becomes an act of resistance against official histories. Fragmented temporal structures replicate the psychological and cultural rupture experienced by marginalized subjects.

Yet memory in these texts is rarely stable or authoritative. Unreliable narration complicates the relationship between recollection and truth. This ambiguity does not weaken the political function of memory; rather, it underscores the complexity of historical representation. Identity reconstruction occurs through selective remembering and reinterpretation.

Memory, therefore, functions as counter-discourse. It challenges institutional narratives that silence or distort marginalized experiences. Through narrative voice, personal memory acquires collective significance. The self becomes a conduit for broader historical reclamation.

6.4 Voice as Intersection of Language, Memory, and Power

When examined collectively, the evidence suggests that narrative voice operates at the intersection of three forces:

Dimension	Structural Function	Political Implication
Language	Medium of articulation	Cultural resistance or assimilation
Memory	Temporal reconstruction	Counter-history formation
Power	Discursive regulation	Contestation of authority

Voice mediates all three. It articulates identity linguistically, reconstructs it temporally, and positions it politically. Identity is not simply narrated; it is produced through the interaction of these forces.

Importantly, contemporary literature does not offer a singular model of emancipatory voice. Some texts portray partial empowerment, others emphasize unresolved fragmentation. This ambivalence reflects the complexity of contemporary subjectivity in globalized societies.

6.5 Implications for Contemporary Literary Studies

The findings suggest that narratology must move beyond structural classification toward politically informed analysis. Voice cannot be understood solely in terms of focalization or grammatical person; it must be situated within socio-historical contexts.

Similarly, postcolonial and feminist theories benefit from renewed engagement with formal

narratology. Structural analysis reveals how political resistance is embedded within narrative mechanics, not merely thematic content. Fragmented chronology, unreliable narration, and polyphony are not decorative techniques; they are mechanisms of epistemic intervention.

Ultimately, narrative voice in contemporary English literature functions as a transformative site where identity is continually reconstructed through linguistic negotiation, mnemonic retrieval, and confrontation with power structures. Rather than stabilizing the self, these voices expose its contingency yet within that contingency lies the possibility of agency.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that narrative voice in contemporary English literature functions as a critical site for the reconstruction of identity at the intersection of language, memory, and power. Moving beyond structural narratology, the analysis reveals that voice is not merely a technical category of storytelling but an epistemological and political instrument through which subjectivity is negotiated. Identity in contemporary literature is neither fixed nor coherent; it emerges through processes of narration that configure fragmented memory, linguistic hybridity, and contested discursive authority.

Through engagement with narratological theory, postcolonial studies, feminist discourse, and memory studies, the research establishes that narrative voice operates as a dynamic mediator between personal experience and socio-political structures. Fragmented temporality reflects trauma and dislocation; polyphonic narration destabilizes singular ideological dominance; code-switching and hybridized language resist linguistic hegemony; confessional and unreliable voices expose epistemic instability within patriarchal and colonial systems.

Importantly, the reconstruction of identity through narrative voice is not necessarily a process of resolution. Contemporary texts frequently sustain ambiguity and incompleteness. Identity emerges as provisional, negotiated, and contextually shaped rather than unified or essential. This instability reflects broader conditions of globalization, migration, and historical memory in late modern societies.

The study therefore argues that narrative voice in contemporary English literature should be understood as a performative and political act. It is through storytelling that subjects reclaim agency, confront silencing, and rearticulate belonging. Language becomes not only a medium of expression but a field of resistance; memory becomes not only recollection but counter-discourse; and voice becomes not only narrative perspective but a mechanism of epistemic repositioning.

VIII. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

While this study has provided a theoretically integrated framework, several avenues remain open for further scholarly investigation.

First, comparative cross-cultural analysis would deepen understanding of how narrative voice reconstructs identity across different linguistic traditions beyond Anglophone contexts. Examining Global South literatures in translation may reveal alternative models of voice and memory not fully captured within English-language frameworks. Second, interdisciplinary collaboration between literary studies and digital humanities could introduce computational stylistic analysis of narrative voice. Quantitative tools such as sentiment analysis, lexical diversity measurement, and focalization

tracking may complement close reading and provide broader empirical validation. Third, future research should further explore intersectionality in narrative voice. While this study integrates gender and postcolonial frameworks, deeper engagement with queer theory, disability studies, and indigenous epistemologies would expand understanding of how identity is narratively reconstructed across multiple axes of marginalization. Fourth, reception studies examining reader interpretation of polyphonic and hybrid narratives could illuminate how narrative voice functions beyond textual structure and into cultural consumption.

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