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Negotiating Cultural Identity in Poetic Canon: Reading Select Texts of Jeet Thayil

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Abstract

This paper examines the negotiation of cultural identity in the poetic canon of Jeet Thayil through a close reading of select poems that foreground questions of language, place, memory, and selfhood. Positioned within the landscape of contemporary Indian English poetry, Thayil's work resists monolithic notions of cultural identity and instead articulates a fractured, fluid, and often contradictory sense of belonging. Drawing on postcolonial cultural theory and socio-linguistic perspectives, the study argues that Thayil's poetry constructs identity as a lived negotiation shaped by urban experience, historical residue, spiritual disquiet, and linguistic hybridity. The analysis focuses on how Thayil employs a deliberately unsettled idioms marked by code-switching, vernacular rhythms, allusive references, and stark corporeal imagery to challenge inherited cultural certainties. His poems reimagine the Indian city, particularly Bombay/Mumbai, as a palimpsestic space where colonial memory, indigenous traditions, and global modernity intersect. In this milieu, cultural identity emerges not as an essence to be recovered but as a process continuously re-scripted through language and experience. By foregrounding marginal voices, desacralised rituals, and fractured narratives, Thayil destabilises dominant cultural myths and exposes the tensions between tradition and transgression. The paper concludes that Jeet Thayil's poetry contributes to the contemporary poetic canon by redefining cultural identity as performative, provisional, and ethically charged, thereby offering a nuanced critique of cultural authenticity in postcolonial and globalised contexts.

Keywords: language, culture, identity, semiotics, imagery, poetry

1. Introduction

South Indian English literature, emerging from the states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana, forms one of the richest yet often under-theorised strands of Indian English writing. From the early fiction of R. K. Narayan in Tamil Nadu, to Anita Nair's explorations of Kerala's gendered spaces, to Perumal Murugan's bilingual experiments, and contemporary voices like Arundhati Roy (Kerala) or Jayakanthan (in translation), South Indian writers have used English as a medium to represent region, memory, and cultural plurality with a distinguished landscape evident in their writings. Their works reveal how language, culture, and identity intersect in ways that complicate both "national" literary narratives and global perceptions of Indian writing. South Indian English literature is marked by a bilingual sensibility or sometimes polylingual sensibility. They often operate between their mother tongues, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam and English. This results in what Braj Kachru (1983)

calls the nativisation of English, where syntax, idioms, and cultural rhythms from Dravidian languages infuse English expression. R. K. Narayan in *Malgudi Days* (1943) employs a deceptively simple English that mirrors spoken Tamil-inflected idiom, creating the effect of universality while retaining local specificity, by creating a fictional town named Malgudi. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) happens to combine English with Malayalam through inflected rhythms, neologisms, and childlike syntax, transforming it into an intimate and playful tool of cultural expression. Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé* (2001) and *Mistress* (2005) weave in Malayalam cultural lexicon, showing how local languages survive within the globalised English medium. Here, English becomes neither a coloniser's tongue nor a neutral tool but it get transformed into a hybrid space where local linguistic identities are preserved and reimagined. South Indian English literature foregrounds the cultural textures of Dravidian society entwined with its rituals, caste hierarchies, landscapes both physical and emotional, together with spiritual thought and traditions. South Indian writers insist on cultural rootedness. R. K. Narayan's fictional town 'Malgudi' embodies the rhythms of Tamil Nadu's small-town life, capturing a culture negotiating modernity without erasing tradition. Arundhati Roy situates Kerala's riverine culture and caste politics at the heart of her Booker-winning novel, presenting "Kerala" as both specific and global. Perumal Murugan (though primarily Tamil, translated and self-translated) brings caste politics and rural Tamil culture into English, challenging dominant narratives of South Indian society. Anita Nair often explores women's negotiations with patriarchy and modernity in distinctly Keralite contexts, where tradition and modern aspirations collide. Thus, South Indian English literature offers a cultural cartography of the region, its landscape, foods, rituals, and everyday life in proximity with ocean, while also interrogating social structures such as caste, gender roles, and religion and reflecting on individual psychology.

When it comes to the analysis of identity, South Indian English literature is plural, hybrid, and aften sprungs up a question. Writers often grapple with the tension between regional rootedness and global visibility. Regional Identity as represented in Narayan's Malgudi and Murugan's villages assert the centrality of the local, challenging the "pan-Indian" frameworks of Indian English literature. The Gendered Identity as expressed by the writers like Anita Nair and Kamala Das (though writing in both English and Malayalam) use English to articulate women's interiority, sexuality, and resistance against patriarchal structures, whereas Kamala Das's confessional poetry, for foregrounds female desire with agency through cultural context that seeks to silence it, making identity a radical assertion, when she says in one of her poems that "I speak three languages, write in two, but dream in one".

The question of Caste and Subaltern Identity as presented in Murugan's *One Part Woman* (2013, trans. 2015) foregrounds caste, fertility rituals, and subaltern voices, showing how English can carry stories of marginalised lives without erasing their cultural particularity. In this sense, identity in South Indian English literature is not homogenised but fragmented that intends to take shape by caste, gender, region, and class, all articulated through an indigenised English.

South Indian English literature reveals the dynamic interplay of language, culture, and identity. Through the nativisation of English, writers transform a colonial language into a medium of regional and personal expression. Through their cultural representations, they map the landscapes, traditions, and tensions of South Indian society. And through their explorations of identity, they insist on plurality which is gendered, regional, subaltern, and global. By doing so, South Indian English writers both expand the Indian English canon and provincialise it, showing that "Indian English literature" is not a monolith but a constellation

of regional voices, each with its own linguistic texture and cultural epistemology and rhythmic flavour. South Indian English poetry has played a crucial but often underexplored role in shaping the Indian English literary canon in terms of language, culture and identity. Unlike the mainstream dominance of North Indian or metropolitan writers, South Indian poets negotiate with English through the lived experiences of Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam through cultural contexts. Poets such as A. K. Ramanujan, Kamala Das, R. Parthasarathy, Jayanta Mahapatra (though Odia, often compared), Arun Kolatkar (Western Indian), alongside more recent poets like Meena Kandasamy and Arundhathi Subramaniam, collectively highlight the South's plural poetic traditions. Their work demonstrates how English is not only appropriated but also reshaped by regional cultural imaginaries, thereby inscribing South India firmly into the native canon of Indian English poetry. The most striking feature of South Indian English poetry is its bilingual or even multilingual sensibility. Many poets are bilingual, writing in English while their sensibility seems to be deeply rooted in their mother tongues. A. K. Ramanujan, the most prominent of all, it is quite evident through his writings that after he started exploring, understanding and translating tamil literature, his writing style in English witnesses a sharp turn, earlier it was mere imitation of the west, the idea put forward by M. K. Naik, he individualised himself as an Indian English poet and contributed a great deal developing this canon, he masterfully translates the rhythms of Tamil Sangam poetry and Kannada bhakti traditions into English. His poems such as *Self-Portrait* or *Obituary* combine a modernist sensibility with the cadences of oral Tamil storytelling, and presenting the landscape of Indian traditional life. R. Parthasarathy, in *Rough Passage* (1977), explicitly presents a linguistic struggle wherein he says "My tongue in English chains." His poetry dramatizes the alienation of using English while yearning for Tamil, suggesting the violence of colonial inheritance, overtly presenting the gradual loss of culture and overpowering of the language, where an individual is caught in the ambiguous web of expression. Kamala Das writes in English with an intensely confessional voice, but the rhythms of her English are infused with Malayalam speech-patterns, yielding a hybrid, indigenised diction. Meena Kandasamy, a contemporary Tamil poet, uses English as a weapon of resistance, fusing Dalit identity politics in a fierce and transgressive style. In each case, over the period of time, English becomes a vernacularised medium, transformed by regional speech and rhythm. South Indian English poetry also reflects cultural negotiations between tradition and modernity, reflecting the South Indian social realities. Ramanujan's use of myths, folklore, and classical Sangam poetry to reinterpret cultural memory in modern contexts. His poetry situates South Indian traditions within global modernist forms, making him a cultural mediator, whereas, Kamala Das, in poems like *An Introduction*, breaks silences around female sexuality and desire, foregrounding the woman's body in a cultural context that suppresses it. She positions herself as both insider and rebel within Malayalam society. Parthasarathy deals with exile and estrangement, linking the Tamil diaspora to cultural dislocation, and thereby inserting South Indian identity into the larger narrative of Indian modernity.

Jeet Thayil's poetic oeuvre exemplifies the linguistic and cultural hybridity central to postcolonial Indian English literature. Living between Bombay, New York, and other transnational spaces, Thayil embodies a diasporic identity that manifests in his poetry as a hybrid negotiation of self, language, and location. Instead of rejecting English as a colonial residue, he transforms it into an expressive medium capable of articulating urban Indian consciousness.

English as a Hybrid Medium, Thayil's English contains musical rhythms, urban slang, Biblical registers,

and traces of Indian vernacular morphology. This nativised English rejects British linguistic purity and instead reflects what Braj B. Kachru calls the "Indianisation of English," where new semantic and phonological forms emerge to represent local realities (*The Alchemy of English* 22). In poems like *"Malayalam"*, the speaker confronts the loss of the mother tongue, yet English becomes re-rooted in Indian cultural memory. This conflict illustrates hybridity as survival, not loss. English becomes "Bombay English," crackling with voices of migrants, addicts, and displaced subjects.

Bhabha's Third Space and Thayil's IdentityHomi K. Bhabha argues that postcolonial identity occupies a "third space" — a site of negotiation where neither colonizer nor colonized identity dominates (*The Location of Culture* 56).

Thayil's poetic persona resides in this liminality: geographically (between East and West), linguistically (between English and lost Malayalam), culturally (between spirituality and urban degradation). This hybridity breaks binaries: sacred vs. profane, Indian vs. Western, poetic language vs. street slang.

Urban Modernism and the Postcolonial City, His poems depict globalised cities, especially Bombay, as contact zones of multicultural existence. His city is alive with multilingual voices, which disrupt English from within: Hindi interjections, references to Indian rituals, localized urban imagery The city becomes a semiotic environment that nativises English organically, through behavior, rhythm, and lived experience — echoing Leonard Bloomfield's theory of language adaptation. Ngũgĩ and the Subversion of Power through Language, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o views language as a carrier of culture and collective memory (*Decolonising the Mind* 13). Thayil's poetry shows that while mother-tongue loss is painful, appropriating and altering the colonizer's language is a counter-discursive act: English becomes the language of addiction, faith, music, and Bombay nightlife — a tool for expressing Indian urban trauma and beauty, not colonial ideology. Thus, linguistic hybridity becomes political resistance. Music as a Translingual Identity, As a musician, Thayil infuses English with jazz-like rhythms, code-switching, and syncopation. Music acts like a universal language that transcends linguistic purism, creating a poetic identity rooted in: improvisation, fusion, multicultural aesthetic freedom. This reinforces the idea that hybridity is creative power, not fragmentation. Jeet Thayil's poetry demonstrates how English in India is no longer a borrowed or imposed medium. Through multicultural language, urban imagery, and postmodern experimentation, he constructs a hybrid identity that is proudly transgressive. His work confirms that Indian English is a native and nativised form of expression — capable of capturing the contemporary Indian psyche in all its contradictions. Thayil's poetic hybridity thus exemplifies a new paradigm in postcolonial writing: the reclaiming and re-voicing of English as a language of Indian selfhood.

Jeet Thayil's poetry is distinguished not by lexical exoticism or overt indigenisation but by a deliberate linguistic austerity. His poems foreground English as a working language—functional, fractured, and ethically burdened. From a linguistic perspective, Thayil's work can be analysed across multiple levels: lexical choice, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, and discourse structure. Together, these levels reveal how his poetry constructs meaning through restraint, fragmentation, and repetition rather than rhetorical flourish.

Unlike many Indian English poets who foreground code-switching or vernacular insertions, Thayil's linguistic strategy is one of minimal deviation, allowing cultural meaning to emerge through structure and

usage rather than vocabulary.
The poetry collections that will be discussed in this chapter are English (2003), These Errors are correct (2008), Apocalypse (1997).

The first poetry collection that will be discussed and analysed is English, published in 2003. This collection is divided in sex sections namely, Moveable, Shapeshifter, Ache, the Genesis Godown, Ache, Shapeshifter and Moveable:
In this poetry collection, the first poem is, Moveable, where he write,
My mother is bathing.
I am on a **guard duty**, which I enjoy.
As my **Asiatic** time came to a close
You and I grew reckless, racing borrowed
Toys through the streets of ghost towns
patrolled by soldiers, priests, guard dogs,
and always the inscrutable face and
lotus feet of the first **godman**, **Sri Sri**
Baba Ba.

These lines present a typical Indian landscape of a city, with nuanced use of Indian English and paraphrasic, narrative expression in form of poetry. He presents a household where a mother while bathing generally appoints her son on guarding in a family because generally the door didn't usually had proper locks as the doors used to be of wood which become retarded over a period of time because of water, hence they can't be locked properly. He gets reminded of the time when he was about to leave his family and move abroad. He presents a typical image of Indian street filled with frequent movement by soldiers, priests and street dogs called as guard dogs satirically with their questionable and investigatory face throughout. The term 'lotus feet' has entirely Indian origin, it is used for certain expressions rooted in Hinduism, like 'charan kamal' generally used for the feet of divine, which literally translates to lotus feet here used for the godman, another Indian English word coming from the literal translation of 'divya manav', mostly revered to priests and saints and hence used for Sri Sri Baba Ba. In the same poem, he moves forward by writing,
"back in a mo", you said,
"and remember, **yaar,** the nail in your head
is moveable. So move it why don't you?"
in the fall of 2001, I do, I walk
from Roosevelt Station to a basement room
in Jackson Heights, past **Hindi movie houses,**
cut-rate travel agents, **kabab halls, suit-**
sari shops, paan-DVD parlours, psychics.
You, I am beginning to suspect, are not here.

In this stanza, he write in a typically Indian conversational language, and uses the technique of code-switching, signifying a typical Indian location. The use of word 'yaar' is used in a friendly way while talking among friends. This term stands as untranslatable in English context, because it's just an expression for expressing ones affection. If one still tries hard to translate, it will translate as 'dear' but emotion

attached does not remain same. He later uses the expression Hindi movie houses which means the cinema halls at that time, there were no multiplexes, cut-rate travel agents signifies the rampant agents at the service of tourists with whom one has to bargain in order to find hotels at a suitable price. Together with he uses expressions like 'kabab halls', the restaurants popular for selling kababs, a typical Indian cuisine and 'paan-DVD parlours', reflects the existence of shops during the period of 90s which used to sell DVD's of movies together with 'Paan', a sweet delicacy of betel leaves in India, together with psychics which signifies the astrologers who indulge in tarot reading or palmistry to talk about ones future.

Another poem in this sequence is 'Skewed':
I will be ready once I
Get myself a hat, it being **winter and all**.
In this line, the poet uses the expression 'winter and all', which suggests the typical expression of talking in Indian milieu, where generally use expression like 'wagera' which translates to 'and all'. Another line from the same poem,
My regenerate heart pumps like a bird,
Floating on auto, ever unwilling to land.
Afloat, The Immigrant Martyr Elect:
Wept together at night.

In these lines, where the poet expresses his emotional condition, where he feels his heart pumping using the simile of a bird, and the next line starts where he expresses as if he is 'floating on auto', signifying the manner in which the auto (a means of public transport typically belongs to Indian milieu is driven on the streets of India), it is known for moving swiftly on the streets of India at a high pace. The next lines of the poems goes as,
Weekends spent
In study, we ate
Only halal and lent-
ils. For weeks on end
I heard no word
Of English spoken
But 'New York!'

In these lines, the eating of 'halal and lentils' prominently consumed in south India. He writes during the his last days in India before moving to New York, where he says that during that time nobody at his home spoke in their regional tongue except a single word in English that is New York. Another poem in this sequence is, How to be a Girl,
My lifeline lengthens.

Fool and flea:
Dearly beloved
We are gathered here
In these lines, the use of express 'my lifeline lengthens', this signifies the typical behaviour of an average Indian to constantly signal towards the lines etched in their hand, an important aspect of Palmistry, which tells about their course of life. The lifeline or 'jeevan rekha', signifies the longevity of life, which poets

assumes to have increased for him.
To join together
This fool and this flea
In holy matrimony.
The Air there is Crowded:
Here we stand, steps away
From our first home.
Look closely at the way
The pictures take shape: three rooms,
Two faces, a patch of lawn.
We are smiling. You will cram
The house with red Kohima rugs,
Jaipur cotton, scrolled iron,
A rocking chair, greenery, jazz:

These lines signify the authentic Indian landscape presented in the poetry, where a house has a patch of lawn, characteristic of Indian households especially in South India, there the house have big and lush green lawns in every house. The poets move ahead by writing that the house has Kohima rugs, Kohima is the capital of Nagaland famous for its tribal artistry in India, next is Jaipur famous for the fine cotton, as it exists in Rajasthan which is known for its hot weather hence produces the most fine cotton. Other prominent symbols that fill any Indian household is the scrolled iron, the greenery, the rocking chair and jazz music prevalent during 9os and early 2000 India in the realm of music.

One of the most distinctive features of Thayil's poetry is its reliance on silence as signification. Short lines, syntactic breaks, and minimal commentary function as negative signs that signify emotional depletion and ethical restraint.

From Eco's perspective, such silence produces an open text, compelling readers to participate in meaning-making. Silence in Thayil's poetry resists spectacle and sentimentality, aligning with a poetics of refusal. Refusal to aestheticise suffering or impose moral conclusions. Silence thus becomes a socio-semiotic marker of contemporary disillusionment.

Identity in Thayil's poetry is not represented as origin or essence but as semiotic positioning. The poetic "I" is constructed through statements, absences, and observational distance rather than narrative self-exposure. This corresponds to Stuart Hall's assertion that identity is produced through representation and difference. Thayil's speakers exist as signifying subjects shaped by language, space, and social constraint rather than as autonomous selves. Bhabha's notion of the third space is evident here: identity emerges in the interstices between languages, cultures, and moral certainties.

This chapter has demonstrated that a socio-semiotic reading of Jeet Thayil's poetry reveals a complex system of signs through which contemporary Indian urban life, postcolonial language politics, gender norms, and cultural dislocation are articulated. Thayil's poetry does not rely on grand symbols or mythic structures; instead, it derives meaning from everyday signs—languages, commands, bodies, substances, cities, and silences. In the process of transforming English into a socially inflected semiotic resource,

Thayil positions poetry as a mode of cultural reading and ethical witnessing. His work exemplifies a mature phase of Indian English poetry in which meaning arises not from assertion but from signification, not from proclamation but from restraint.

Another key feature of Thayil's poetry is his preoccupation with death and transcendence. His later works, particularly *These Errors Are Correct*, approach mortality with a mixture of scepticism and yearning for the sacred. The poems blend Christian and Hindu imagery, presenting death as a moment of paradoxical illumination. The tone oscillates between confession and revelation, suggesting that art and poetry themselves are redemptive forms of survival. Stylistically, Thayil combines the confessional candour of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton with the urban irony of Allen Ginsberg and T. S. Eliot. His verse often merges multiple voices, perspectives, and registers, creating a fragmented, collage-like structure. Intertextuality, irony, and linguistic play dominate his craft, producing what Arundhathi Subramaniam calls "a poetics of fragmentation that refuses to mourn its own brokenness" (Subramaniam 58).

Jeet Thayil's poetry articulates the contradictions of modern urban existence and postcolonial identity with rare honesty and stylistic daring. His exploration of addiction, exile, and the nativisation of language transforms English into a polyphonic space — at once Indian and global. Through the fusion of musical rhythm, confessional depth, and linguistic hybridity, Thayil emerges as one of the most distinctive and transgressive voices in contemporary Indian English poetry.

Jeet Thayil's poetic oeuvre embodies the linguistic and cultural hybridity of postcolonial India, where English — once a colonial imposition — has been transformed into an expressive tool for articulating local experiences, urban identities, and fragmented subjectivities. His poetry reflects what Homi K. Bhabha describes as the "third space", a liminal zone where cultures intersect, meanings shift, and new identities emerge (*The Location of Culture* 56). Through his nativized English idiom, Thayil constructs a hybrid urban sensibility that is simultaneously global, metropolitan, and deeply rooted in Indian social realities.

Thayil's upbringing across Hong Kong, Bombay, and New York created a multilingual consciousness that manifests as a linguistic duality in his poetry. In poems such as *"Malayalam,"* the speaker mourns the estrangement from his mother tongue, yet recognizes English as the language of his lived reality. This tension echoes Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's assertion that language carries one's culture and memory (*Decolonising the Mind* 13). Unlike Ngũgĩ's rejection of colonial languages, however, Thayil engages in reclamation, reshaping English to voice diasporic Indian experience.

His English incorporates local rhythms, Indian sociolects, and interlingual references: Bombay slang, Biblical echoes, Carnatic musicality, and Bollywood imagery coexist seamlessly. This fulfils what Braj B. Kachru terms "the nativisation of English", a process where non-native communities adopt, adapt, and indigenize English into a culturally expressive code (*The Alchemy of English* 22).

Thayil is often associated with the Bombay school of Indian English poetry, a group focused on the metropolitan dislocation of the postcolonial city. His representation of Bombay is multilingual and multicultural, a linguistic patchwork of English, Hindi, Urdu, and regional idioms. The very soundscape of his poems resists imperial linguistic hierarchies by validating subaltern speech forms within literary

English. The city becomes a metaphor for hybrid identity as chaotic, intoxicating, and layered with histories of migration and resistance. In *English* (2004) and *These Errors Are Correct* (2008), the poet not only writes in English but rewrites what English can signify in an Indian context: urban grit, addiction, and disillusionment become poetic aesthetics.

Thayil's recurring themes of displacement, craving, and ruin correspond to postcolonial psychic fragmentation. Addiction in his poetry is both literal and symbolic, a metaphor for the fractured cultural consciousness of a community negotiating between linguistic worlds. Like Agha Shahid Ali and Arun Kolatkar, Thayil uses poetry to navigate identity suspended between belonging and unbelonging. His hybrid linguistic performance becomes a way of stitching together broken subjectivities.

Thayil's work creates a bridge between Indian and Western poetic traditions. His references to Baudelaire, Eliot, Ginsberg, and Plath coexist with Indian musical and cultural signs. This intertextual hybridity challenges Western ownership over English literary modernism and asserts Indian agency within the global canon, an act of postcolonial reclamation.

He does not merely imitate, he recontextualizes Western styles in Indian environments, thereby *provincializing* metropolitan English and elevating the lived histories of urban India to literary centrality.

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