

English, the Language of Assimilation, in Sabeeha Rehman's *Threading My Prayer Rug*

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ABSTRACT

Language, the basis of human civilization, is a medium for people to come together, communicate their thoughts, emotions, and interact with each other. Globalization has moved the world towards a common language. Here, English stands tall, "The worldwide spread of English, its predominant use in diverse international economic and cultural arenas, and the dramatic expansion of electronic communication have allowed the language to achieve the status of an international language or a global lingua franca" (Marlina and Xu 1). Against this background, the present paper explores how a Pakistani woman Sabeeha Rehman in her memoir *Threading My Prayer Rug* has explored English as a medium to form and establish her own Muslim community in Staten Islands, the United States so as to complete the process of assimilation and settlement in the host land, the United States, thereby, diminishing the aspect of diaspora to underscore that in the present time English, besides, occupying the status of global language has also achieved the status of the language of assimilation, hence, reducing the tensions and conflicts surrounding humankind.

Keywords: *English, lingua franca, migration, assimilation, integration, diaspora, community formation, religion, community bonding.*

Migration is a complex process as it transforms not only geographical location but also deeply impacts and alters linguistic identity of immigrants. Language plays an important role in the varied experiences of immigrants. It serves not only as a means of communication but also as a marker of identity, a sense of belonging, and helps in social integration as suggested by Dr. Almestareehi Kefah Mohammad, "As globalization continues to facilitate increased migration, the linguistic dynamics within migrant communities become pivotal aspects of their integration and cultural identity" (d785). It becomes even more complex for immigrants migrating to multicultural societies like the United States as acquiring English is often understood an essential step towards educational achievement, professional advancement, and participation in public life. Further, language integration is not as easy as it seems to be as the adoption of English may lead to dilemma between choosing one's cultural heritage and adapting to the expectations of the host society. This leads to cultural conflict among immigrants who are unable to decide whether to forsake their native culture altogether and if they wish to integrate both the cultures, then how are they are meant to achieve it, "the significance of heritage languages as a means of cultural preservation and identity maintenance, exploring the factors influencing language retention, language shift, and the intergenerational transmission of languages within migrant families" (d785). Hence, language

becomes an important and integral issue that immigrants face along with various other problems including issues of assimilation, identity-crisis, and cultural conflict. Thus, the memoirs written by immigrant often explore these complexities and illustrate how language influences personal identity and social acceptance while simultaneously reflecting the challenges of maintaining connections with one's native culture.

Sabeeha Rehman's memoir *Threading My Prayer Rug: One Woman's Journey from Pakistani Muslim to American Muslim* narrates her journey from Pakistani Muslim woman to America Muslim woman after an arranged marriage in 1971. The memoir narrates her journey of assimilation and adaptation to American life while remaining steadfast to her Islamic values and Pakistani culture and tradition, "I was holding American parties in English, in pants, with Western music, and Pakistani parties in Urdu, in shalwar kameez, and with Urdu songs. Khalid and I would greet our Muslim friends with a nod, our American friends with a hug and a kiss" (Rehman). In the process of assimilation, Sabeeha Rehman narrates how English, the language of her host land, plays a vital role in helping her assimilate in the West. Rather than portraying English as a delimiting force that restricted her identity, Sabeeha Rehman represents it as a means through which dialogue could be sought with others to help bridge the gap between the natives and immigrants so as to develop a sense of understanding among them, thereby, helping to bring intercultural exchange between them. The memoir highlights how language helps immigrants to maintain multiple cultural identities (both native and host culture) within the multicultural America, "We got a call. Eid prayers were being held in Burgher Hall, and the sermon would be in English." (Rehman). Thus, English became a facilitating rather a delimiting factor responsible for easing the process of migration and assimilation in case of Sabeeha Rehman and her family.

In the similar context, Sabeeha Rehman's *Threading My Prayer Rug* offers a captivating account of the interplay of language and culture. By penning down her memoir, Sabeeha Rehman chronicles her migration from Pakistan to the United States, focusing on the changes required to re-establish a life in a completely new socio-cultural environment. What makes her journey of assimilation memorable is that rather than portraying assimilation as a complete abandonment of her Pakistani and Muslim identity, she presents it as a gradual and ongoing process of balancing multiple cultural affiliations, "I had never been inside a mosque in Pakistan, and there was no such thing as a Sunday school. Religion was a home-based department, and every family did it their own way. And here we were, a bunch of religiously ignorant mothers, trying to model religion the American way." (Rehman). English gradually emerges throughout the memoir as more than a practical language of communication; it becomes a symbolic medium through which Sabeeha Rehman gains access to education, employment, civic engagement, and intercultural dialogue, "English was the official language, and the ability to converse fluently in English was the norm. My parents tried to find the right balance in integrating Muslim values into a British lifestyle" (Rehman). Her experiences demonstrate that linguistic competence facilitates integration into American society while simultaneously reshaping her understanding of the self and community.

The relationship between language and assimilation has been widely examined in sociolinguistic and postcolonial scholarship. Researchers such as Pierre Bourdieu argue that language functions as a cultural capital, a marker of social identity, and a means of negotiating power within multilingual societies, "social interaction articulates socio-historically configured "positions" from whence people speak; these positions are defined by

a ‘market’ of symbolic capital in which resources are circulated and unevenly distributed, ensuring, for instance, that a “high” Parisian accent will be perceived as superior vis-à-vis a ‘low’ upcountry accent” (Blommaert 5). English, particularly in immigrants’ contexts, often serves as the dominant language that enables participation in institutional, educational, and economic structures. However, these scholars also emphasize that adopting to the dominant language does not necessarily erase one’s native language or cultural identity. Instead, bilingualism and multilingualism frequently produce hybrid identities in which individuals draw upon multiple linguistic and cultural traditions simultaneously. Sabeeha Rehman’s memoir reflects these theoretical perspectives by illustrating that English becomes a language of opportunity while her religious beliefs, cultural practices, and emotional ties to Pakistan remain integral to her individual identity. This becomes clear from the fact that in order to assimilate Muslims of different regions, she decided to sing *naats* in English rather than in Urdu, which is one of the various ways through which immigrants seek assimilation in terms of language, “I tried to rationalize my proposal: we have children from various ethnic backgrounds and not all of them understand Urdu. We need to institutionalize English as our medium ... be inclusive” (Rehman). Thus, immigrants tend to seek their religious faith by using English as a medium rather than their native language so as to inculcate Muslim people belonging to different regional background.

The memoir further challenges the conventional belief that assimilation is only possible with complete cultural interchange and adoption of host land’s culture. However, Sabeeha Rehman’s memoir *Threading My Prayer Rug* projects an altogether different picture as instead of abandoning her native cultural heritage, Sabeeha Rehman exploits English as a useful tool for interaction across cultural and religious boundaries without abandoning her Muslim faith or Pakistani traditions altogether, “And I thought that waving an English *naat* in front of them would be a moment of enlightenment. I was asking them to give up what defined their identity—language—and had steered the plane into an air pocket” (Rehman). Thus, their relationship with their religion and even with God underwent a change as now in the United States, besides, reciting prayers and *naats* in English, they “began the supplication—a personal conversation with God, in English, thanking him for His blessings, for the health of his family, their well-being, asking for them to be good Muslims” (Rehman). The above statement represents the major act of transformation and assimilation, where the immigrants slowly and gradually start accepting the host land language as their own, close to their heart and a part of their identity.

In *Language and Symbolic Power* (1991), Pierre Bourdieu has discussed the concept of linguistic capital where he argues that language is not merely a tool of communication rather it is a form of symbolic capital through which one gets access to social, educational, and economic opportunities: “although it is legitimate to treat social relations – even relations of domination – as symbolic interactions (...) one must not forget that the relations of communication par excellence – linguistic exchanges – are also relations of symbolic power in which the power relations between speakers or their respective groups are actualized” (Blommaert 5). Thus, individuals who possess competence in the dominant language eventually acquire higher legitimacy and authority within institutional structures. Also, in case of the United States, proficiency in English holds much importance as it is a means to guarantee the maximum participation of immigrants in the field of education, employment, and civic life. In Sabeeha Rehman’s *Threading My Prayer Rug* her efficiency in English

enables her to establish her career in hospital administration, communicate with others confidently, establish her Muslim community with Muslim immigrants from different countries and participation in public discussions, especially in interfaith dialogue and talk openly about Islam, Islamophobia and religious tolerance. Thus, English ensures social mobility and public visibility for immigrants.

The memoir *Threading My Prayer Rug* presents how Sabeeha Rehman effectively uses English as a medium to interact and educate others about Islam by holding interfaith dialogues, especially post 9/11. 9/11 not only cost the lives of thousands of Americans but also left an indelible mark on the Muslim immigrants living in the United States, “The media have so distorted the image of Islam and left such an indelible impression on the viewers that nothing we can do can change that.” (Rehman). Therefore, in order to bring the reality of the preaching of Islam to the world, various Muslim persons living in the West felt the dire need to bring out the true message of Islam. Similarly, being a Muslim woman, Sabeeha Rehman also felt responsible to sensitize American population about the true tenets of Islam to remove the hatred for them, that rose to its peak post 9/11, “*Here is my chance to convince the skeptics that there is value in interfaith dialogue. I will tell them, ‘See what they are doing for us’*” (Rehman).

The interfaith dialogue proved a great success as it helped people to truly understand the fact that violence was never taught as a means to achieve something in Islam: “That’s not true, Islam is a peaceful religion” (Rehman). Though she was able to generate the message of peace to the entire population of the United States through the medium of interfaith dialogues, however, she realized it was not a goal that could be achieved in a day rather, it needs a lifetime work with patience so as to pacify the Islamophobia that has emerged in the United States and in the West, “I made my peace with the Islamophobes, acknowledging that we had not done enough to amplify the voices of moderation. Their vitriolic voices made me realize how much more work we had to do, and how much further we had to go to dispel the misconceptions about Muslims and to make ourselves known impacted and establish professional and social relationships” (Rehman).

In *Threading My Prayer Rug*, English operates as the language of assimilation by providing access to American social, professional, and cultural life while simultaneously facilitating the construction of a hybrid identity that integrates Pakistani, Muslim, and American experiences. Through an analysis of Sabeeha Rehman’s autobiographical narrative, the present study demonstrates that language serves both as a practical resource and a symbolic space in which identity is continuously altered and re-constructed. By examining the aspects of language, assimilation, and identity, the paper contributes to broader discussions of immigrant literature and highlights how Sabeeha Rehman’s memoir redefines assimilation as a process of cultural dialogue rather than cultural loss.

This study examines the role of English as the language of assimilation in Sabeeha Rehman's *Threading My Prayer Rug* through the interconnected perspectives of sociolinguistics, cultural studies, and postcolonial theory. The framework draws upon theories of linguistic capital, assimilation, identity formation, and hybridity to analyze how language functions both as a means of social integration and a medium through which immigrants develop and maintain multiple cultural identities. The study also explores the acculturation model given by John W. Berry, where he explains in detail the process of immigration and adaptation in

host land as faced by immigrants. Berry (1997) identifies four stages of acculturation strategies: assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization. Assimilation occurs “when individuals adopt the cultural norms of a dominant or host culture, over their original culture” (Maricopa). Separation happens “when individuals reject the dominant or host culture in favor of preserving their culture of origin” (Maricopa). Integration involves adoption to “the cultural norms of the dominant or host culture while maintaining their culture of origin. Integration leads to, and is often synonymous with biculturalism” (Maricopa). Whereas, marginalization involves rejection of “both their culture of origin and the dominant host culture” (Maricopa). Sabeeha Rehman’s memoir *Threading My Prayer Rug* aligns more closely with the integration model than with the complete assimilation. Although she embraces English and actively participates in American society, she maintains her Pakistani cultural traditions and Islamic faith. They even started celebrating Eid with similar fervor similar to the customs they followed in their homeland Pakistan:

The high tea brought the flavor of Eid into my home . . . But I missed the sounds and the familiarity of communion of shared background. The men in the living room chatted in Urdu and Punjabi, and the girls and I cleared the kitchen, in English. This day, I didn’t want to explain my customs—I wanted to share them. I didn’t want to make these friends understand; I wanted it to be understood. And I certainly didn’t want to deal with looks of horror over the sacrificial lamb. I didn’t want to repeat myself to make my British-Pakistani-English accent understood to the American ear . . . Sara Lee cake didn’t have the sweet-and-sticky texture of swirling *jelebi*; hash browns didn’t have the spicy sting of *samosas*; *sheer khorma* made with spaghetti lacked the fine, slurpy feel of vermicelli; vanilla flavoring couldn’t replace the refreshing flowery fragrance of rosewater; and Eid Mubarak with an American accent felt foreign. (Rehman)

However, like other immigrants she missed her homeland and its easiness, especially in terms of language barrier, “I longed for the freedom to speak Urdu, to have someone talk back to me in the language of Eid” (Rehman). Being a first-generation immigrant, Sabeeha Rehman initially faced difficulty in shifting from her mother tongue, Urdu to the host land’s language, English, however, her children, being the second generation immigrants, could speak English fluently while simultaneously participating in Islamic rituals and maintaining cultural connections with Pakistan. Hence, English in the memoir is explored not as a symbol of cultural replacement but as a means of ensuring participation in a multicultural society.

Also, Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994), talks about the notion of hybridity. He argues that cultural identities are not fixed but are continuously reconstructed within what he terms as the “Third Space,” which he defines as “though unrepresentable in itself, (...) constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that meaning” (Bhabha 37). Thus, immigrants often develop a technique of survival where they indulge in hybrid identities that combine elements of both the cultures so that they do not have to forsake either of their cultural identity. Sabeeha Rehman rather than living exclusively as a Pakistani or an American, thus created a third space where she can enjoy American culture without forsaking her indigenous and religious identity. Language plays an essential role in the process of hybridity because it enables interaction within diverse cultural communities while simultaneously preserving connections to one’s indigenous heritage. Sabeeha Rehman’s use of English symbolizes her hybridity, as she adopts the dominant language for public

engagement without abandoning her cultural values and religious beliefs that form the basis of her identity.

Besides, Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity (1990) also rejects the notion of identity as an essential or permanent characteristic. Rather, he argues that identity is a continuous or fluid process of 'becoming' rather than simply 'being.' Cultural identity evolves through various factors including historical experience, migration, and interaction with changing social contexts: "Cultural identity is not fixed and forever unchanged in the past in a certain nature, but according to different living environment, historical and cultural influences, it changes" (Yang et al. 178). Sabeeha Rehman's memoir *Threading My Prayer Rug* also reflects this dynamic perspective of identity where she repeatedly finds her identity as continuously changing: being a Pakistani immigrant, an American citizen, and a fervent Muslim woman. Her exploitation of English as a tool of cultural assimilation thus, becomes an important element in this evolving identity of her, because it allows her to participate in American public life while simultaneously expressing and defending her religious and cultural values.

CONCLUSION

Sabeeha Rehman's *Threading My Prayer Rug* offers a complex understanding of the relationship between language, assimilation, and identity in the immigrant experience. Rather than presenting English as a force that compels immigrants to abandon their cultural and religious heritage, the memoir demonstrates that language can serve as a bridge between different two varied cultural worlds. Throughout her narrative, Sabeeha Rehman illustrates that proficiency in English enables her to participate in American society, establish her career as a hospital administrator, and engage in a meaningful interfaith dialogue. English, thus, functions as the primary language of assimilation by facilitating access to social institutions and public life in the host land while simultaneously empowering the writer to articulate her experiences as a Pakistani Muslim immigrant.

The analysis of the memoir through the theoretical perspectives of Pierre Bourdieu, John W. Berry, Homi K. Bhabha, Stuart Hall, and Joshua Fishman reveals that language is closely intertwined with identity formation and cultural negotiation. Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital explains how English provides Sabeeha Rehman a podium for social mobility and institutional participation, while Berry's integration model demonstrates that successful adaptation does not require the rejection of one's native culture. Likewise, Bhabha's theory of hybridity and Hall's conception of identity as an evolving process illuminate the fact that in the memoir the identity is projected as fluid and multidimensional. Sabeeha Rehman's continued attachment to Urdu, Islamic faith, and Pakistani traditions further supports the concept of fluidity in terms of identity formation.

A significant contribution of *Threading My Prayer Rug* lies in its rejection of assimilation as a process of total cultural expurgation. Instead, the memoir proposes the concept of integration in which English facilitates communication and participation without replacing the writer's linguistic, religious, or cultural heritage and incredibility. English becomes a language of connection that allows Sabeeha Rehman to engage in dialogue with American society while preserving the traditions and values that define her personal and collective identity. Through public speaking, interfaith dialogue, and everyday interactions, she

transforms English into a tool for challenging stereotypes, fostering mutual understanding, and representing Muslim voices within American public discourse.

The memoir also stresses upon the fact that bilingualism and multiculturalism are sources of strength rather than obstacles to integration. Sabeeha Rehman's approach to the concept of assimilation challenges traditional assimilation theories that privilege cultural uniformity, instead advocating a multicultural model where different linguistic and cultural identities coexist within a shared civic framework. Her narrative advocates the fact that that immigrants need not to choose either between their traditions and customs and their adopted homeland; rather, they can confine to hybrid identities that brings a mixture of both the cultures. In this context, English becomes not only the language of assimilation but also the language of empowerment, dialogue, and self-representation.

Ultimately, *Threading My Prayer Rug* redefines the meaning of assimilation in contemporary multicultural societies. The memoir argues that successful integration depends not on the abandonment of one's native language or cultural identity but on the ability to communicate across cross-cultural boundaries while remaining rooted in one's heritage. Sabeeha Rehman's journey from a Pakistani Muslim woman to an American Muslim woman illustrates that language is central to this process of migration and assimilation, enabling immigrants to negotiate belonging without sacrificing authenticity. By presenting English as a tool for inclusion, agency, and intercultural understanding, the memoir offers a compelling vision of assimilation as a dynamic process of adaptation that augments both immigrants and the societies they join. Consequently, Sabeeha Rehman's work *Threading My Prayer Rug* remains a valuable contribution to the studies of immigrant literature, sociolinguistics, and identity formation, which demonstrating the fact that language is not merely a means of communication rather a powerful instrument through which individuals shape their place within an increasingly diverse and interconnected world.

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