

Transcending borders: the role of language and culture in Nathalie Handal's poetic expression through a transnational perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this research article is to explore the role of language and culture in the poetic works of Nathalie Handal within the context of transnational theory.

Design/methodology/approach – This research article is designed to discuss two key aspects: how language constructs multicultural identities, and the role of hybrid language and culture in identity formation. The descriptive, close reading and analytical approaches are adopted in this research to represent the role of language and culture in the poetry of Nathalie Handal.

Findings – The article examined how the blending and erosion of languages influence transnational identities, presenting influential meditation on belonging in an age of global migration. It was found out that Handal's work, by interrogating identity through hybridity, resistance and cultural or language exchange, offered a pattern for understanding diaspora not as loss but as recreation. Moreover, by exploring a number of sensory experiences, it appeared that Handal invited readers to appreciate the compound nature of language and its ability to evoke powerful emotions and images; and through her skillful use of linguistic experimentation, exploration of the shadows of linguistic expression, and the various dimensions of language, it has become clear that Handal created a unique and powerful poetic voice that resonates with readers across cultures and backgrounds.

Research limitations/implications – The limitation of this research article is to explore the role of language and culture in the poetic works of Nathalie Handal within the context of transnational theory.

Practical implications – The practical implications of this research article are to analyze, read closely, and examine some of Handal's poems in order to explore the role of language and culture in the poetic works of Nathalie Handal in terms of transnational theory.

Social implications – The social implications of this research article have been portrayed through the discussion and close reading of Handal's poetry, which serves as a reminder of the importance of valuing and preserving linguistic diversity, while also urging people to use language responsibly to promote understanding and bridge the gaps that divide them.

Originality/value – The material and subject matters conveyed in this research article are original, hoping to add value to the literary field by highlighting Handal's skillful use of language, and creating a powerful and evocative poetry that explores the complexities of transnational relationships, memory, complications of migration, multiple identities and the search for the self in transnational backgrounds.

Keywords Culture, Language, Transnational theory, Identity

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Nathalie Handal is a Palestinian American poet born in 1969 in Latin America and a significant contemporary voice in world poetry. She is an accomplished novelist and essayist who is



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distinguished by her multilingual and multicultural outlook, which is deeply woven into her poetic style. Her work blends multiple languages, cultures, and literary traditions, reflecting her personal experience of exile and diaspora. Throughout her poetry, Handal navigates the intersection of both language and culture using them not just to express personal identity but also to engage in a broader and universal conversation about belonging, displacement and cultural memory.

This article explores the role of language in Handal's poetry and investigates how her poetic expression transcends borders both literally and metaphorically through her innovative use of language and cultural references as well as her deep engagement with the politics of transnational identity. The discussion unfolds across two key dimensions: language as a tool of cultural and multiple identities, and linguistic and cultural hybridity in shaping identity.

The first dimension is language as a tool of cultural and multiple identities in the context of which Handal's poetry foregrounds language as a vessel for mixed identities, where words carry the weight of ancestral heritage, colonial histories and contemporary reinventions as revealed in poems like "Canto Mediterraneo" and "Naming What We Don't Know." Handal's multilingualism, including Arabic, French, Spanish and English, mirrors what Homi Bhabha, one of the leading contemporary philosophers and theorists of translation, terms the "third space," where identity emerges from cultural overlap rather than rigid borders. According to [Milostivaya et al. \(2017\)](#), "the theory of Homi K. Bhabha is based on the existence of such space where cultural borders open up to each other, and creation of a new hybrid culture that combines their features and atones their differences" (p. 181).

This idea of cultural interaction reflected in migrant literature like Handal's poetry is recently expressed architecturally by Merna Moataz in her article "Third Place Theory: Creating Community Spaces." The "third place" here is another theory conceptualized by urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg and highlighted by the architect Moataz to indicate that people's lives transcend the boundaries of work and home ([Moataz, 2024](#)). Oldenburg believes that "our home is our 'first place' and the workplace is our 'second place', while 'third places' are the spaces in the communities that bring people together" (www.urbandesignlab.com). However, the third space is originally a postcolonial sociolinguistics theory of identity and community realized through language.

For Handal, language is not static but a code layered with meanings that shift across geographies and generations as demonstrated by Rainier Grutman and the notion that code-switching can enhance analyses of texts combining more than one language ([Grutman, 2024](#)). Therefore, the idea of multiple identities is maintained in Handal's works, otherwise there will be general isolation as stated by E. Glissant: "Live in seclusion or open up to the other . . . Either you speak a language that is "universal," or on its way to being so, and participate in the life of the world; or else you retreat into your particular idiom-quite unfit for sharing-in which case you cut yourself off from the world to wallow alone and sterile in your so-called identity" ([Glissant, 2010](#), p. 103).

The second dimension is linguistic and cultural hybridity in shaping identity. The fusion of languages in Handal's work such as weaving Arabic proverbs into English verse or invoking Latin grammatical structures reflects hybridity as survival. Hybridity is a conception among other key concepts such as mimicry, differences and duality developed by H.K. Bhabha. Moreover, the term "hybridity" facilitates understanding the world of bilingual translators who deal with several cultures ([Milostivaya et al., 2017](#)). Handal's poetry also embodies what Gloria Anzaldúa calls "linguistic borderlands," where code-switching and metaphor become acts of cultural preservation ([Grutman, 2024](#)). Handal's use of grammar reflects longing and illustrates how hybrid syntax can articulate the unspeakable.

Literature review

Several academic journals and literary publications have published works and critical essays on Nathalie Handal's poetry, showing the depth and significance of her contributions to

contemporary literature. These journals cover multiple disciplines, including literary studies, Middle Eastern studies, postcolonial and cultural studies. Below are some prominent journals that have discussed Handal's work:

- (1) *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*: This journal examines postcolonial literature, including the works of writers from marginalized and diasporic communities. Handal's poetry, which often addresses themes of displacement, exile and cultural identity, has been a subject of interest in such publications. Scholars have examined her work as a critical engagement with postcolonial narratives, highlighting how her poetry challenges and redefines the concept of national and cultural identity. Studies in this journal often explore Handal's work in the context of Palestinian diaspora and the representation of exile in contemporary poetry.
- (2) *Arab Studies Journal*: This journal publishes scholarly articles related to Arab studies, covering topics such as literature, history, politics and culture. It provides a platform for exploring the experiences of Arabs in the diaspora and their impact on global cultural and literary production. Studies of Handal's poetry often appear in the context of Arab diasporic literature, highlighting the ways in which her work serves as a cultural and political commentary on the Palestinian struggle for identity and justice.
- (3) *Cultural Critique*: This journal is an interdisciplinary platform for critical cultural studies, focusing on issues of race, gender, class and colonialism. It often publishes essays that engage with the inter-sectionalism of identity and power structures. Handal's poetry has been explored within the critical frameworks employed by *Cultural Critique*. Scholars have examined her work through the lens of cultural studies, feminist theory and postcolonialism.
- (4) *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*: This journal is dedicated to scholarly work on Middle Eastern women's contributions to various cultural and political realms. Articles on Handal's poetry address complex issues related to gender, identity and the politics of representation; analyzing Handal's role as a female Palestinian poet and her challenge to patriarchal representations of women in the context of the Palestinian diaspora.
- (5) *World Literature Today*: It is an international periodical that publishes essays and reviews on global literary traditions, with a focus on the intersection of literature and culture. Handal's poetry has been reviewed in the context of global literature, particularly how her Palestinian identity informs her writing and her role in the wider landscape of diasporic literature.

These journals contribute to the broader conversation surrounding Handal's work, situating her as a key figure in contemporary poetry. References of Handal's poetry include academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles and interviews with the poet in addition to her poetry collections. Below are some other key resources for reviewing Handal's work, including critical essays and literary analyses:

(1) Books by Nathalie Handal

- *The Republics* (Handal, 2015): This poetry collection focuses on themes of displacement, identity, and the experience of exile. It is one of her most widely read works, focusing on Palestinian diaspora and the emotional impact of political conflict.
- *Love and Strange Horses*: Another collection of Handal's poetry, which delves into themes of love, cultural landscapes and memory. It explores the intersections of personal and political identity in a way that Handal's bilingual and multicultural background is deeply embedded in the poems.

- *Life in a Country Album Poems* (Handal, 2019): This collection addresses themes of memory, longing and loss while reflecting on Handal's complex cultural, political, and hybrid identities. Scholars often turn to this collection to explore the theme of self-reflection through cultural and historical lenses.

(2) Anthologies and Collections Presenting Nathalie Handal

- *The Poetry of Arab Women: A Contemporary Anthology* (2001), edited by Nathalie Handal. This anthology compiles works from contemporary Arab women poets, showcasing the diversity of female Arab voices in literature. Handal in this anthology is presented as both a poet and editor who plays a central role in bringing attention to the issues of gender and exile in Arabic poetry.
- *Language for a New Century: Contemporary Poetry from the Middle East, Asia, and beyond* (2008), edited by Tina Chang, Nathalie Handal and Ravi Shankar. Handal's work appears alongside other global poets in this anthology that emphasizes the impact of historical forces on contemporary poetry.

(3) Interviews with Nathalie Handal

- Interview with Nathalie Handal in *World Literature Today*. In this interview, Handal discusses the impact of her multicultural upbringing, the difference between homeland and home, and how language serves as a vehicle for cultural identity and political resistance in her work. The interview provides insight into her creative process and personal experiences, which shape her poetry.
- The PEN Ten: An Interview with Nathalie Handal. Handal discusses truth and fiction, the intersections of politics, culture and personal identity in her poetry, offering valuable commentary on the challenges of expression and the thematic concerns of her works.

Thus, it is important to mention that these references serve to gain deeper insights into Handal's literary contributions. Many other journals and individual scholars have contributed to the ongoing study of her poetry, which continues to be a key voice in global discussions of identity, politics and the power of language.

Language and culture in Handal's poetry

Language and culture are linked in the poetic universe of Handal, the contemporary transnational writer whose work navigates the complexities of displacement, belonging, and identity. Born into a Palestinian-Latin family and raised across multiple continents, Handal's poetry serves as a linguistic and cultural crossroads where Arabic, Spanish, French and English intersect. Through her verses, she dismantles monolithic and non-distinctive notions of identity and presents instead fluid and ever-evolving self, shaped by migration, memory and resistance.

Handal's poetry is a vibrant composition of language and culture, weaving together the complications of identity and engaging with themes of exile, diaspora and cultural memory. Her work transcends geographical and linguistic borders that she keeps on crossing (Grutman, 2024), offering a lyrical reflection on how culture influences expression and how language shapes perception as indicated by both Mykhailiuk and Pohlod when they stated "the languages we speak profoundly shape the way we think, the way we see the world, and the way we live our lives" (Mykhailiuk and Pohlod, 2015, p. 37).

Handal's multicultural background is also deeply rooted in her poetry, reflecting both the fragmentation and unity of diasporic experience challenged in the migration process. She often employs lyrical, polyphonic style, blending different linguistic registers and cultural references to create a rich, hybrid voice (Chimhanda, 2021). This linguistic fluidity mirrors

the instability of identity in a globalized world, where the self is constantly negotiating between multiple homelands and histories. In collections like *The Lives of Rain* (2005) and *Love and Strange Horses* (2010), she juxtaposes the personal with the political, using imagery that evokes the landscapes of her ancestry while addressing universal human emotions.

Therefore, culture in Handal's poetry is not static but a dynamic force that evolves through migration, memory, and storytelling. Her work does not only engage with Palestinian history, but also embraces a transnational sensibility, drawing from European, Latin American and Caribbean influences. This cultural fusion challenges established narratives of identity, suggesting instead that belonging is a fluid, ever-shifting concept (De Fina, 2015).

Moreover, Language for Handal is both a tool of resistance and a bridge between worlds. She often plays with translation, silence and the untranslatable, highlighting the gaps and overlaps between different linguistic systems. In doing so, she reveals how words carry the weight of history, distress and desire. Her poetry becomes a space where languages are reserved and compounded, mirroring the fragmented yet interconnected nature of contemporary existence; and that is why Handal's work invites readers to reflect on the influence of language to shape cultural memory and the role of poetry in articulating the unspeakable. By navigating multiple cultural and linguistic landscapes, her poetry affirms the possibility of finding home in words themselves.

On the other hand, transnational theory provides a crucial lens for understanding Handal's poetry as it rejects the notion of identity being confined to a single nation or culture, and highlighting instead the ways through which diasporic migrants construct belonging such as movement, memory and multiplicity (Prömel, 2023). Handal's poems often depict cities, like Beirut, Paris and New York, not as fixed homes but as transitory spaces where identity is continually negotiated. Home in the transnational condition is not a singular place but an accumulation of encounters. In her poem "Declaration of Independence" from her collection *Life in a Country Album*, she asks: "Do you know anyone/who loves more than one country?" (Ls. 1–2) and repeats her enquiry at the end of the poem: "Let me ask again —/love isn't a lie, but a country is?" (Ls. 9–10), asserting that her identity is not bound to a certain place.

Additionally, Handal's characters exist in a state of perpetual migration, carrying their histories with them like suitcases. This changeability resists nationalist narratives that demand adherence to one homeland, proposing identity instead as an ever-evolving journey. In her poem "As We Wait," she asserts "foreign languages competing for space. The news is at/the edge of our fear. I start to run" (Ls. 8–9) and this means that acquiring foreign languages is in itself a kind of evolving with new cultures; and in her poem "Elsie," she confirms "But you learn how to/leave" (Ls. 12–13). Again, she verifies the fact of transferring identity while eternally moving in her poem "Home in Transit": "so we memorize/the sheets of sound/in our moving" (Ls. 5–7).

In her poem "American Camino" from her collection *Life in a Country Album*, Handal expresses her continuous movement and migration through a blending of geographic and cultural displacement:

When a great eagle followed me to Lincoln then to Cairo, Nebraska, where
I passed a pyramid-shaped sign, a statue of a camel, and streets named
Nile, Nubia, Suez, Alexandria, Mecca, Syria, Medina, I dreamed I was
Faten Hamama in Land of Peace. (Ls. 67–70)

The "great eagle" here is a symbol of both freedom and predation and this eagle, which follows her across places like Lincoln, Nebraska and Cairo, highlights how migration reshapes identity across unfamiliar lands. The references to Egyptian icons Faten Hamama, the pyramids and Nile streets superimposed on an American landscape reveal the flexibility of memory and belonging, and maintaining the idea that homelands are carried internally. The dreaming of being Faten Hamama, an Egyptian cinematic legend, in a "Land of Peace" suggests that migration is not just physical but also an ongoing compromise of selfhood across borders and imaginations.

In her poem “Interior Roads,” Handal reflects the immigrant experience in their ongoing and rootless journey: “some find another country/others only a motion in the same hour” (Ls. 7–8). The literal migration is acknowledged, but the verb “find” suggests a chance or impermanence rather than permanence. The new country is not a fixed endpoint but a transient station as many immigrants remain psychologically or legally suspended. They are physically displaced but temporally trapped as if within the “same hour” and their “motion” evokes cyclical movement without progress. Their status is “like a road that distracts a second/to give it a minute” (Ls. 8–10) and the simile of the road here distracts and indicates a fleeting illusion of direction. The temporal shift from “second” to “minute” mirrors how immigrants stretch small moments of hope into persistent survival while their journey stretches endlessly.

Furthermore, Handal’s engagement with global literary traditions from Arabic Ghazal poetry, as in her poem “Shur-e Hayat” which means in Persian “an ecstasy of life,” to surrealist verse exemplifies how transnationalism operates as both a lived reality and a creative strategy. By refusing to be categorized within a single literary canon, Handal’s work embodies what scholar Paul Gilroy terms “the Black Atlantic” of cultural exchange, though in her case it is a Levantine Atlantic. The Levantine Sea is located in the easternmost part of the Mediterranean Sea. It borders Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Egypt (www.atlanticoceanmap.com). In an interview with Sherouk Zakaria and in her answer to the question: What does the Mediterranean mean to you? Handal says: “It is limitless, intoxicating, illuminating. It is where everything begins and re-begins. I’ve never been able to stay away from it for too long. I am made of the Mediterranean Sea. I speak its language fluently, effortlessly, and passionately” (Zakaria, 2022). Therefore, it is clear that Mediterranean, Arab and Western influences come together in her poetry, producing globally intercultural adaptable poetry.

Henceforth, language and culture at first glance might seem like two distinct fields, but they are closely linked and mutually influencing one another in the sense that while language is essential for navigating other cultures, the interaction with foreign cultures cannot be completed without language as they are interwoven with one another. M. Rani asserts this fact by quoting N. Wa Thiong’o idea that “language and culture are inextricably bound together, each dependent on the other for sustenance and expression” (Rani, 2022, p. 108).

Language as a tool of cultural and multiple identities

Language is one of the most powerful means by which individuals connect to their cultures, histories and communities. There is a connection between language and culture, and some individuals argue that language is actually a part of culture itself. Language is also essential in forming people’s identity in the sense that the way people use language both mirrors and shapes their cultural, ethnic, national, and individual identities (Barbosa, 2023). For Handal, Language is both a symbol of identity and a source of belonging. It is not only a means of communication but also a carrier of memory, history and survival.

Handal’s poetry illustrates how language can both preserve and shape cultural identity. Born in Latin America to Palestinian parents and raised in multiple countries, Handal’s experience of transnational exile and migration is central to her poetry. Her use of multiple languages in her work, including Arabic, French and English emphasizes the diversity of cultural identity and the complex interplay between heritage and globalization. In the context of multilingualism, the human perspective highlights the intricate and subtle factors that influence people’s connection to their cultural heritage and the wider globalized world beyond policies and strategies (Saaida, 2023).

Handal’s multilingualism reflects her widely experience, yet it also marks the fragmentation and dislocation that characterize the lives of many expatriates in the diaspora. Her writings reveal the tension arising from the impact of multiple languages and cultures, serving as a means to make sense of her diverse experiences and displacement (Gupta, 2014). Handal’s poem “Language and the Refugee” from her poetry collection *Life in a Country Album* examines the intricate role of language as both a marker of cultural identity

and a site of transnational negotiation. Through the lens of transnational theory, which emphasizes the fluid movement of people, ideas and identities across borders, the poem reveals how language functions as a contested space that is simultaneously grounding the refugee in memory and tradition while forcing adaptation to new linguistic landscapes.

In this poem, home for refugees is not a fixed place but a portable memory shaped by language and culture: “We carry our homes on our backs,/like snails (Ls. 1–2). The metaphor of snails carrying their homes suggests that refugees are perpetually mobile, yet always tied to their origins. The refugee’s identity is fluid, carried within them rather than rooted in geography; and that is why refugees exist in an indistinct space feeling that they never fully belong to a fixed space and always shift between acceptance and alienation: “We are the strangers of yesterday,/today’s locals,/tomorrow’s strangers again” (Ls. 3–5). Language here becomes a marker of belonging for “locals” or marginalization for “strangers” (Prömel, 2023); maintaining that refugee’s identity is unstable, and yet negotiated through linguistic and cultural assimilation or resistance.

Nevertheless, the refugee understands the concept of “home” intellectually but lacks the cultural or emotional grounding to claim it: “We learn the word home/in every language/but have no accent/to pronounce it (Ls. 6–9). The pronunciation or accent here signifies belonging and without it, the refugee remains an outsider even when speaking the language. This highlights how language is not just a means of communication but also a performance of identity. According to R. Bauman, such performance then represents for refugees “an arena for the display, contemplation, and manipulation of salient elements, practices, and relationships that allow language to serve as a resource for the expression of identity” (Bauman, 2000, p. 4).

On the other hand, language is usually imposed upon the refugees when they are forced to adopt the colonizer’s or oppressor’s language for survival: “We write in the language of the enemy,/love in the language of the exile,/and dream in the language of the sea” (Ls. 10–13). This forced learning of the language of the exile results in emotional and hybrid language of displacement with a mixture of native and foreign words. The “dream in the language of the sea” symbolizes both migration and memory as dreams are untranslatable, fluid and boundless, and writing in the enemy’s language reflects colonial and postcolonial struggles. Therefore, the refugee’s identity is multilingual and fragmented, yet shaped by the power of the enemy, the emotion of exile, and the imagination of the Mediterranean Sea surrounding Handal’s original homeland.

In her poem “Canto Mediterraneo,” Handal reflects this kind of multilingual, cultural identity, conveying a search for identity, belonging and expression, filled with longing and displacement:

in what language will I love
in what waters will I breath
in what voice will I find the world
in what sound will I find the beats
in what sun will I learn to speak
in what love will I learn to sing (Ls. 17–22)

The poet asks where and how love, voice and self can truly flourish; and then she replies: “I’m Venetian and Greek/I’m Jerusalem in Arabic/I come from the outskirts of cities/and the sea/and to you Rebetiko, I return” (Ls. 31–5). She evokes her fragmented yet rich cultural identity, blending Venetian, Greek and Palestinian heritage while expressing a deep connection to Rebetiko music as a source of belonging. Handal explains, in her collection *Life in a Country Album*, the meaning of Rebetiko as “Greek urban blues. It fuses Greek, Turkish, Arabic, and Jewish musical traditions, and the songs deal with themes of exile, loss, longing, love, and death” (Handal, 2019, p. 58). Therefore, Handal claims roots in marginalized spaces and finds home in the soulful sounds of music, suggesting shattered identity and a deep yearning for connection with indigenous identity and the natural world.

However, despite the sense of disintegration, there is always hope: “We are the ones/who left the keys under the mat,/who left the door open,/who left (Ls. 14–17). The imagery in these lines suggests a hope of return as they evoke both the longing to return and the painful finality of exile, understanding that some departures are absolute. The act of “leaving” is thus tied to language in the sense that there are no words remain unsaid and no stories are left untold, highlighting the idea that language becomes a relic of the past. Therefore, refugees are suspended between origin and destination and who in a cultural or psychological sense never fully “arrived”: “We are the ones/who never arrived (Ls. 18–19). This sense of oblivion is perpetuated by language barriers and without full linguistic integration, their acceptance remains elusive: “We are the ones/who are still arriving (Ls. 20–21). It seems that accent, pronunciation, and fluency become gatekeepers to acceptance and this indicates that refugees’ journey is ongoing, their identity is continuously evolving, and their language acquisition is a lifelong process, mirroring the endless negotiation of identity in a new land. This negotiation of identity or “who is who” process is reached “in order to survive and have a kind of social relation with the West” (Adejumo and Akintaro, 2024, p. 8).

Handal’s poem, therefore, portrays language as both a barrier and a bridge, a tool that shapes identity while exposing the refugee’s fractured sense of self. In other words, language is highlighted as both a connection to homeland and a necessity for survival in new environments, revealing its dual role as a site of memory, adaptation and resistance. The tension between preservation and change is clearly captured by the poet to show how linguistic hybridity and loss redefine identity across borders, and how the multiplicity of languages mirrors the multiplicity of identities as none of them is fixed, but they are all in transformation.

Furthermore, Handal’s poem “Language and the Refugees” concentrates on the profound sense of displacement and longing for a place to call home. It refers to the duality of language for those who have been forced to leave their homeland (Erbil *et al.*, 2023, p. 157). The speaker expresses her transnational experience of belonging nowhere, carrying only echoes of homes that are forever out of reach. The language here refers to a displaced person conveying a powerful feeling of estrangement and nostalgia for a sense of rootedness and belonging that might never be attained, and that is why Handal’s words evoke a touching portrayal of the anguish of searching for a place of true belonging while feeling perpetually uprooted. This feeling is assured when “people experiencing nostalgia feel the pleasure of joyous times and the pain that these times are gone, making the emotion bittersweet” (Versteegen, 2024, p. 261).

Again, the phrase “language of the enemy” refers to a transnational language though no longer fully connected to its origins. Language in this context becomes a marker of exile, a vehicle through which the displaced persons experience and express their sense of loss. The phrase “love in the language of the exile” suggests that language, while carrying the memory of a home, is detached from the physical space of that home. What remains are only “dreams” which are faint and muted memories that cannot fully restore the lost world of homeland.

Language, for the displaced person, thus becomes both a source of transnational connection and estrangement at one and the same time. The impact of alienation and home distancing can affect each and every immigrant, regardless of whether a person is directly involved or not (Scharp, 2023). While it may allow them to remember their culture, it also serves as a reminder of what has been lost. The fact that the language now “carries nothing but echoes” shows how displacement distorts the relationship between language and identity in the sense that language might have been an exciting part of culture, but it has now become merely a shadow of what it once was. Dianne Biritjalawuy Gondarra, a young woman from northern Australia, said that “culture is a shadow, it’s something that follows you everywhere, and part of culture is language, which connects me back to my land” (Collins, 2012, p. 152).

Once more, the poem captures the emotional weight of displacement, the longing for home and the struggle to maintain one’s identity during upheaval. There is no wonder that the language used in host countries can “either help or hinder expatriates, as it reflects the broader culture, society, and community” (Bhatti and Alzahrani, 2023, p. 98). For refugees, language is thus a crucial part of their identity, and losing the ability to communicate in their native tongue

can aggravate feelings of disconnection; and that is why Handal in her poem illustrates how language carries the memories and culture of one's origins, making it transnational and vital link to the past.

Moreover, language is portrayed as a powerful tool for both expression and connection. It allows refugees to share their stories, articulate their pain, and connect with others who have had similar experiences. "Language and the Refugee" also suggests that despite the challenges imposed by language barriers, it can foster understanding and solidarity among diverse communities. Furthermore, the poem conveys a sense of resilience and highlights how refugees can reclaim their narratives through language, using it as a means to assert their identities and find strength in their experiences. This idea of empowerment emphasizes that language can be a source of hope, enabling refugees to build new lives and communities.

Hence, Handal's poem affectingly reveals the complexities of the refugee experiences through the lens of transnational language. It shows how language is used as a double-edged sword in the sense that it both connects the poet to her past and accentuates the emotional weight of displacement.

Linguistic and cultural hybridity in shaping identity

For Handal, being multilingual allows her to capture the complexity of her transnational hybrid identity, an identity that is not confined to a single cultural or linguistic space. As Handal speaks Arabic, French and English, her poetry often includes a blend of these languages. This multilingualism reflects her experience of living among different domains and cultures. Language is thus used as a site of hybrid identity. Hybrid identity is "embraced as speakers move from one language to another in their speech" (Al Azkaf *et al.*, 2025, p. 261); and that is clearly reflected in the opening lines of Handal's poem entitled "Naming What We Don't Know."

Language in this poem is framed as a terrain of cultural negotiation: "we speak in accents,/ in the grammar of maybe,/in the syntax of elsewhere" (Ls. 1–3). The word "accents" signifies the embodied tension between origin and adaptation, where voices bear traces of multiple homelands. It also marks cultural in-between, revealing origins while adapting to new environments. The "grammar of maybe" reflects the provisional existence of transnational migrants, whose identities are continually conditional, suspended between acceptance and exclusion and never fully rooted but always conditional. The "grammar" which is a system of rules becomes fluid, mirroring unstable identities as well. In the meantime, "syntax of elsewhere" suggests a linguistic reorganization shaped by displacement, challenging the notion of a fixed national language as "elsewhere" is both a physical and psychological space and "syntax" or sentence structure is rearranged by exile. Here, Handal critiques nation-bound language, proposing a transnational "syntax" for diaspora while mirrors Homi Bhabha's concept of the "third space," where hybrid identities re-create new meanings beyond colonial or twofold nationalities and where the purity of cultures is untenable (Umar and Lawan, 2024).

Metaphors of movement and borders are exemplified in the next following lines: "our tongues are maps/of unfinished journeys" (Ls. 4–5) as they transform language into a map-making of diaspora where both physical and linguistic "tongues" become archives of migration and charting changing routes that resist closure; and this indicates that language preserves journeys even when unfinished. This aligns with transnational theory's emphasis on "unfinished journeys," where home is neither here nor there but in constant flux, maintaining the idea that migration is a perpetual process and not a destination. According to M. Bitschnau and G. D'Amato, when they speak of migration in a contemporary context, they usually "mean not just spatial movement but spatial movement across international borders: from one nation or jurisdiction to another" (Bitschnau and D'Amato, 2023, p. 632).

The subsequent lines: "our consonants—border checkpoints,/our vowels—the only passports we have" (Ls. 6–7) suggest that even phonetics are politicized in exile. Passports are replaced by voice as a critique of nationalism. It seems that "consonants," with their hard

edges, embody state-imposed borders while “vowels,” fluid and open, symbolize the subversive power of voice to transcend barriers. This duality shows how nations weaponize language through accent discrimination. This discrimination impacts speakers not just through negative stereotypes and social stigma, but also by creating challenges in comprehension as listeners may struggle to process accented speech smoothly.

Therefore, the grammar of displacement is employed in Handal’s reference: “we conjugate verbs/in the subjunctive of exile,/decline nouns/in the ablative case of longing” (Ls. 8–11) in order to merge linguistic precision with genuine yearning. The conjugation or verb modification mirrors adaptation to new cultures. The subjunctive mood, which is the tense of hypothetical longing like “if I could return,” reflects the unrealized dreams of migrants and captures their psychological obscurity of memory and imagination. The ablative case, which means in Latin “away from home,” denotes separation; and this points out that even grammatical terms become metaphors for loss and blend classical education with migrant pain. Handal in these lines reveals how transnational, exiled individuals remake language structures to survive and articulate their sense of statelessness; thus, echoing Gloria Anzaldúa’s idea of “linguistic borderlands,” where grammar itself becomes a site of cultural variety and creativity (Anzaldúa, 1987). Moreover, the poem’s hybrid grammar mirrors the migrants’ condition which is fractured but fertile and whose words are both wounds and weapons.

Yet, transnational resistance and voice are both culminated in the poem in the form of a paradox where language, though fragmented by exile, becomes a “passport” to belonging. By framing vowels as documents, Handal subverts the nation-state’s monopoly over identity. This resonates with Paul Gilroy’s Black Atlantic theory, where diasporic cultures create fluid identities outside national frameworks, generating counterculture. Paul Gilroy, a sociologist and cultural studies scholar, talked about a distinct Black Atlantic culture that incorporated elements from African, American, British and Caribbean cultures and positioned itself as a counterculture to Western modernity (www.oxfordbibliographies.com). Here, the poem’s hybrid grammar with its mixing metaphors of borders and maps mirrors the transnational experience confirming the idea that painful dislocation generates innovative forms of expression.

Hence, Handal’s poem exemplifies how language, when destabilized by migration, exposes the artifice of borders and indicates how it breaks down artificial boundaries and encourages dialogue among different groups. It rejects monolingual nationalism, proposing a transnational vernacular where accents, consonants, and vowels carry political weight. The poem also aligns with theories of “hybridity” by Bhabha, “borderlands” by Anzaldúa, and “African diaspora” by Gilroy, illustrating how poetry can theorize identity. It has become clear that the poem asserts the fact that to speak from exile is to remake the world through an unfinished passage of poetic creation.

Handal uses the metaphor of exile to reveal how language functions not just as a means of communication, but as a carrier of remembrance, identity, and emotional survival; serving both as a shield against cultural erasure and a bridge between the past and the present of the migrants’ selves. Therefore, building identity in exile is connected to land where “place, real or imagined, has become a central metaphor for the identity construction in exile” (Magnatta, 2022, p. 8). Exiled people leave their homelands and look for claiming new identities as revealed in her poem “Exiled Sentence”:

Most exiles do not take enough with them—
some obtain new lands, new identities
others return to the empty corridors of their sleep
in a place they are certain they can always call home;
but most hold on to a sentence as if it were a coat
that will protect them from sun prisons,
a sentence that will grow
the way we grow, leave ourselves

like silence leaves a home
it can no longer love. (Ls. 1–10)

The title of the poem is a phrase in which “sentence” becomes a metaphor for language itself “exiled” from its homeland, transformed, or adhered to as identity. The speaker in the first line states that “most exiles do not take enough with them” as exiled individuals often leave behind them physical belongings, but their greater loss is intangible such as their language, culture and memory.

The use of enjambment, which is a poetic technique where a sentence, phrase, or thought flows beyond the end of a line without a pause, creates a sense of suspense and ambiguity as the dash creates a pause, mirroring the abrupt rupture of exile. The concept of exile here is tied to Edward Said’s contrapuntal or the state of simultaneous belonging and estrangement (Prömel, 2023). For Said, exile is not just a loss but a perspective for critical, polyphonic engagement with multiple cultures. Polyphony, which is a literary technique involving the presence of multiple voices or perspectives within a single text, plays a crucial role in reflecting the interconnectedness of cultures and the often contrasting perspectives that arise in a globalized world (Bahr, 2024).

As a result of exile, new identities emerge from assimilation or fusion “some obtain new lands, new identities.” This line illustrates Arjun Appadurai’s “ethnoscapes,” briefly defined as “identities reshaped by global migration” (Appadurai, 1990, p. 297). Appadurai considers the “sentence” as a “mediascape, a fragment of culture that travels” (p. 305). The phrase “new identities” also reflects Homi Bhabha’s idea that colonized subjects negotiate identity in the third space, which is neither fully native nor assimilated. The “sentence” becomes a site of this struggle (Mambrol, 2016). While some people remain psychologically bound to the past, “others return to the empty corridors of their sleep” as the mind becomes a site of return, where language and memory blur. The phrase “empty corridors of their sleep” echoes the “unhomely” term of Bhabha for the alienation of displacement, where even dreams are haunted by loss.

Moreover, the certainty of “home” is undercut by the semicolon, a grammatical pause that hints at the fragility and illusion of stability: “in a place they are certain they can always call home”; and this means that for exiled people, language often becomes home when physical return is impossible. In order to maintain a linguistic survival, they hold onto a phrase like a proverb or a prayer and this in itself becomes an act of resistance: “but most hold on to a sentence as if it were a coat/that will protect them from sun prisons (Ls. 5–6). Additionally, the ‘sentence’, signifying mother tongue and represented as a coat, is a metaphor confirming a weak protective layer against identity erasure. “Sun prisons” suggests the oppressive glare of assimilation brought up by Frantz Fanon who wrote of how colonized minds internalize the oppressor’s language (Zeiny, 2019) as the “coat” of the mother tongue is a feeble shield.

Furthermore, the “sentence” grows like a living thing, adapting to new contexts while retaining roots: “a sentence that will grow/the way we grow, leave ourselves” (Ls. 7–8) but there is still a sense of self-fragmentation as to “leave ourselves” suggests the splitting of identity in exile by the loss of a part and the transformation of another. The splitting of self reflects Paul Gilroy’s theory of identities shaped by movement, not rootedness (Gilroy, 1993). Again, the phrase “leave ourselves” mirrors Fanon’s concept in *Black Skin, White Masks* showing that exiled individuals shed parts of themselves to survive in hostile lands (Zeiny, 2019). The “sentence” may be regarded as a portable homeland like blues music in Gilroy’s work, and thus language becomes a transnational artifact, though changing yet retaining traces of origin.

The “exiled sentence” is also like silence, and silence itself is what remains when love or belonging is lost: “like silence leaves a home/it can no longer love” (Ls. 9–10). The paradox here is that the “sentence” is either a remnant but void or a linguistic ghost of what once was. The line “silence leaves a home” resonates with Gloria Anzaldúa’s idea that silence can be either oppressive, forced assimilation or sacred resistance (Ferrari, 2021). The word

“sentence” is also a cultural reservoir and the rejection of colonial languages is an act of resistance; and when exiled people cling to a native phrase, it becomes a lifeline to pre-colonial identity (Wa Thiong’o, 1986). On the other hand, there is a linguistic border-crossing as the poem’s code-switching implied by the cultural weight of “sentence” reflects the transnational theory with the sense of fluidity and fragmentation.

The poem, consequently, embodies how mother tongue is fragmented, adapted, or fossilized in diaspora despite the attempts to forge new identities and anchoring them to a past that may no longer exist. It is a kind of a transnational or postcolonial artifact in which Handal captures the central paradox of linguistic hybridity by portraying language as both an injury and a healing, as something vanished yet preserved. H. Mokrushyna indicates that “transnationality and hybridity have always been part of diaspora; they are inner attributes of diaspora identity and experience” (Mokrushyna, 2013, p. 800). The poem is hence a testament to identity’s diasporic and transnational changeability that survives and adapts to culture but never becomes fully assimilating or wholly integrated.

Accordingly, Handal’s poetry reflects a hybrid identity, intricately woven from the varied strands of her multicultural life, blending her Palestinian heritage, Latin American childhood and American adulthood, and producing a fusion of influences that permeates her work. These layered identities profoundly shape her themes, imagery and distinctive poetic voice.

Conclusion

Nathalie Handal’s poetry captures the struggle between maintaining tradition and embracing change, as displaced individuals grapple with their native language as a tie to their roots and the dominant languages of new societies as instruments of either survival or assimilation. Within this dynamic, language transcends mere communication as it becomes a living record of history, a form of resistance and a connector or divider between cultures. By highlighting the struggle between language displacement and cultural preservation, which are key concerns in transnational and postcolonial thought, Handal’s work resonates with postcolonial critiques of linguistic domination while embracing transnationalism’s emphasis on fluid identities. This article has examined how the blending and erosion of languages influence transnational identities, presenting influential meditation on belonging in an age of global migration.

As a transnational poet, Handal keeps moving between her many languages, multi-literacy, and identities. She has proved that she is still keeping memories of the past, experiencing the present and imagining the future across different places. Transnational theory examines how identities transcend borders, shaped by migration, diaspora, and hybridity. Handal’s poetry has exemplified this through language as a site of negotiation, where grammar, sound and metaphor become tools to articulate displacement and belonging. Therefore, Handal’s poetry has transformed language into a transnational lifeline, a line that fractures, adapts and eventually transcends boundaries. By interrogating identity through hybridity, resistance, and cultural or language exchange, her work offers a pattern for understanding diaspora not as loss but as recreation. In a world of forced migrations and cultural erasures, Handal’s poetry reminds readers that language, even in exile, remains a homeland.

Handal’s use of multiple languages allows her to live in several cultural communities and transnational space, reflecting the intense sense of loss and disintegration that comes with the experience of exile. By exploring the dual role of language as both a connector and a barrier, Handal’s poetry has exposed the profound emotional and cultural implications of displacement. It ultimately affirms the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity, displaying the enduring power of language and poetry. By exploring a number of sensory experiences, Handal invites readers to appreciate the compound nature of language and its ability to evoke powerful emotions and images.

While it has become clear that Handal’s poetry is a reflection of her multilingual background, yet it is also a vehicle for exploring the shades of language and its impact on human experience. Handal’s poetry is a testament to the power of language to shape identity,

convey emotions, and challenge social norms. Through her skillful use of linguistic experimentation, exploration of the shadows of linguistic expression, and the various dimensions of language, Handal has created a unique and powerful poetic voice that resonates with readers across cultures and backgrounds. Her work serves as a reminder of the importance of valuing and preserving linguistic diversity, while also urging people to use language responsibly to promote understanding and bridge the gaps that divide them.

Finally, this research has explored the role of language and culture in Handal's poetic expression through a transnational lens and examined how her work reflects the fragmented yet fertile realities of diasporic existence. Handal's work challenges, redefines and reimagines the notion of cultural and linguistic identity in globalized and transnational world.

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Further reading

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