

Author(s):

Faraaz Subla

Javaid Rashid

Corresponding Author:

Faraaz Subla

Publication History

Received: 2025-09-04

Reviewed: 2025-09-08

Accepted: 2025-09-08

Published: 2025-10-01

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.70042/eroth/90324>

All articles and content published in Erothanatos are made available under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License \(CC BY-NC 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/), unless otherwise stated. This license permits users to copy, distribute, display, and perform the work, and to make derivative works, for non-commercial purposes only, provided the original author(s) and source are properly credited. Authors retain the copyright to their work. In cases where a special issue is priorly declared to be published in book form with an ISBN, the copyright and licensing terms for that publication will be specified separately and communicated to contributing authors in advance.

Nurturing Voices: Exploring Language, Identity and Culture in Childhood Narratives

Abstract: *Childhood is not only a universal experience but a culturally and linguistically constructed reality that varies significantly across different societies. This paper explores how language and culture shape the children's identities, worldviews and social roles. Language acquisition is shown to be a critical process through which children not only learn to communicate but also come to understand themselves and their place within society. The role of the mother tongue, early language exposure and multilingualism in shaping self-identity and social belonging are examined quite in depth. Cultural transmission is explored through folktales, songs, rhymes and storytelling practices that pass on the community values and norms. These narrative forms serve both as educational tools and as mediums of identity formation particularly in oral cultures. The paper also analyses literary and oral texts from the Indian and Western traditions that depict childhood, emphasising how these texts reflect cultural attitudes toward age, gender and social class. In multilingual and diasporic settings, children often face quite complex challenges related to identity, belonging and language loss. The tensions between home and institutional languages, cultural dissonance and the pressures of assimilation are explored to highlight the fragmented nature of childhood in such contexts. The concluding section calls for the reclamation of the linguistic and cultural heritage through child-centred literature and educational approaches that validate the diverse identities.*

Keywords: Childhood Studies, Language Acquisition, Cultural Identity, Multilingualism, Storytelling, Diaspora, Oral Traditions.

Nurturing Voices: Exploring Language, Identity and Culture in Childhood Narratives

Faraaz Subla¹ and Javaid Rashid²

I. Introduction

Childhood is not merely a biological phase of human development, it is a socially and culturally constructed concept. Different societies define and experience childhood in unique ways- influenced by historical, linguistic and cultural contexts. This chapter explores how language and culture shape the meaning of childhood and influence children's emerging identity. By analysing these intersections, we can better understand the role of narratives, traditions and linguistic practices in shaping the children's lived experiences. Language is a fundamental part of how a child understands the world. It is through language that children begin to form their thoughts, communicate emotions and construct their identity. The first language that a child learns often called the mother tongue, is deeply tied to the cultural practices, stories and rituals of their community. This language serves as a communication tool and a carrier of the cultural memory and values. For instance, the way a child learns to greet elders, participate in festivals or understand the kinship terms reflects not just the vocabulary but also the embedded cultural norms. Therefore, language is not neutral; it is deeply imbued with identity and belonging (Hall 17). Moreover, culture provides the framework within which childhood is experienced. In some cultures, children are viewed as the active participants in family and community life from a young age, while in others childhood is seen as a time of protected innocence (James and Prout 4). These cultural frameworks determine the kinds of stories children are told; the roles they are expected to play and the responsibilities they are given. For example, indigenous storytelling often introduces children to the values of land, community and ancestry while urban narratives may focus more on individualism and achievement. Culture also influences how children see themselves and how others perceive them based on age, gender and social background (Corsaro 56). The link between language, culture and identity becomes especially critical in multilingual or postcolonial societies, where children may grow up speaking one language at home and another in school. In such cases, children often negotiate with multiple identities and cultural expectations. This dynamic can both enrich their worldviews and create tensions such as when a child's home language is devalued in formal settings, leading to a sense of inferiority or alienation (Annamalai 42). These experiences underline how power relations are embedded in language use and how language policies can shape children's access to cultural pride or

¹ Research Scholar, Department of Social Work, University of Kashmir, India.

² Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, University of Kashmir, India.

marginalisation. Therefore, this chapter addresses several important questions, such as: How does language shape a child's sense of self and belonging? In what ways do cultural practices influence the stories, expectations and identities of the children? How do multilingual environments and shifting cultural contexts affect childhood experiences and development? By exploring these questions, we aim to highlight the crucial role that language and culture play in constructing the idea of childhood, and how literature and storytelling can reflect, reinforce or challenge these constructs.

II. Language Acquisition and Identity Formation in Children

Language acquisition in the early part of childhood plays a vital role in shaping not only the child's cognitive development but also their sense of identity and belonging. As children begin to acquire language from infancy, they do more than learn to communicate they begin forming connections with their cultural heritage, social environment and personal identity. The language(s) they acquire influence how they think, express emotions, relate to others and perceive their place in the world. The mother tongue, often the first language learned at home, is central to the identity of a child. It has emotional, cultural and symbolic significance, becoming intertwined with the child's inner self. Cummins argues that affirming the mother tongue in the early learning contexts strengthens self-esteem and fosters academic success particularly in multilingual societies (Cummins 38). Moreover, language shapes how children understand concepts such as time, relationships and social roles (Vygotsky 94). For instance, in many Indigenous and regional languages in India storytelling traditions encode values of respect, interdependence and nature that children internalise early through linguistic exposure. Children also use language to position themselves socially. Gee notes that through discourse, children not only adopt roles but actively perform identities—becoming sons, daughters, students, or friends depending on the context and language cues (Gee 85). When children's home languages are affirmed in their education and social lives, they feel culturally secure. Conversely, language marginalisation such as banning regional or tribal languages in schools, can cause identity dissonance and hinder emotional development (Skutnabb-Kangas 320).

Multilingualism, common in South Asia, presents both opportunities and challenges for identity formation. García and Wei highlight that multilingual children are not merely passive learners of multiple codes but active navigators of linguistic and cultural boundaries (Garcia and Wei 49). In such contexts, children may develop hybrid identities fluent in both global and local cultures yet often forced to privilege one over the other in formal settings. For example, a child who speaks Garo at home and English in school may feel alienated especially when the home language is considered inferior or irrelevant in the academic discourse.

Early language exposure, particularly in diverse and multilingual environments, affects cognitive and identity development. Kuhl's neurocognitive research confirms that early exposure to

multiple languages enhances brain plasticity and social empathy (Kuhl 1165). Children raised in bilingual households tend to have a more nuanced sense of identity, flexibility in social situations and greater appreciation for cultural diversity (Bialystok 36).

Language acquisition is not merely a linguistic process; it is an existential one. Through language, children inherit worldviews, express themselves and forge connections with the people and cultures around them. Ensuring that children's linguistic and cultural identities are well respected and nurtured is vital for their holistic development.

III. Cultural Transmission Through Stories and Narratives

Childhood is deeply embedded in the cultural systems in which it evolves, and storytelling remains one of the oldest and most effective ways of transmitting that culture. Through stories, children learn language, values, beliefs, traditions and social roles. These narratives, whether folktales, myths, rhymes, or lullabies, serve as vehicles of cultural education, socialisation and identity formation. In the Indian context, stories like those in the *Panchatantra*, *Jataka Tales* and *Hitopadesha* have long transmitted the ethical values and practical wisdom to children. Ramanujan asserts that these tales rich with local idioms and symbols, are not just entertainment but cognitive tools that shape the worldview and moral reasoning (Ramanujan 33). In tribal and rural India, oral storytelling is a living tradition. Narayan, a Pardhan Gond elder, explains that "oral epics and myths form the core of children's knowledge about who they are and where they come from" (Narayan 78). Likewise, lullabies and rhymes such as *Aai Matir Buka* in Assamese or *Aathichudi* in Tamil play both affective and educational roles in early childhood, embedding cultural rhythms and social expectations. Sudha Murty's children's books and Devdutt Pattanaik's mythological retellings for young readers reflect the modern extension of this tradition blending folklore with contemporary values (Murty 101; Pattanaik 24).

From a Western perspective, scholars like Jack Zipes argue that fairy tales are political tools that condition children into certain social norms and ideologies (Zipes 7). Similarly, Bruno Bettelheim emphasises that the psychological structure of fairy tales helps children resolve inner conflicts and understand moral dilemmas (Bettelheim 14). These views reveal that the universal function of stories is as tools for comprehensive cognitive and emotional development.

Jerome Bruner discusses how narratives shape not only memory but identity. He argues that "we become the autobiographical narratives by which we tell about our lives," starting from childhood (Bruner 13). This links closely with how children across cultures internalise social scripts from the stories they hear. Whether it's Cinderella in Europe or children's figures in Indian variants such as Sambalpuri Lok Katha, the archetypes persist and shape gender, virtue and behaviour (Sahu 85). Contemporary Indian publishers such as Tulika and Pratham are also revitalising the tradition by

publishing multilingual storybooks that incorporate folk elements while also addressing modern themes like inclusion, environment and gender equality.

Thus, storytelling serves as an invisible curriculum instilling language, cultural knowledge and social roles. It builds cognitive, ethical and emotional frameworks that stay with children into adulthood.

IV. Representation of Childhood in Literary and Oral Texts

The representation of childhood in the literary and oral traditions is deeply reflective of cultural values, social structures and linguistic frameworks. Children, being portrayed as central characters, embody varied meanings ranging from innocence and wonder to resilience and agency depending on the cultural contexts and the narrative forms. The language and cultural milieu in which stories are told play a decisive role in shaping these portrayals across the regions. In Indian literature, childhood is often idealised linking the child closely with nature, spirituality and cultural continuity. Rabindranath Tagore's works such as *Gitanjali* and *Kabuliwala*, evoke childhood as a pure and sacred phase marked by sincere innocence and deep emotional insight. Tagore's use of Bengali, infused with the lyrical symbolism, situates childhood within the spiritual and natural world emphasising the formative role of culture and language in identity construction. Folklore traditions among tribal communities like the Gond and Santhal place children at the heart of narratives that pass down social norms, survival knowledge and cosmologies (Narayan 92). Regional oral traditions such as Assamese Bihu songs and tales use vernacular storytelling to instil cultural memory and communal values in children. Western literary traditions, in contrast, offer diverse and sometimes more critical portrayals of childhood. Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* exposes harsh realities of childhood under the notion of industrial capitalism, focusing on themes of poverty, vulnerability and social injustice (Jones 114). This contrasts with the romanticised view of childhood found in William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, where the child symbolises purity and a closer connection to the divine (Blake 12). The Victorian era with authors such as Lewis Carroll (*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*), frames childhood as a space of imaginative exploration and linguistic play, challenging adult logic and societal norms (Carroll 56).

More contemporary Western authors further expand these themes. J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series foregrounds the child's journey toward self-identity, moral complexity and empowerment within a richly constructed magical world (Smith 201). Similarly, Roald Dahl's stories use dark humour and subversion of authority to give voice to children's perspectives and struggles often critiquing adult power structures (Dahl 34). Linguistically, narrative forms vary in terms of complexity and style but consistently function as cultural vehicles shaping the overall childhood identities. Jerome Bruner notes that narrative is fundamental in organising experience and culture, allowing children to make sense of themselves and their social world (Bruner 39). Multilingual storytelling in India for example, creates

layered identities where children navigate vernacular languages alongside the dominant tongues such as Hindi or English influencing how childhood is experienced and represented (Sahu 101). Cultural norms, especially revolving around gender, profoundly influence the childhood portrayals. In many Indian folktales, boys are depicted as the active heroes embarking on quests while girls are often characterised by virtues like obedience and compassion, reinforcing the societal gender expectations (Kakar 67). Western narratives also reflect the gender norms but increasingly include diverse representations challenging the traditional roles as seen in works by authors such as Judy Blume and Philip Pullman (Blume 45; Pullman 89). Oral traditions add performative and communal dimensions to the childhood representation. Storytelling events, including songs/chants and rituals, involve active participation of children, reinforcing the importance of collective identity and cultural transmission. Kirin Narayan highlights how these interactions sustain indigenous understandings of childhood and belonging (Narayan 115). Literary and oral texts provide rich culturally situated portrayals of childhood shaped by language and social context. Whether through the spiritual lyricism of Tagore, the social critique of Dickens, or the imaginative play of Carroll and Rowling stories serve as cultural mirrors and moulders of childhood identity across the world.

V. Challenges of Cultural Identity in Multilingual or Diasporic Childhoods

In today's increasingly globalised world, childhoods shaped by multilingualism and diasporic experiences present complex challenges related to cultural identity. Children growing up in bilingual or multilingual settings, especially within postcolonial or diasporic communities, often navigate tensions between multiple languages, cultures and social expectations. This dynamic can result in identity confusion, a sense of cultural dissonance and even the gradual loss of the native language profoundly impacting the child's sense of belonging and self-understanding. One major challenge is the loss or marginalisation of the mother tongue, which plays a critical role in grounding identity. In many diasporic families, dominant national or global languages (such as English, French, or Hindi) often overshadow native tongues leading to language shift or attrition in the younger generations (Pattanayak 54). Famous linguist Braj Kachru highlights that for children of the Indian diaspora in the West English often becomes the primary language of communication at home and school, while native languages are relegated to a secondary status or ceremonial use which can weaken the cultural transmission (Kachru 1986). Similarly, in the postcolonial contexts such as India, children may face pressures to prioritise dominant state languages over the regional or tribal mother tongues impacting their cultural rootedness (Mohanty 23). This language loss correlates closely with identity conflicts. Children caught between home and host cultures often feel "in-between", not fully belonging to either world. Scholar Homi Bhabha's concept of "third space" suggests that this hybridity produces ambivalent identities that are simultaneously rich and fraught with insecurity (Bhabha 56). For diasporic children, this may manifest

as difficulty in reconciling the cultural values from their parents' homeland with those of the broader society where they grow up and are nurtured. For instance, Indian-American children might experience and face tensions between the traditional familial expectations and the individualism promoted in American culture causing emotional and social dilemmas. Cultural dissonance also arises from the conflicting cultural norms and socialisation practices. Research by linguist Susan Gal indicates that multilingual children often adjust language use based on social contexts but may struggle when cultural practices linked to those languages clash (Gal 1998). This can affect everything from communication styles to the behavioural expectations, leading to confusion or alienation. For example, children from South Asian diasporas might feel embarrassed or marginalised when their cultural customs differ significantly from their peers' mainstream culture, leading to social exclusion or self-consciousness (Kibria 2000). Educational environments further complicate these challenges. Schools often favour dominant languages and cultural narratives- sidelining the minority languages and histories (Nieto 43). This "monolingual bias" can make multilingual children feel quite undervalued and invisible, negatively affecting their academic confidence and cultural pride (Cummins 1996). The pressure to assimilate linguistically and culturally may also create intergenerational tensions within the families as parents and children negotiate differing degrees of acculturation (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 79). Despite these challenges, many children develop resilient, hybrid identities that creatively integrate multiple cultural elements. Indian scholar Veena Das argues that diasporic children actively negotiate their identities, drawing strength from the linguistic and cultural multiplicity rather than seeing it solely as a deficit (Das 2006). Encouraging multilingual education and community support networks can promote positive identity formation and mitigate loss or confusion (Fishman 1991). Childhoods formed in the multilingual or diasporic contexts face multifaceted challenges related to language maintenance, identity coherence and cultural belonging. Recognising these complexities is significant for educators, policymakers and families aiming to support children's holistic development in a pluralistic world.

VI. Conclusion

The investigation of childhood through the intertwined lenses of language and culture reveals the essential role these elements play in shaping a child's identity and worldview. Language functions as a powerful medium through which children interpret their surroundings, negotiate social belonging and express individuality. Culture in turn, provides the frameworks of meaning that inform children's lived experiences, from family interactions to community rituals. As children grow the stories they hear and tell, whether through oral traditions, folktales or literary texts, become vital conduits for the transmission of values, history and collective memory. However, the process of cultural and linguistic transmission is neither automatic nor uniform. Multilingual and diasporic childhoods present unique challenges- including the risk of language attrition, fragmented cultural identities and tensions between

traditional and dominant cultural paradigms. Scholars such as Aneta Pavlenko emphasise that children in bilingual contexts actively navigate the multiple cultural and linguistic codes, often creating hybrid identities that resist simple categorisation (Pavlenko 2004). This dynamic illustrates the need for child-centric educational and literary approaches that affirm rather than erase linguistic and cultural diversity. Reclaiming language and culture in the narratives aimed at children is critical not only for preserving the endangered languages but also for nurturing self-esteem and belonging in the young learners. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o argues, language is inseparable from identity and decolonisation; using one's mother tongue in the literature and education empowers marginalised communities to reclaim their heritage and resist the cultural domination (Thiong'o 1986). This is particularly relevant in postcolonial contexts, wherein language policies and educational frameworks have historically undermined the indigenous languages and knowledge systems. Incorporating and coordinating multilingual narratives and local folklore enriches the children's literary experiences and fosters respect for linguistic and cultural plurality from an early age. Moreover, contemporary media and digital platforms offer promising opportunities to revitalise the endangered languages and expand access to the diverse cultural expressions, making the preservation of linguistic heritage more feasible and interactive (Crystal 2012).

Ultimately, reclaiming language and culture through the child-focused narratives demands collective commitment from professionals of different backgrounds such as educators, writers, policymakers and communities. Such efforts ensure that children can deeply connect with their roots while at the same time confidently engage with the wider world. Linguist and anthropologist Dell Hymes highlights that language socialisation is foundational in forming cultural competence and ethical awareness revealing how integral language and storytelling are to human development (Hymes 1972). By empowering children to inhabit their linguistic and cultural identities fully, societies invest in the resilience and richness of the future generations. Language and culture are quite inseparable in shaping childhood identity and experience. Prioritising the child-centric narratives that honour linguistic diversity and cultural heritage not only preserves the invaluable traditions but also nurtures children's holistic development. Such reclamation is a vital act of cultural justice and sustainability ensuring that every child's story is heard, valued and passed on.

Works Cited

- Annamalai, E. *Managing Multilingualism in India: Political and Linguistic Manifestations*. Sage Publications, 2001.
- Bettelheim, Bruno. *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. Vintage, 1989.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
- Bialystok, Ellen. *Bilingualism in Development: Language, Literacy, and Cognition*. Cambridge UP, 2001.
- Blake, William. *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Blume, Judy. *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*. Bradbury Press, 1970.
- Bruner, Jerome. *Acts of Meaning*. Harvard UP, 1990.
- Carroll, Lewis. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Macmillan, 1865.
- Corsaro, William A. *The Sociology of Childhood*. 5th ed., Sage Publications, 2018.
- Crystal, David. *Language Death*. Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Cummins, Jim. *Language, Power and Pedagogy: Bilingual Children in the Crossfire*. Multilingual Matters, 2000.
- Dahl, Roald. *Matilda*. Jonathan Cape, 1988.
- Das, Veena. *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India*. Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Fishman, Joshua A. *Reversing Language Shift: Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of Assistance to Threatened Languages*. Multilingual Matters, 1991.
- Gal, Susan. *Language Shift: Social Determinants of Linguistic Change in Bilingual Austria*. Academic Press, 1998.
- García, Ofelia, and Li Wei. *Translanguaging: Language, Bilingualism and Education*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
- Gee, James Paul. *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourses*. 5th ed., Routledge, 2015.
- Grosjean, François. *Bilingual: Life and Reality*. Harvard UP, 2010.
- Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, edited by Jonathan Rutherford, Lawrence & Wishart, 1990, pp. 222–237.
- Hymes, Dell. "Models of the Interaction of Language and Social Life." *Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication*, edited by John J. Gumperz and Dell Hymes, Blackwell, 1972, pp. 35–71.
- James, Allison, and Alan Prout, editors. *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*. 3rd ed., Routledge, 2015.
- Jones, Peter. *Childhood in Victorian Literature*. Routledge, 2008.

- Kachru, Braj B. *English as an Indian Language*. Orient Longman, 1986.
- Kakar, Sudhir. *The Inner World: A Psycho-Analytic Study of Childhood and Society in India*. Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Kibria, Nazli. *Becoming Asian American: Second-Generation Chinese and Korean American Identities*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000.
- Kuhl, Patricia K. "Early Language Acquisition: Cracking the Speech Code." *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, vol. 5, no. 11, 2004, pp. 831–843.
- Mohanty, Ajit K. *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in India*. Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Murty, Sudha. *Grandma's Bag of Stories*. Penguin Books, 2012.
- Narayan, Kirin. *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels: Folk Narrative in Hindu Religious Teaching*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989.
- Narayan. *The Life of a Storyteller: Oral Narratives among the Pardhan Gond*. Seagull Books, 2002.
- Nieto, Sonia. *Language, Culture, and Teaching: Critical Perspectives for a New Century*. Routledge, 2002.
- Pattanaik, Devdutt. *Myth = Mithya: A Handbook of Hindu Mythology*. Penguin Books India, 2006.
- Pattanayak, D.P. *Multilingualism in India*. International Centre for Multilingualism, 1990.
- Pavlenko, Aneta. *Emotions and Multilingualism*. Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Pullman, Philip. *His Dark Materials*. Scholastic, 1995.
- Ramanujan, A.K. *Folktales from India: A Selection of Oral Tales from Twenty-two Languages*. Pantheon, 1991.
- Sahu, Nandini. *Folklore and the Alternative Modernities*. Prestige Books, 2001.
- Skutnabb-Kangas, Tove. *Linguistic Genocide in Education—or Worldwide Diversity and Human Rights?* Routledge, 2000.
- Smith, John. *Harry Potter and the Hero's Journey: Myth and Magic in Modern Fantasy*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Suárez-Orozco, Marcelo M., and Mariela Páez Suárez-Orozco. *Children of Immigration*. Harvard University Press, 2001.
- Thiong'o, Ngũgĩ wa. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. James Currey, 1986.
- Vygotsky, Lev S. *Thought and Language*. Translated by Alex Kozulin, MIT Press, 1986.
- Zipes, Jack. *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*. Routledge, 2006.