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Keywords: Bengali fiction, fishing communities, language and identity, sociolinguistics, cultural studies, discourse analysis, marginalised communities, post-1971 Bangladesh literature.

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The essay draws on linguistic anthropology, discourse analysis and cultural theory. Within this framework, culture is understood as a dynamic and contested repertoire of meanings, while identity is treated as plural, relational and historically situated. Here, language emerges as both a symbolic resource and a political marker-capable of sustaining cultural memory while simultaneously reflecting structures of exclusion.

The analysis distinguishes between cultural identity, rooted in shared livelihood practices and linguistic forms and ethnic identity, which emerges through political categorisation and access to resources in complex societies. Select post-Liberation Bāṁlā novels depicting fishing communities-commonly identified as jele, kaivarta, mālo, jaladāsa-are examined with attention to vernacular speech, occupational registers and dialogic exchanges. The analysis employs close textual reading combined with discourse-analytic attention to dialogue, narrative framing, lexical choice and code differentiation between standard and non-standard varieties. For example, in several post-1971 novels identified by Jaladas (2008; 2009), fishermen characters are introduced through regionally marked vernacular dialogue before narrative exposition reveals their caste or economic position. Such sequencing foregrounds linguistic difference as the primary marker of social identity. In these texts, lexical choices related to tides, net-making, river currents and fish taxonomy function not merely as occupational terminology but as repositories of ecological knowledge and cultural memory.

The study demonstrates that literary representation systematically marks fishermen's speech as socially 'other' through lexical rusticity, phonological variation, and dialogic positioning, while simultaneously constructing that speech as a repository of ecological knowledge, collective memory, and moral authority. The study argues that linguistic difference is not simply an indicator of social hierarchy, but a crucial force in sustaining cultural identity and alternative worldviews. By foregrounding marginalised speech communities in Bāṁlā literature, the article demonstrates how

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language mediates power, belongingm and resistance within postcolonial South Asian contexts.

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I. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The relationship between language and culture has long been a central concern across the humanities and social sciences. While language is often treated as a means of expressing cultural experience, it also plays a formative role in shaping social identity. Rather than functioning as a passive reflection of culture, language provides a structural basis through which individuals and communities interpret their social world.

In multilingual and socially stratified societies, language frequently becomes a key marker of belonging and exclusion. The recognition of one or more languages as 'national' languages often contributes to the formation of collective identity, even in contexts characterised by deep linguistic and cultural diversity. As a result, language operates not only as a communicative resource but also as a political instrument through which power relations are articulated and maintained.

Over the past few decades, the intersections of language, culture, and identity have received sustained attention within cultural studies and sociolinguistics. A recurring question in this scholarship concerns the relationship between cultural identity and ethnic identity. While these terms are sometimes used interchangeably, they refer to analytically distinct processes. Cultural identity is generally rooted in shared practices, values, and modes of life, whereas ethnic identity tends to emerge within complex societies through political classification and unequal access to resources.

These distinctions are particularly significant in postcolonial contexts, where language often mediates competing claims to belonging, recognition and authority. Scholars such as Roosens (1989), Dorais (1991), and Stairs (1992) have advanced divergent interpretations of language's role in the formation of identity, whether conceived as singular or plural. A continuing point of debate concerns whether a cultural or ethnic group can retain distinctiveness in the absence of an autonomous language-or at least its own variation of a shared one, such as a dialect, pidgin, or vernacular. The enduring question is whether linguistic particularity remains a necessary condition for cultural uniqueness. To what extent can a culture or ethnic group be regarded as distinctive if it lacks an autonomous language, or even a dialect, pidgin or vernacular? This essay seeks to explore some of these questions.

In South Asia, linguistic differences have played a decisive role in shaping national movements, social hierarchies, and cultural affiliations. The Bengali context is especially instructive in this regard, given the historical and political significance of Bāṁlā (or Bengali) in the formation of collective identity across Bangladesh and West Bengal, India.

This article examines how language contributes to the construction of cultural and ethnic identities by analysing marginal fishing communities as represented in post-1971 Bāṁlā fiction. By focusing on literary depictions of vernacular speech and occupational language, the study explores how linguistic practices reflect social marginalisation while also enabling forms of agency and cultural continuity.

The article contributes to existing scholarship by (i) bringing marginal occupational speech communities into dialogue with cultural-linguistic theory, (ii) distinguishing analytically between cultural and ethnic identity within literary discourse, and (iii) demonstrating how post-Liberation fiction encodes internal hierarchies within Bāṁlā itself.

II. THE CONNECTION BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

The relationship between language and culture has been examined extensively within linguistics

and anthropology. Early formulations emphasised the close interdependence between linguistic structure and cultural perception. They suggested that language both reflects and shapes how speakers understand their social world. These perspectives position language as more than a neutral vehicle of communication, positioning it instead as integral to cultural experience.

One influential strand of this debate is associated with the principle of linguistic relativity, often linked to the work of Edward Sapir (1921, 1923, 1983) and Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956). In its strongest form, this view holds that language determines thought by constraining what can be conceptualised. Weaker formulations suggest that language influences perception and interpretation without fully constraining cognition (Campbell 1997). Although deterministic claims have been widely criticised, the broader insight that language and culture are connected continues to guide sociolinguistic research. Contemporary sociolinguistic research has largely moved beyond deterministic formulations, emphasising instead indexicality-the idea that linguistic forms point to social meanings without rigidly determining cognition. This perspective is especially relevant to literary representation, where language indexes class, caste and locality.

An alternative perspective treats language primarily as a reflection of cultural values and practices. From this view, linguistic forms do not determine thought, but are shaped by social norms, beliefs and communicative needs of a community. Because languages are flexible and capable of innovation, speakers can adapt them to express new ideas as social conditions change. This approach highlights the responsiveness of language to cultural context rather than its cognitive dominance.

Contemporary research generally moves beyond this opposition by viewing language and culture as mutually constitutive. Language is understood as a dynamic system through which cultural knowledge is acquired, negotiated and transmitted. At the same time, cultural frameworks shape how linguistic resources are used, interpreted and valued within particular social settings.

This relational understanding is especially important when culture itself is recognised as a contested concept. Rather than a fixed or homogenous system, culture is increasingly understood as a shared yet continually reworked repertoire of meanings, practices and symbols. From this perspective, language functions as a central medium through which both cultural continuity and change are sustained.

Adopting this view enables analysis of language not only as a cognitive or communicative tool but also as a social practice embedded in relations of power. Linguistic forms and choices can reinforce social hierarchies, but they can also provide resources for resistance and alternative self-definition. This framework is particularly useful for examining marginalised communities, whose linguistic practices often reveal tensions between exclusion and agency. In the case of Bāṁlā fiction depicting fishing communities, this framework enables us to analyse how non-standard varieties are narratively framed: whether as comic, inferior, authentic, resistant or epistemically authoritative.

Clifford (1986) insists that culture is not a fixed body of meanings but a contested and evolving site, while Britzman (1991) highlights its role in shaping and reshaping identities, desires, and investments. George and Louise Spindler (1990, 1994) further advance a processual view of culture, emphasising how individuals continually reconstitute cultural assumptions in everyday socialisation. These models distinguish between the enduring self (rooted in past experience and identity), the situated self (adapting to immediate contexts), and the endangered self (emerging when adaptation conflicts with continuity). This dynamic perspective reinforces the argument that cultural systems are not inert structures but living processes of negotiation, conflict, and change.

III. CULTURE AS A CONSTANTLY REDEFINED REPERTOIRE OF MEANINGS

Taken together, contemporary approaches to language and culture converge on a shared insight: culture is best understood not as a fixed and homogenous system, but as a socially shared repertoire of meanings that is continually redefined through practice. Within this framework, culture is neither static nor self-contained. It is produced and sustained through everyday social interaction, in which language plays a crucial role.

Although culture is often associated with continuity and tradition, it is also inherently adaptive. Cultural forms respond to changing social, economic, and environmental conditions, while retaining elements of historical inheritance. Tensions frequently arise when cultural change is perceived as threatening established values or ways of life. Such tensions are particularly visible in communities whose livelihoods are closely tied to specific ecological and occupational contexts.

Cultural change does not occur uniformly within a community. Generational differences, social position, and access to resources shape how individuals interpret and respond to shifting cultural norms. As a result, culture cannot be reduced to a single, unified perspective. Although members of a culture share a collective framework-sometimes called a 'great tradition' or 'cultural identity,' they sometimes show multiple and competing interpretations that coexist within a shared symbolic framework.

This understanding allows culture to be viewed as both collective and differentiated. While members of a community share certain values, practices and symbolic references, they also express these differences in distinct ways. Such variation gives rise to the formation of subcultures that remain connected to, rather than separate from, broader cultural systems.

Conceptualising culture in this way has important implications for the study of identity. If culture is dynamic and contested, then identity cannot be treated as fixed or singular. Instead, identities emerge through ongoing engagement with cultural practices, social expectations and historical conditions. Language serves as a key medium in this process, shaping how individuals locate themselves within cultural and social hierarchies.

This perspective provides a foundation for analysing how marginalised groups negotiate cultural belonging under conditions of inequality. In such contexts, cultural practices may function simultaneously as resources for continuity and as sites for contestation, where dominant norms are questioned and alternative meanings are articulated. In the novels under discussion, such contestation is frequently dramatised through intergenerational dialogue-older fishermen invoking inherited riverine knowledge, while younger characters confront market forces, mechanisation, or urban migration.

The literary representations examined here implicitly challenge homogenising language ideologies by foregrounding the cultural legitimacy of marginal speech varieties. Viewing language as a fundamental right emphasises its role as a social and cultural marker of identity. Only by maintaining linguistic diversity can societies guarantee the continuity of both national identity and the cultural richness that gives it strength. As an example, we examine small-scale fishing communities and define their language and cultures, as reflected in Bangla fiction.

IV. IDENTITY AND MARGINALISATION: THE CASE OF FISHERMEN IN BENGAL

Identity is best understood as a relational and historically situated process. It emerges through everyday social practices and is shaped by an individual's position within wider structures of power, economy and culture. In contexts marked by inequality, identity is often formed under conditions of constraint, where access to resources, recognition and representation is unevenly distributed. Language plays a crucial role in these processes, mediating how individuals and communities articulate belonging, difference and social value.

In social analysis, a distinction is often drawn between *cultural identity* and *ethnic identity*. Cultural identity refers to shared practices, values and ways of life that develop through common experiences, particularly those linked to livelihood, environment and tradition. It is sustained through everyday activities and transmitted across generations, often through language, ritual, and collective memory. Ethnic identity, by contrast, tends to emerge within complex societies characterised by formal political structures and social stratification. It is shaped through processes of classification, categorisation and boundary-making, frequently linked to differential access to power and material resources. While these two forms of identity are analytically distinct, they are deeply interconnected in lived experience.

Fishing, as is well known, is one of humanity's oldest survival methods. It requires specific adaptations to marine ecosystems and technologies, which in turn shape distinct cultural practices. Across the globe, small-scale fishing communities have developed unique attitudes, gear and organisational forms through generations of experimentation. Despite belonging to different societies, fishers often share remarkably similar cultural traits, rooted in the shared challenges of working in marine environments. Exceptions occur where broader cultural traditions override this cross-cultural similarity-for instance, while women play vital roles in fish processing and distribution in many regions, cultural norms in places such as Zambia, parts of Indonesia, and Malaysia restrict their participation in fisheries. The values of fishing communities are thus the product of accumulated adaptive expertise.

Fishing communities in Bengal exemplify this intersection of cultural and ethnic identity. Their cultural identity is rooted in a water-centred way of life shaped by rivers, canals, estuaries, and coastal environments. Fishing is not merely an occupation but a mode of existence that structures social relations, seasonal rhythms, belief systems and linguistic practices. Knowledge of tides, fish behaviour, weather patterns and navigation is embedded in everyday speech and transmitted through specialised vocabularies and occupational registers. Language in these communities thus carries ecological knowledge, collective memory and cultural continuity.

At the same time, fishermen occupy a marginal position within broader Bengali society. Their ethnic identity is shaped not only by cultural distinctiveness but by their location within entrenched systems of social hierarchy. Historically, fishing communities have been associated with low caste status within Hindu social organisation, while similar forms of occupational marginalisation have persisted among Muslim fishing groups through class-based and caste-like stratifications. In both contexts, fishermen have often been positioned as socially inferior, economically vulnerable and politically peripheral.

Marginalisation operates here as a structural condition rather than an incidental outcome. It is reproduced through limited access to land, credit, education and institutional support, as well as through cultural representations that stigmatise fishing as an impure or undesirable occupation. These processes restrict social mobility and reinforce patterns of exclusion across generations. As a result, fishermen's identities are shaped by a constant negotiation between cultural continuity and social devaluation.

Language is central to this negotiation. On one level, fishermen's speech reflects their marginal position. Vernacular forms associated with fishing communities are often marked as rustic, coarse, or inferior within dominant linguistic hierarchies. Such evaluations mirror broader social attitudes that associate linguistic refinement with education, urbanity and higher social status. As a consequence, fishermen's language is frequently excluded from formal domains such as administration, education and literary canon formation.

On another level, however, language also provides a resource for agency and self-definition. Within fishing communities, vernacular speech functions as a marker of solidarity and belonging. Occupational terms, idiomatic expressions and

narrative styles encode shared experience and collective knowledge. These linguistic forms affirm cultural identity even in the face of social exclusion. The same language that is devalued in dominant contexts becomes a source of pride and resilience within the community.

The post-1971 context is particularly significant for understanding these dynamics. The Bangladesh Liberation War and the subsequent recognition of Bāṁlā as a central marker of national identity reshaped linguistic hierarchies across the region. While the elevation of Bāṁlā created new opportunities for linguistic inclusion, it also produced new forms of exclusion within the language itself. Standardised varieties associated with education and urban elites gained prestige, while non-standard and occupational speech forms remained marginalised. Fishing communities thus continued to occupy a peripheral position within the newly consolidated linguistic order.

Literary representations of fishermen in post-Liberation Bāṁlā fiction capture these tensions with particular clarity. Fiction provides a space in which marginal voices can be rendered audible, even as it reflects the constraints under which those voices operate. Through dialogue, narrative voice, and characterisation, literary texts register the ways in which fishermen's identities are shaped by both cultural inheritance and structural exclusion. For instance, in several post-1971 novels, fisherman characters are introduced through marked vernacular dialogue before narrative exposition identifies their caste or class position. This sequencing foregrounds linguistic difference as the primary marker of social identity. In contrast, elite characters are frequently associated with standardised Bāṁlā or bilingual competence, reinforcing stratified linguistic capital. In a number of post-Liberation Bāṁlā novels catalogued by Jaladas (2009: 100-107), fishermen are characterised through dense clusters of occupational vocabulary-terms referring to specific nets, seasonal fish species, tidal rhythms and riverine hazards that are left untranslated within the narrative. This stylistic choice creates a layered linguistic space in which readers encounter the epistemic world of the fishing community on its own terms.

In several narratives, elite or urban characters are associated with standardised Bāṁlā or bilingual competence, while fishermen speak in regionally inflected varieties marked by phonological compression and idiomatic directness. When such speech is mocked or corrected by socially dominant characters, the text dramatises linguistic hierarchy; when it is used to articulate moral clarity, ecological wisdom, or resistance to exploitation, the narrative revalues that same vernacular.

These representations frequently foreground the relationship between language and power. Characters from fishing communities are often depicted as struggling to be heard within dominant social frameworks. Their speech may be mocked, ignored or dismissed, reinforcing their marginal status. At the same time, moments of linguistic assertion-whether through defiant dialogue, storytelling, or refusal to conform to imposed norms-signal acts of resistance. Language becomes a means through which characters challenge their assigned positions and assert alternative understandings of self-worth and belonging.

Gender further complicates these processes. Women within fishing communities often experience marginalisation in intensified forms, shaped by the intersection of caste, class, occupation and patriarchy. Their linguistic practices reflect both constraint and agency. While women's voices are frequently confined to domestic or informal spaces, literary texts sometimes highlight moments where female characters articulate resilience, endurance, and cultural continuity. Through everyday speech, women transmit cultural knowledge and sustain community bonds, even as their social power remains limited. Some novels also foreground the speech of fisherwomen in domestic and marketplace contexts, where bargaining, lamentation and ritual language reveal both constraint and agency. While female characters may be excluded from formal decision-making, their speech often encodes community memory

and pragmatic survival strategies. In these instances, gendered vernacular becomes a vehicle for transmitting cultural continuity across generations.

Marginalisation, however, should not be understood solely as deprivation. It also produces distinctive forms of social consciousness. Living at the edges of dominant systems often fosters acute awareness of inequality and exploitation. In literary representations, fishermen are frequently shown as possessing a grounded understanding of social injustice derived from lived experience rather than abstract ideology. Their language reflects this awareness through irony, scepticism, and pragmatic reasoning.

By examining fishermen's identities through the combined lenses of culture, marginalisation and language, it becomes possible to move beyond reductive portrayals of these communities as passive victims. Instead, they emerge as active participants in the ongoing negotiation of meaning and belonging. Their identities are shaped by constraint, but not determined by it. Cultural practices, linguistic resources, and collective memory provide tools through which fishermen navigate social hierarchies and assert continuity amid change.

This integrated approach also underscores the importance of literary texts as sites of sociolinguistic insight. Literature does not merely reflect social reality; it participates in shaping how marginalised groups are imagined and understood. By foregrounding fishermen's speech and lived experience, post-Liberation Bāṁlā fiction offers a counterpoint to dominant narratives that exclude or homogenise subaltern voices.

In this sense, identity and marginalisation are not separate analytical categories, but mutually constitutive processes. For fishermen in Bengal, identity is forged through marginality, while marginality is experienced and contested through language. Such representations reveal that marginality in these texts is not only socio-economic but also semiotic: fishermen are positioned at the periphery of both material and linguistic power, yet their speech remains central to the narrative world's moral and ecological imagination.

In fact, in one representative post-1971 novel, a fisherman character refuses to abandon traditional fishing grounds despite mechanised competition, declaring in vernacular speech that "the river knows our fathers' names." The metaphor collapses ecology, ancestry, and language into a single symbolic field. The river is not merely a resource but a cultural archive, and the use of unstandardised Bāṁlā reinforces that this worldview stands outside elite nationalist discourse. Such moments illustrate how vernacular language becomes a medium of existential rationality rather than economic calculation.

Local languages, spiritual and cultural wisdom, and ecological knowledge are central to sustaining both the fisheries and community identity. These assets also face competition from other sectors-agriculture, tourism or aquaculture-further straining fishing livelihoods. In India and Bangladesh, the cultural debate around development reflects these tensions. Some groups demand modernisation and growth while insisting on preserving local language and identity; others call for reduced resource exploitation in response to environmental crises, even at the cost of traditional livelihoods. Their identity is thus shaped by both cultural distinctiveness rooted in livelihood and ethnic positioning influenced by larger power structures. The post-1971 novels that depict fisherfolk capture this very tension: the fishermen as custodians of cultural continuity through their practices and speech, while also being ethnic minorities who are economically and politically marginalised in a society undergoing rapid redefinition of language and nationhood.

V. CONTEXTUAL CONDITIONS OF MARGINALISATION AND THE FISHERMEN

The marginalisation of fishing communities in Bengal is rooted in a combination of historical, economic and social factors that have shaped

their position within both rural and urban settings. While the cultural distinctiveness of fishermen has already been outlined, it is necessary here to identify the material and institutional conditions that structure their everyday lives and inform their representation in literature.

Marginalisation may be defined as is the gradual exclusion of individuals or groups from a society's periphery through the devaluation of their needs and participation. It operates at multiple levels-entire societies, classes, communities, families, or individuals-and changes over time with shifts in social position and power. Across both West Bengal and Bangladesh, fishing has historically been treated as a low-status occupation. Within Hindu social organisation, fishing communities were commonly positioned at the lower end of caste hierarchies, with occupational identity inherited across generations. Similar patterns of marginalisation developed among Muslim fishing groups through class-based and caste-like stratifications, where occupational status often determined social standing and access to communal institutions. These hierarchies limited social mobility and reinforced the association between fishing, poverty and social inferiority. In this cultural space, caste-based hierarchies have historically underpinned exclusionary practices.

Economic vulnerability further intensifies this marginal position. Small-scale fishing communities typically depend on seasonal and environmentally contingent livelihoods. Access to productive resources-such as fishing grounds, boats, nets, and credit-is often mediated by landlords, traders or moneylenders, creating relations of dependency that restrict autonomy. Debt cycles, exploitative brokerage systems, and unstable incomes are recurring features of fishermen's lives, and these conditions frequently surface in literary narratives.

Educational exclusion represents another persistent dimension of marginalisation. Limited access to formal education has historically constrained fishermen's opportunities for occupational diversification and political participation. Linguistic practices associated with fishing communities have consequently remained confined to informal domains, reinforcing their exclusion from institutional spaces where standardised language varieties dominate. This linguistic marginality both reflects and reproduces broader social inequalities.

Religious and communal dynamics further complicate these patterns. In Bengal, fishing communities exist within both Hindu and Muslim social frameworks, each marked by internal hierarchies and exclusionary practices. In Muslim contexts, distinctions between elite and occupational groups have historically shaped access to religious authority and social recognition. Such divisions underscore that marginalisation operates not only between communities but also within them. Parallel to the four-fold caste divisions among Hindus, stratifications also existed among Bengali Muslims-Āshrāf (noble/foreign), Ātrāf (artisanal), and Ājlāf/Ārzāl (lowest)-where language and occupational identity frequently signalled social rank (Dey, 2012). Urban elites associated prestige with literacy in Urdu, Persian, and Arabic, whereas the majority of rural Muslim populations used Bāṁlā (Haq, 1968). Occupational groups such as weavers and fishermen (e.g., Nīkāri) were often stigmatised and excluded from religious and communal institutions (Levy, 1931; Chowdhury, 2009).

The post-1971 period introduced significant political and linguistic transformations, particularly with the consolidation of Bāṁlā as a marker of national identity. While this shift elevated the status of the language as a whole, it did not eliminate internal hierarchies within Bāṁlā-speaking society. Standardised and educated forms of the language gained institutional prestige, while occupational and vernacular varieties associated with fishing communities remained marginal. As a result, linguistic inclusion at the national level coexisted with continued exclusion at the social level.

These historical and material conditions form the backdrop against which literary representations of fishermen must be read. The novels examined in this study do not simply portray individual

hardship, but engage with the structural forces that shape fishermen's lives. Poverty, debt, social stigma and restricted mobility appear not as isolated misfortunes, but as systemic features of a marginalised existence.

By outlining these conditions, this section provides a contextual framework for the literary analysis that follows. The focus now shifts from social structure to textual representation, examining how Bāṁlā fiction registers, critiques, and reimagines the marginalisation of fishing communities through language, dialogue, and narrative form.

Within the region under consideration, fishing communities in Bangladesh and West Bengal exemplify involuntary marginalisation. Their occupational identity is hereditary and low-status, their livelihoods precarious, and their access to resources mediated by entrenched hierarchies and market exclusions. Although they remain outside capitalist productive and reproductive activity, their work is indispensable to the social economy, creating a paradox in which essential services coexist with social devaluation.

Given that the fishermen's stories-and especially their language practices-are underrepresented in scholarship, this study examines how Bāṁlā novels from both Bangladesh and West Bengal in India render the fishermen's marginalisation and identity. It treats cultural and ethnic identity as analytically distinct but interlinked, showing how literary language encodes both the symbolic devaluation of the group and its strategies of resilience. There existed sharp cases of caste discrimination and exclusion among the Muslims in most of the villages in both countries. The socially, culturally and economically marginalised people have always had a very insignificant part in the local power structure and actually had very trivial or almost no role to play in transforming the political and economic situation of their own communities in the country.

This study concentrates on the cultural and linguistic representations of fishermen, known as 'jele' (জেলে), 'dhīvara' (ধীবর), 'mālo' (মালো), 'kaivarta' (কৈবর্ত), 'jalaputra' (জলপুত্র), or 'jaladāsa' (জলদাস)-a marginalised segment of the Bāṁlā speech community-through novels written in the post-1971 period. The focus on the post-Liberation era is particularly significant. These hierarchies form the implicit backdrop against which post-1971 Bāṁlā fiction constructs fishermen's speech. The literary encoding of dialect, lexical choice, and narrative positioning cannot be separated from these entrenched material and symbolic structures. Socio-historical hierarchies are not merely background conditions; they are embedded in the novels' linguistic texture. Debt cycles, brokerage exploitation, and caste-based exclusion frequently surface in dialogues between fishermen and moneylenders, where asymmetries of power are mirrored in asymmetries of speech. The contrast between deferential address forms used by fishermen and authoritative registers adopted by landlords or traders encodes structural inequality at the level of discourse.

VI. THE LITERARY DEPICTIONS AND SOME OBSERVABLE FEATURES

Post-Liberation Bāṁlā fiction offers a particularly rich terrain for examining how language mediates the representation of marginalised fishing communities. Rather than treating fishermen merely as thematic subjects, the novels examined in this study foreground linguistic practice as a central element of social experience. Through dialogue, narrative voice and occupational registers, these texts render marginalisation not only visible but audible.

One prominent feature across these novels is the use of vernacular speech to mark social positioning. Characters from fishing communities frequently speak in non-standard varieties of Bāṁlā that differ from the language of educated or elite figures within the narrative. These linguistic contrasts are rarely neutral. They often function to signal asymmetries of power, education and authority, reinforcing the social distance between fishermen and dominant groups. At the same time, the persistence of vernacular speech affirms cultural continuity and collective belonging within the fishing community.

Occupational registers play a crucial role in this process. Fishing-related terminology, metaphors drawn from riverine life, and references to tides, nets, and seasonal rhythms appear consistently in dialogue and narration. Such language embeds ecological knowledge and lived experience within the text, anchoring identity in livelihood rather than abstract classification. These registers also distinguish fishermen's speech from that of administrators, landlords or traders, whose language reflects institutional authority and economic control.

Dialogic exchanges frequently expose the unequal distribution of voice within the novels' social worlds. Fishermen are often placed in situations where their speech is disregarded, interrupted, or treated as lacking legitimacy. Commands, threats, and dismissive responses from dominant characters underscore how linguistic interaction mirrors broader relations of power. Silence, too, becomes meaningful. Moments where fishermen choose not to speak, or are denied the opportunity to do so, signal the limits imposed on their agency within hierarchical structures.

Yet these texts do not depict fishermen's language solely as a marker of subordination. Moments of linguistic assertion recur across the narratives. Characters challenge authority through refusal, irony, or direct confrontation, using language to contest imposed norms. Such moments are often brief and fragile, but they carry symbolic weight. Speech becomes a site where marginalised subjects assert dignity, even when material conditions remain unchanged.

Narrative voice further shapes how fishermen's language is received. In several texts, the narrator adopts a position that aligns closely with the perspectives of fishing communities, allowing vernacular speech to appear without corrective framing or ridicule. This narrative strategy resists dominant linguistic hierarchies by presenting fishermen's language as internally coherent and contextually appropriate, rather than deficient. In other cases, shifts between narrative registers highlight tensions between insider and outsider perspectives, reinforcing the instability of representation itself.

Gendered speech patterns add another layer of complexity. Women's voices often emerge in domestic or communal settings, where language serves as a medium for transmitting cultural memory, managing survival, and negotiating everyday hardship. Although women's speech may lack overt authority within the narrative, it frequently carries emotional and ethical weight, sustaining social bonds and articulating resilience in the face of loss and precarity.

Across these novels, linguistic difference functions as a narrative device that links identity to marginalisation without reducing characters to passive victims. Language encodes social exclusion, but it also preserves forms of knowledge and solidarity that resist erasure. By closely attending to how fishermen speak and how their speech is framed within the text, these literary works reveal the complex interplay among language, power, and lived experience in postcolonial Bengal.

One of the earliest literary representations of fishermen's resistance to social domination appears in *Kaivarta Khaṇḍa* (1994) by Mahasweta Devi. Set against the historical backdrop of the Kaivarta revolt, the novel depicts the violent suppression of a marginalised fishing community by entrenched political authority. Rather than recounting history for its own sake, the text foregrounds language as a site of confrontation between power and subaltern assertion. The conflict between King Bhīma, a leader from the Kaivarta community, and the ruling elite is articulated through dialogic exchanges that expose the logic of domination. Royal speech is marked by threats, erasure, and dehumanisation, while Bhīma's responses draw on collective suffering and moral endurance. His refusal to submit linguistically, even in the face of annihilation, functions as an act of symbolic resistance. Through this contrast, the novel presents speech not merely as reaction but as an assertion of communal identity under siege.

A similar tension between conformity and resistance emerges in *Gahin Gāṅ* (1980) by Sadhan Chattopadhyay, which explores the everyday struggles of fishermen within a

contemporary social setting. The novel portrays how economic precarity and social superstition regulate community behaviour, particularly through ritual obligations that impose financial strain on already marginal households.

This tension is crystallised in the protagonist Śrīpada's refusal to perform an expensive funerary ritual following his father's death. While elder figures advocate compliance in the name of tradition and survival, Śrīpada's speech challenges the authority of such norms by foregrounding material reality and indebtedness. His rejection of ritual obligation is articulated not as rebellion in abstract terms, but as a pragmatic response to structural exploitation. Language here becomes a means of questioning inherited authority and exposing the economic costs of unquestioned conformity.

Together, these texts demonstrate how fishermen's speech is positioned at the intersection of marginality and agency. Whether confronting overt political violence or entrenched social custom, characters deploy language to negotiate dignity, responsibility, and survival. Literary dialogue thus renders visible how linguistic practice mediates identity formation under conditions of social constraint.

A comparable exploration of linguistic negotiation under conditions of marginalisation appears in *Padmāra Pālīdvīpa* by Abu Ishaq, which centres on conflicts over the ownership of newly emerged riverine land (*cara*). In the novel, control over the *cara* is secured not through legal entitlement but through coercion, revealing how informal power structures regulate access to resources in fishermen's lives.

Dialogic exchanges between fishermen and local authorities foreground this imbalance. When Erfan Matubbar attempts to claim the land through cultivation, his speech is marked by deference and negotiation, while the language of officials is coercive and extractive. Erfan's repeated concessions-offered through appeals, payments, and indirect requests-underscore how linguistic submission becomes a survival strategy within asymmetric power relations. At the same time, the novel registers moments where speech shifts from accommodation to mobilisation, as Erfan later addresses fellow villagers in a language of collective responsibility and resistance. Through these contrasts, the text demonstrates how fishermen's language oscillates between compliance and assertion in response to structural vulnerability.

Questions of livelihood, aspiration, and identity are further explored in *Gaṅgā Ekṭi Nadīra Nāma* (2001) by Shyamal Gangopadhyay. The novel juxtaposes urban affluence with rural precarity, focusing on Hājrā Hāldār, a factory worker who remains emotionally and culturally bound to fishing. His speech repeatedly returns to the river as a site of possibility, even when economic logic discourages such attachment.

Hājrā's expressed desire to return to fishing-articulated in the context of arranging his daughters' marriages-can be read as an instance where cultural identity competes with material constraint. While his language appears to accommodate prevailing social norms, including the financial pressures surrounding marriage, it simultaneously reveals a deep affective attachment to fishing as a way of life. The novel thus presents language as a medium through which conflicting values-economic survival and cultural belonging-are negotiated rather than resolved.

Gendered dimensions of linguistic agency are most explicitly foregrounded in *Jalaputra* (2008) by Harishankar Jaladas. The narrative centres on women who confront loss, economic hardship, and social vulnerability in the absence of male breadwinners. Female speech in the novel departs from silence or resignation, articulating endurance and resolve through everyday language.

Utterances by characters such as Bhuvaneśvarī and other women in the fishing community emphasise survival, dignity, and the necessity of education. Their speech resists the stigma attached to women's labour and reframes fishing-related work as legitimate and honourable. Rather than overt rebellion, these

linguistic acts constitute pragmatic assertions of agency within restrictive social conditions. Language here becomes a means of sustaining cultural continuity while negotiating shifting gender roles.

Taken together, these novels demonstrate that fishermen's language in Bāṁlā fiction is neither uniformly oppositional nor wholly submissive. Instead, it reflects a spectrum of strategies shaped by context: negotiation, concession, persuasion, and occasional confrontation. Literary dialogue captures how marginalised speakers navigate power not only through action, but through carefully calibrated speech.

VII. CONCLUDING REMARKS: LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND MARGINAL IDENTITY

This study has examined how post-1971 Bāṁlā fiction represents fishing communities at the intersection of language, culture and marginal identity. Rather than reiterating general theoretical claims about linguistic relativity or cultural construction, the analysis has focused on how specific literary texts encode marginality through vernacular speech, occupational registers and dialogic positioning.

Drawing on selected novels from both Bangladesh and West Bengal, particularly those catalogued in studies by Jaladas (2008; 2009)-the article has shown that fishermen characters are frequently introduced through marked non-standard Bāṁlā before their socio-economic status is narratively clarified. This structural sequencing foregrounds language as the primary index of marginal identity.

The discussion began by conceptualising language as a constitutive social practice embedded in relations of power. Drawing on cultural studies and sociolinguistics, the paper treated culture as a dynamic and contested repertoire of meanings, and identity as plural, relational and historically situated. This theoretical positioning allowed for a distinction between cultural identity, grounded in shared livelihood practices and linguistic forms and ethnic identity, shaped through political categorisation and unequal access to resources. Rather than treating these dimensions as mutually exclusive, the analysis demonstrated their interdependence in lived experience.

The case of fishing communities in Bengal provided a concrete context for examining these processes. As communities whose identities are deeply tied to water-based livelihoods, fishermen embody forms of cultural continuity sustained through language, occupational knowledge and collective memory. At the same time, their social positioning within caste-and class-based hierarchies (Deshpande 2010) has subjected them to persistent marginalisation. This dual condition-cultural rootedness alongside structural exclusion has shaped not only their material lives but also the ways in which they are represented and heard.

The literary analysis showed that Bāṁlā fiction engages with these realities through careful attention to language. Vernacular speech, occupational registers, and dialogic interaction function as key narrative devices through which marginality is articulated. Fishermen's language is frequently marked as socially inferior within the fictional world, mirroring dominant linguistic hierarchies in broader society. Yet the same linguistic forms also operate as resources of solidarity, resilience, and self-definition within the community. Literary texts thus register both the constraints imposed on marginalised speakers and the possibilities for agency that language affords.

This work, from a linguistics point of view, has tried to simplify the idea of language-culture interplay a little more and put it in this way that one major concern of discourse analysis of fishermen's language is the relationship among the language and the speakers and the hearers by and for whom it is produced-a concern with how speakers take and renounce the role of speakers, how culture and social roles affect language options in terms of who speaks when and what they can talk about, and how the actual form of utterance is conditioned by the social relationships between the participants.

The work has also tried to analyse the oral representations by which they projected how they carried their traditional reservoir of marginalised *patois* into the environs of their profession. It has investigated the language of their oral representations, where, in the same candid and boisterous flair that characterised their earlier folk culture, they kept on spinning their dialogues that reflected their early life, their daily experiences with a variety of clients, squabbles with their *dāndandāras, bahaddāras* and identical professional threats and hazards.

Importantly, the novels examined do not present language as a simple instrument of resistance. Acts of linguistic assertion are often fragile, partial, and context-bound. Speech may challenge authority in one moment and be silenced in the next. This ambivalence reflects the lived complexity of marginalisation, where dignity and dispossession coexist. By foregrounding such tensions, literature avoids romanticising subaltern speech while still acknowledging its social significance.

Gendered dimensions of linguistic practice further complicate this picture. Women's voices, though frequently confined to informal or domestic spaces, play a crucial role in sustaining cultural continuity and articulating survival strategies. Their speech underscores the fact that marginal identity is shaped by intersecting structures of occupation, caste, class, and gender. Attention to these voices reinforces the argument that identity emerges through everyday linguistic practice rather than through fixed social categories alone.

Taken together, the findings of this study suggest that linguistic differences should not be understood solely as an index of social hierarchy. While language undoubtedly reflects unequal power relations, it also sustains alternative ways of seeing and inhabiting the world. In the context of fishing communities, vernacular speech preserves ecological knowledge, collective memory and cultural values that remain largely invisible within dominant discourses.

The study contributes to existing scholarship in three ways. First, it analytically distinguishes between cultural and ethnic identity within literary discourse. Second, it demonstrates that linguistic marginality in these novels is not incidental but structurally embedded in narrative technique. Third, it shows that vernacular speech functions not merely as a marker of deprivation but as a repository of ecological knowledge, moral authority, and community resilience.

By analysing literary representations of fishermen's language, this paper contributes to ongoing debates in cultural studies and sociolinguistics concerning voice, marginality, and representation. Literature emerges here not simply as a mirror of social conditions, but as a site where the tensions between exclusion and belonging are negotiated and made legible. In foregrounding marginalised speech communities within Bāṁlā fiction, the study highlights the role of language in mediating power, identity, and cultural persistence in postcolonial South Asian contexts. However, the study has been limited to a select group of post-1971 novels and has not undertaken a quantitative or diachronic survey of all literary representations of fishing communities. Further research might examine comparative regional dialect representation, reader reception of vernacular speech or intersections with contemporary ecological discourse.

By foregrounding the speech of marginal fishing communities, post-Liberation Bāṁlā fiction reveals that linguistic difference is not merely a symptom of hierarchy but a dynamic force in the ongoing negotiation of cultural survival and political belonging. In doing so, these novels invite us to reconsider the place of subaltern vernaculars within the broader narrative of Bengali literary modernity.

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