

The Hegemony of English in Post-colonial Realities and its Aftermath

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Abstract

English is the language of power and it is now racing hand in hand with capitalism. During the colonial era English served as an instrument of conquest and literature its repertoire. Its future depends on how long its native speaking nations will control the reign of economy of the world. Through corporatization this language is still exercising cultural imperialism upon the countries with colonial pasts though now the writers from these countries are writing back not only in English but also in englishes. Even the literature in englishes has already decentered the English literature and more books of literature in englishes are now being produced from outside England and at present they are in the pivot of world literature. In this way, the hegemony of English is encountering a vehement challenge from the literature of the previous European colonies and diaspora literature. This paper seeks to explore how englishes challenge the hegemony of English in the post-colonial realities.

Keywords: Hegemony, Otherization, Hybridity, Globality, Counter-discourse, Historicity

Introduction

English is the language of power and in relation with our historiography it is the language of cultural reproduction which refers to collective experiences working in favor of the interest of the dominant class, not in favor of the “oppressed groups that are the object of the dominant policies” (Macedo, Dendrinos & Gounari, 2003, p.14). Macedo et al. (2003) assert:

...the purpose of English language education in the contemporary world order cannot be viewed as simply the development of skills aimed at acquiring the dominant English language. This view sustains an ideology that systematically disconfirms rather than makes meaningful the cultural experiences of the subordinate linguistic groups who are, by large, the objects of language policies. (p.14)

English cannot be read only as a language but we have to read how it is used to produce, transform and reproduce meanings. Under the disguise of globalization, the neoliberal policies are working to stamp out wider use of national languages in international interaction. According to Donald Macedo et al. (2003), “These policies are consonant with a colonial legacy that had as its major tenet the

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total deculturation of colonized peoples" (p.15). These policies work in the political sites of the countries with colonial pasts with a view to rearticulating a colonial worldview to deculturate, create gender, class and racial inequalities. In this connection, one of the most glaring examples is Africa which is still panting under the weight of de-Africanization policy in which English has been idealized as a gateway to economic prosperity, good jobs and productivity. But uncritical assimilation of English as a gateway to economic and technical advancement may risk the local languages, culture, and identity and lived experiences. Even in postcolonial period English is not a mere language but a tool of cultural invasion that tends to Disneyfy the world culture. Antonio Gramsci (1975) in his *Prison Notebooks* warns that while discussing issues emerging out of the relation between the rulers and the common mass the question of language comes first because the language defines as well as decides the factors working behind the relationship between these two parties (p. 52). Similarly, in the book *The Hegemony of English*, Donald Macedo et al.(2003) suggest that the tenet, "art for art's sake" cannot be applied while talking of the supposed neutrality of English language (p.18). It is very crucial for the post-colonial societies who are writing back by using English as a medium.

At present in many post-colonial societies, English enjoys the elitist status and post-colonial theory does not usually shrink to show how colonizers and an English learning section of the natives used this language to exploit the common mass. In today's world English is given priority in discussion while the local languages of the previously colonized people are marginalized. But in his *Decolonizing the Mind*, Kenyan author Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) asserts that language is substantially related to culture and hence, it is "... the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history" (p. 15). He further declares that as language is closely connected with culture and communication it leads a community to liberation. Even while the postcolonial nations appropriating English have started writing back, the ex-colonial masters distinguish their English from the English of the post-colonial nations. In this connection, Alabi (2005) asserts, "While the upper case of the letter "E" is retained for the British English, the lower case is for other varieties, conveying the impression that "English" is superior to "English"" (p. 45). So, English as a language of the present day imperialists is still trying to enjoy the status of the big brother and sophistication. Another crucial point is that the use of English as a medium of writing gives literature an elitist status and the majority of the local readers do not have any access into it. Thus, in postcolonial literature English is still exercising its hegemony not by coercion, but by consent.

Hegemony, as Gramsci (1975) defines, is the "cultural, moral and ideological" leadership upon the subaltern groups. Let us look back to the history of this

subcontinent and learn how the British rulers exercised their linguistic hegemony upon our people. After the establishment of the Supreme Court of Judicature at Fort William, Calcutta, now Kolkata, in 1774 by the Regulating Act of 1773, the English needed some copyists and accountants. These positions then involved solvency and distinct status in the society. So, a huge section of people of this subcontinent felt tempted to receive English education with a view to enjoying a distinct status in the society. In this connection, Jatin Sarker (2015) refers to Ram kamol Sen who asserts, "In 1774 the Supreme Court was established here, and from this period a knowledge of the English language appeared to be desirable and necessary" (p. 11). Initially, this word-book based knowledge did not prepare the natives for any important post in the Bureaucracy of the Raj. But during the formative phase of the colonial rule political realities:

...would forge that language into a hegemonic instrument to persuade the subject population about the desirability of its own subjection. Education would unfold, therefore, as an ideological campaign with English assigned, in a variety of discursive forms, the task of committing the colonized to the notion of colonialism as a historically necessary and beneficial development. (Guha, 1977, p. 175)

In fact, the British Raj did not want to develop India as a nation-state as they did in Europe. Rather they went on transforming the natives into subjects, not citizens. This process of transformation was geared up by the establishment of Hindu College in 1817 in Kolkata. According to Ranajit Guha (1977), it was a systematic attempt, at an institutional level, to put "the ideal of mastering a language" by teaching based on literary texts rather than word-books, on lessons in grammar rather than spelling, on writing rather than memorizing" (p. 175). In accordance with Calcutta Gazette, the aim of this college was to teach the Bengalee youths to read English literature, to store their minds with the facts of history and science and to enable them to express their knowledge in a polished way. This generation with the values and knowledge of the English stored in their minds gradually found their own history and age-old tradition inaccessible to them as their minds were stereotyped in the power-structure in European framework. Thus, English taught through consent, not through coercion, detached the educated Indians from their own historical and cultural realities. In this connection, Ranajit Guha (1977) asserts:

There was nothing in this education, tailored meticulously to fit British Imperial interests and the British point of view, to allow any distinctively Indian approach to the South Asian past. It would be vain therefore to try and seek the impulse for an Indian historiography of India in this education. (p. 172)

Thus, it is found that the process of fortifying the hegemony of English and the politics of dehistoricising the natives in this subcontinent went hand in hand during the British Raj. There is no denying the fact, as asserted in Julie Mullaney's book *Postcolonial Literatures in Context* (2017) that the "emergence of the academic study of English as a distinct discipline coincides with the expansion of Empire in the nineteenth century and the need, on the part of the colonizer, to find a common language through which to rule and unite the spaces of Empire (p. 33). Besides, through the institutionalization of English it was also suggested that development in the Empire went hand in hand with the academic study of English.

But English has opened the other horizons for the natives, and here again we must echo with Shakespeare's Caliban in *The Tempest*, "You taught me the language; and my profit on't/ Is, I know how to curse: the red plague rid you, / For learning me your language!" (p. 39). This is in the words of Bill Ashcroft et al. (1989), "The Empire Writes Back" and in Ashcroft's phrase Caliban has become "an evocative model of the post-colonial subject" (4). In this connection, a question arises: Can't he do anything other than cursing? Can't he pose a discursive resistance embedded in his local epistemological framework of discursive knowledge against the cultural imperialism that was promulgated by Macaulay's minute proposed in the House of Commons in 1835 for introducing educational institutions in the European framework for teaching British curricula in English, not in Persian language, the then language of the Mughal Empire? It requires examining the role of English literature in the British Empire.

Macaulay, in his minute, put emphasis on transforming the indigenous people of India into a colonial other and this process of Otherization would be done under "the auspices of English language and culture..." (Ashcroft, 2001, p. 9). Ashcroft (2001) puts forth that the responsibility of imparting civilized values was imposed upon English literature (p. 5). Matthew Arnold (1869) in his *Culture and Anarchy* defines culture refuting the anthropologists from the perspective of an idealist as the study of perfection. Ironically enough to be cultured in the framework of the colonizers meant to be perfect. So, Arnold referred to the purgatorial role of culture. This conception of culture tainted with the annihilating disposition of the imperial power structure took up the role of imperial instrument. As the discipline of English was introduced in the colonies including India as an apparatus of teaching the values and culture of the colonizers, inevitably it assumed the role of an 'agent of colonial control'. Soon the study of English literature turned into the study of culture or cultural study, basically of the British people. English literature also defined and distinguished the cultural identity of the natives by promulgating its superiority as a repertoire of universal values and aesthetic prominence. Thus, the colonial culture was universalized by means of English which legitimized the

colonial hegemony upon the natives. In this way, it also legitimized the colonial discourse through transforming the natives into the colonial Other.

Responding to this colonial discourse with the auspices of English literature a section of natives who were once colonized responds to this promulgation and writes in the language of power and cultural values. One of the stimuli that work behind this enthusiasm of choosing English as a medium of writing is to become close to the power structure which is now transformed into a neoliberal corporate network, working worldwide in the name of globality and internationality. Still the recognition of an author is at the hands of the imperialists. In this connection, Ashcroft (2001) refers to George Lamming, a Caribbean author who in his essay "The Occasion for Speaking" proclaims that "the recognition in America and the considerable financial rewards this brought his writing were little consequence compared to the recognition by the literary establishment in London" (p. 10). This self-criticism of Lamming echoes the realization of the reality of a diaspora writer living, in Homi Bhabha's term, in "in-betweenness" which promotes him to assimilate the host culture and at the same time, nurture the culture of the place of origin. This ambivalence creates a space for him and Bhabha calls it 'Third space' which marks his identity as hyphenated identity. 'Third space' marks the hybridity which distinguishes not only a diaspora author but also, from the present global perspective, a native author who takes up English as a signifier of superior discursive identity. Thus, according to Bhabha, hybridity is found not only in diaspora but also in a native writing because it results from various forms of colonization, leading to intertextuality and intersections, interchanges and collisions. This hybridity has also got a positive aspect. It, in Bhabha's opinion, enables the postcolonial writers to upset the discourse of imperialism and compromise its claim for superiority, wholeness and exclusiveness by disclosing its intertextual complicity to various forms of identities.

In this connection, Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o argues that African literature should be written in African languages because he finds the essentialist role of English language. In his eyes there lies an intensive relationship between African culture and African languages. Language, according to him, is culture. Language for its essentialist role possesses the power of defining a culture. So, the change of language brings about the change of culture. He recounts that the use of English language in African literature marginalizes the local languages and in the same vein the department of English in Nairobi University seems to him a neocolonial institution. So, he demands the abolition of the department of English. The message that he wants to put forth through his declaration of the abolition of English department is that he wants that the local languages should be set in the center, not in the margin but he saw quite a reverse picture. English occupied the

center and local languages were forced to the margin. By the term 'abolition' he does not declare a crusade against English rather he wants to set local African languages in the center. Ngugi finds English as the language which cannot colonize all other indigenous languages of the world. He also finds English language in the role of subordinating African literature to European literature. Ngugi (1993), in his essay, "Imperialism of Language" tells about two functions of a language. According to him, one is that it enables people to communicate and accelerate the means of survival. While defending this point, he has referred to the Scandinavians, the Japanese and the West Germans who use English with the speakers of English "to facilitate commerce, trade, tourism, and other links with foreign nations" (p. 49). The other function of a language is that it plays the "role as a carrier of the history and the culture built into the process of that communication over time" (p. 48). Ngugi (1993) vehemently suggests if a language is used in communication between two nations in terms of independence and equality then the role of the language remains confined within communication. But if it is used between the oppressor and the oppressed then the language works as a tool like the Bible and the sword (p. 49). He further clarifies that "the encounter between English and most so-called Third World languages did not occur under conditions of independence and equality" (p. 49). But many critics have dismissed Ngugi's view of English language as essentialist.

Alabi (2005) asserts that "The recuperative trip "inside" or strategic essentialism is unavoidable if formerly colonized peoples are to compete and participate in the world economy" (pp. 44-45). To prove their legitimacy of candidature in the competition of manufacturing the commercial and cultural products they must assume a strategic role, a counter-productive gesture. While doing this, Ashcroft et al. assert that the difference between English and englishes is blurred. But it is difficult to believe that the metropolis is not sustaining the superior position upon the former colonized nations. For example, even today if a person from an Asian or African country with a graduation in English literature and language intends to pursue higher studies in England, Australia or America, he or she is to sit for TOEFL or IELTS and obtain required score to prove his or her competence in four skills of English language. So-called liberalism which always vacillates between revolution and reaction is tantamount to neocolonial policies that promulgate 'American English-Only' movement. This movement serves as an ideological yardstick against which all cultural values are measured, including the standard of English language. It also reminds us of the valuable words of Mexican author Gloria Anzaldua who in her semi autobiography has said:

So, if you want to really hurt me,
Talk badly about my language. (qtd. in Macedo et al. 2003, p. 61)

In the 'American English Only' movement scienticism works in parallel with neocolonialism. Throughout the postcolonial era the English language has taken resort to science as an apparatus to rationalize its hegemony. Science promulgates English as its gateway and thus keeps working to cause historical amnesia, dehumanization and marginalization of ethnicity, culture and ideologies of different races.

Furthermore, writing in English or in the language of the former colonizers has another considerable limitation, too. It keeps a huge non-English speaking local readership out of their reach. A text works only while it brings about dialogues between it and the readers. Now, how does it serve its purpose by keeping a huge number of readers in the bog of inscrutability? Again, if the English language text books take the readers to visit the city of London, the British Museum and the Eiffel Tower, estranging them from their own cities, own museums and own rivers, then they will pose the threat of annihilation as well as Otherization. If a Bangladeshi child reads about Humpty Dumpty from a book of rhyme leaving away its own cultural elements there emerges an apprehension that he will learn to carry on the colonial legacy that may likely cause the displacement of his cultural identity. To fight back the colonial hegemony of English Bangladeshi English is to be developed and practiced in the literature and it must be comprehensible to both the local and the international readership and compete with the advent and hegemony of English upon the culture and identity of the Bangladeshis. And this competition will not be done on equal ground unless and until we who were once colonized can involve all our people in this campaign.

Besides, English language, as it is historically evident, was used as a tool by the colonizers to build up a nexus of cultural ways, scientific discoveries, economic impulses and the imperial power. It, in this way, enabled the West to make ideological claims that it has superior civilization. In his essay "Hinduism for Hindus", Shrinivas Tilak (2017) aptly asserts, "The idea of the "West" became a reality when it was represented to the people of Africa, Asia, and Oceania through colonialism. Colonial education was used to create new indigenous elites to colonize indigenous disciplines of knowledge" (p. 275). This process of colonization was accomplished through imposing a traumatic effect upon the local scholarship with the installation of the tenet of inferiority complex in the minds of the natives. And through the network of the colonizers' language and historiography the epistemology of the colonized countries were encaged or enslaved. It was done due to the nervousness and trauma on the part of the natives. They allowed their history to be told by the West. It happened in this subcontinent, Africa and Oceania and the West did it by creating an archive with veritable knowledges, philosophies and images and employing it upon the natives as a tool of exercising cultural hegemony.

So, the postcolonial nations now feel the necessity to develop a way of cultural studies of their own. But culture falls into two divisions, “art’ and ‘way of life’. Social and institutional frameworks dissolve this gap between art and way of life. These two grow into a singular network through synthesis and it is maintained through state power. Culture’s vulnerability lies in its subjugation to the state power for its momentum and praxis. In this connection, Edward Said (1983) asserts, “To a great extent culture, cultural formations, and intellectuals exist by virtue of a very interesting network of relationships with the state’s almost absolute power” (p. 169). Said (1983) further goes on, “...nearly everyone producing literary or cultural studies makes no allowance for the truth that all intellectual work occurs somewhere, at some time, on some very precisely mapped-out and permissible terrain which is ultimately contained by state” (p. 169).

In the same vein, Bill Ashcroft (2001) in his book *On Post-colonial Futures* emphatically declares:

No writer picking up a pen to write in a colonial language can avoid coming to terms with the irony of this practice at some stage. No post-colonial intellectual, no artist, no critic can avoid the fact that this production is occurring in some already determined discursive space. (p.17)

The realities of place, publishing requirements, market forms, ideological containments produce an apprehension and against this apprehension the post-colonial writers test their capacity. For local identity construction the post-colonial production appropriates imperial forms, and in this way, it engages itself in global culture. This process is difficult because it has the risk of distancing postcolonial discourse from the center. This task is also further hardened because of the inherent appropriation of the colonizers’ language. Again, it is also daunting to reject the imperialists’ discourse, language and literature because if it is attempted to do, it will cast him into an illusory space of time and won’t let him understand the protean nature of imperial power.

As such, resistance against the imperial power of English can be formed not through opposition, but through transformation. This transformation process is adopted by Ngugi through his declaration of the abolition of English department from the University of Nairobi. He gave up English language but took up the novel-form from English literature; produced writings in Gikuyu language and then translated them into English. Thus, the post-colonial world will have an autonomous identity when it will exemplify that more imaginative and literary works are produced from outside England. Now Indian English writing and its diaspora literature have already proved it like some other parts of the world which were previously colonized by the metropolis. Bangladeshi diaspora literature has also

started writing back of late. Bangladeshi writers are extending their range of exploration of our history of and beyond the variegated events of the colonial experiences of the people of this part during the British Raj and the Pakistani oppressive rule and examining our history that contributed to the formation of Bengali nationhood and identity for centuries.

At present Indo-Anglican literature is writing back the center of English literature. During the post-colonial period Indian authors like Salman Rushdie, Bikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri, Arundhati Roy, Arbind Adiga and many more local and diaspora writers are writing in English about India. In Bangladesh Kaiser Haq, Tahmima Anam, Zia Haider, Rashid Askari, Monica Ali, Neamat Imam and many others are writing in English. Besides, lots of translations of Bangladeshi literary texts into English are being done in recent decades and these can aptly add to the bulk of Bangladeshi literature in English. In this field Fakrul Alam, Niaz Zaman, Khondakar Ashraf Hossain and a considerable bunch of translators play a pioneering role.

True, diaspora literature of this subcontinent has occupied a considerably concrete position in world literature. This literature in English is now deconstructing and reconstructing the historiography concocted and distorted by Macaulay, Max Mueller and James Mill. Even English literature produced by the colonial authors like Rudyard Kipling, E.M. Forster is now challenged by the post-colonial critics and authors of this part of the world. Rudyard Kipling's "racially repugnant Kim portrays a caricature of Indian characters like Huree Chunder Mookerjee in contrast with the so called glamour of the British Raj. Kipling deliberately overlooks "an older and more complex civilization with its own legal culture" of India (Tharoor, 2016, pp. 105-106). He advocates in favor of Whiteman's burden. E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* omits any mention to the formation process and development of Indian nationalist movement very deliberately, and caricatures middle-class Muslim doctor Aziz who is in no way an intellectual and social equal of English man Fielding. The only major Hindu character Godbole "...seemingly cannot conceive of either the kind of Indian (like Surendra Nath Banerjee) who had won entry into the ICS or the kind (like Jawaharlal Neheru) whose critiques of Empire were challenging the foundations of the Raj" (Tharoor, 2016, p. 79). Now Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and many more texts of many authors are posing counter-discourse against the stultifying limited vision of the subcontinent and thus they are potently contributing to the process of the restoration of our history and heritage. They are also embracing the whole of India that the colonizers could not and they are doing it in English.

Besides, linguistic hegemony in this subcontinent had been assisted during

the colonial period by the hegemonic curricular practices in colleges and universities, denying space for developing dialogues with the local languages and cultures and posed a threat to the cultural unity and plurilingual aura of this subcontinent. The composite of sociopolitical discourses originated from the local realities is challenged by these practices which remain attached with western identity and singleness. English which remained in the core of these practices itself played the role of a discourse and actively worked to shape the conditions of knowledge. The same intention of the Pakistani rulers was exposed while they planned to impose Urdu upon the people of East Pakistan, now Bangladeshis in 1952 as a state language. This deliberate disposition marked by the legacy of the British colonizers instigated them to displace the people of this land from the formation-process of individual nationhood and cultural nationalism. However, at present India has developed a new form of English and is very potently throwing a challenge against the hegemony of the former colonizers' English. A new trend of developing a kind of English with the accent of Bangla language is found now in different social media like Facebook, instagram, whatsapp, SMS of cell phone and many more like these. Inclusion of local texts in English into the university-curricula may be seen as an attempt to challenge the omnipotence of the colonial texts of colonial language. Also, language planning in many postcolonial countries is now safeguarding their indigenous languages from being marginalized due to the incursion of English. Even assimilation of English in the framework of local languages is generating englishes through pidginization and creolization and potently offering a counter-discourse against the hegemony of English.

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