



# Impact of Mental Colonisation: A Select Study of Literary Works from the De-colonised Nations

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## Abstract

The impact of the British colonisation is a massive one in world history. Many scholars prefer to call it imperialism over colonisation as its damages are huge. Though the British colonised in the disguise of civilising the world, they indulged in uncivilised activity. They colonised the colonies both physically and mentally. As physical colonisation alone was not sufficient for them to have the colonised under control for a longer time duration, simultaneously they colonised them mentally too. For such act, they used language, culture and religion as tools to detach the colonised from their language, culture and religion. The present paper tries to analyse the role of English language in colonising the colonised mentally. The hypothesis of the paper is to project the condition of the decolonised countries with respect to the usage of the English language over their mother tongue. The paper compares some of the literary works of the indigenous and postcolonial writers to present the impact of coloniser's language in the decolonised world.

**Key Words:** colonization, imperialism, English language, discourse

Most of the time in the history of the world, power is attained through the domination of the subalterns. Economy and power lead dominant people to construct 'truth' about the 'other'. Consequently one group is in power by suppressing and humiliating the other group. It is applicable to any kind of discrimination as the power structure is created this way. One such power structure that changed the world is colonisation. Though many types of colonisation happened in the past, a particular colonisation had/has created great impact upon the most part of the world for a longer period: It is the European colonisation that conquered 2/3 of the world for many centuries. Some historians prefer to use the term 'imperialism' than 'colonisation' as its impact was/is very cruel. The paper tries to focus on the process of British colonisation, especially its mission in spreading English language in the colonies and the present position of English language in the decolonized countries. Though Britain started its exploration and expansion later than the other European nations, it emerged as the great imperialist nation.

Britain followed a strategy to colonise the desired lands. It understood well that colonising a country merely with physical force will not be enough, as it had less population when compared with the population of the colonised countries. Thus it decided to colonise the nations mentally; it used various strategies like creating discourses among the colonised by enabling them to accept the coloniser as superior. Moreover the British came in the disguise of civilising the uncivilised world. They brainwashed the colonised people to accept themselves as uncivilised and brutal and the British as civilized and gentle. McLeod in *Beginning Postcolonialism*, elaborates this idea that the British Empire did not rule by military and physical force alone, but it made the colonised to see their world in a particular way, that is to look negatively upon their people, their culture and themselves. It is considered as an effective way of disempowering people which became possible through English education and English language. One of the agents of the British Empire states,

I have conversed both here and at home with men distinguished by their proficiency in the Eastern tongues... I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. Thus, English education was imposed upon the Indians. In Africa and Pacific Islands, missionaries were instrumental in starting English education for the native people. Christian missionaries had opened many elementary and secondary schools in Africa between 1820-1881. Fifty years after Macaulay's Minute, Sir Richard Temple, the former Governor of Bombay stated regarding the importance of English education to the natives as, "English or Western education has greatly elevated the character of natives who have come within its influence" (quoted in Boehmer: 49).

The purpose of a language is not only to communicate but it is also a tool to maintain and to protect a nation's cultural identity. Removing a language would be sufficient to break a country's identity and cultural practice.

Language is the primary mode of comprehending, contextualising and communicating reality: without it one can neither name nor distinguish what one perceives. ...thoughts are as much shaped and expressed by language as that language is shaped by its specific context. The lives of the people who speak it, the terrain which they inhabit, their cultural, social and religious practices, their economic activities – all contribute to the development of a language (Sarbani Chowdhury: XV)

By understanding this, the British implemented English language and literature to have control over the colonised lands. By hiding this fact they projected a reason for forcing the colonised to learn English language as the practical impossibility of learning all the colonised nations' languages. Bill Ashcroft in *The Empires Write Back* highlights the connection between the growth of the empire and the study of English. The colonisers by controlling the language of the colonised countries enslaved their minds to accept the colonisers' language and education as the standard one and the other languages as "impure" (7). They created an ideology that English as the only language, which works as a vehicle to convey 'truth', 'order' and 'reality'.

The British imperialists imposed English language upon the colonised in various ways. In the case of settled colonies they forbade the indigenous people to communicate their language and to follow their culture.

In order to break their culture and tradition, the younger generations were forcefully separated from their families and placed in English residential schools in Canada and Australia. In Australia that particular generation is still known as stolen generation. In the case of the African slaves and indentured labours, they were made to live in groups of various tribal communities. “Every owner of slaves shall, wherever possible, ensure that his slaves belong to as many ethno linguistic groups as possible. If they cannot speak to each other, they cannot then foment rebellion and revolution” (Philip: 30). When the whites find the slaves/indigenous children communicating in their native languages, they punished them severely. “Every slave caught speaking his native language shall be severely punished. Where necessary, removal of the tongue is recommended. The offending organ, when removed, should be hung on high in a central place, so that all may see and tremble” (Philip: 32). As English language was imposed with severity, it has removed other languages from usage. The British wanted to impose English education to the colonisers in order to fill clerical level jobs. As Bhabha pointed out the British wanted the colonised to mimic them. Thus even after de- colonisation people from the formerly colonised nations prefer to mimic the White. Still in most of the decolonised nations English language and culture is celebrated over their mother tongues and cultures. The present paper attempts to read literary works from the decolonised nations to project the issue of identity due to the spread of English language and culture. It implies the in-between position in the usage of English language in the decolonised countries in a comparative way.

The first writer selected for the study is Rita Joe, a Native Indian (Mi'kmaq) from Nova Scotia, Canada. As she became an orphan in her young age, she was sent to a residential school where she was forbidden to use her mother tongue and forced to speak in English. Later when she came out of the school she mingled with her tribes and learnt her language and culture. Her poems are filled with the facts about the reservation schools and project the pain of Native people in a white world.

Rita Joe's poem “I Lost My Talk” is a best example to project the pain of indigenous people. This is a very powerful poem that presents the power of snatching one's culture and identity through forbidding one's own language and by imposing a foreign language. The poet states that in the residential school she lost her talk as her talk was ‘taken away’ by the Whites (that is she was forbidden to talk in her language). The language that was imposed on her became her ‘way of thinking’. As her mother tongue was snatched from her she could ‘speak, think and create’ like the white. Due to the abuses she experienced in the residential school, the education what she had gained has become ‘scrambled balled’. Now she knows both ways to talk and she requests the imperials to give her an opportunity to explain her culture and language to the white. The poem ends in a soft and firm tone where she asks the oppressors to give her a chance to find her talk. The poem ends as, “Your way is more powerful. / So gently I offer my hand and ask, / Let me find my talk/ So I can teach you about me.” Through this short and strong poem Rita Joe presents the loss of orature, language, culture and identity of the indigenous people in the residential schools in Canada.

The second writer selected for study is Marlene Nourbese Philip, Afro- Caribbean, now Caribbean-Canadian writer known for her works on the theme of Feminism and Postcolonialism. Her works focuses on the power of language and how a language could decide one's identity. According to her the possibility of

using a foreign language can distance oneself from identity and culture. She believes neither in using a Caribbean dialect nor Standard English language but prefers to destroy and deconstruct the English language through her writings. She uses “demotic variant of English” (“The Absence” 18). She calls English as her father tongue which replaced her mother tongue. She questions her condition thus,

How does one write from the perspective of one who has ‘mastered’ a foreign language, yet has never had a mother tongue; one whose father tongue is an English fashioned to exclude, deride and deny the essence of one’s be-ing? ... How does the poet work a language engorged on her many silences? How does she break that silence that is one yet many? Should she? Can she fashion a language that uses silence as a first principle? (120).

Marlene finds the father tongue, English as anguish. Her famous work *She Tries Her Tongue* is a deconstructive way of projecting English as a destroyer of her identity which was used by the colonisers as a tool to separate the Afro- Caribbean from their African heritage. “My father tongue/ is a foreign lan lan lang language/ l/anguish/ anguish/ a foreign anguish/ is english—(43-49)”. She believes that the imposed English language is like a wall which restricted the usage of the mother tongue. “...licks/ into nothing/ the prison of these walled tongues/ speaks this/ .... / holy-white-father-in-heaven this/ ai! ai! tongue that wraps squeezes the mind round and around”. She believes that English language shrinks her imagination as her tongue ‘wraps and squeezes’ her imagination ‘round and around’. According to her, English language is insufficient to express what she feels.

The third writer to discuss is Sujatha Bhatt, an Indo-American. Bhatt uses poetry as a medium to convey her ideas of culture and language. Though she is a diaspora writer, she projects the condition of contemporary India. In the decolonised countries though English is the second official language, its role is massive; English is perceived as knowledge than as skill. The select poems talk about Bhatt’s anger towards love for English language in India and her helpless condition in using English language. Bhatt in “A Different History” questions Indians craze towards English language. The first part of the poem discusses Indian culture and practices towards books. The second part questions how the language of the oppressor’s, which has tortured and killed many of the natives, becomes the most admired language. After independence instead of forgetting the language, the decolonized people have started to love that language. By raising such questions, she is trying to enable the people to realize that they are worshipping the language of their enemies.

Through the lines “And how does it happen/ that after the torture/ after the soul has been cropped/ with a long scythe swooping out/” she tries to portray the tortures people faced under their oppression. Instead of revenging the conqueror, the grandchildren of the oppressed have started to love the conqueror’s language. Here the history is a different one, where people love their enemies’ language. Bhatt fears that in future due to the love for English people may forget their mother tongue.

In “Search for My Tongue” Bhatt expresses her fear about losing her identity as a Gujarati-speaking Indian. She presents herself as having two tongues in her mouth: the mother tongue and a foreign tongue. When

she stays in a place where she has to depend upon a foreign language, the writer realizes that she has lost her tongue. The need to use the foreign tongue often results in the death of her mother tongue. She

believes that her mother tongue

“rot and die in ...mouth

Until ... had to spit it out.”

The tongue which is believed as dead comes alive at night in her dream. Now it occupies the centre by pushing the foreign tongue aside. She concludes the poem with a hope that even in such a condition her mother tongue grows and blossoms.

The fourth poet is R.S Thomson from Welsh. His works are noted for his dislike of Anglicisation; both English language and culture. He criticised the British who imposed their language and power in Welsh. His Poem “The Old Language” presents the imposition of English language upon them and the condition of not being able to return/retrieve of the past. The poem begins by presenting the imposition of English on the Welsh community,

“England, what have you done to make the speech  
My fathers used a stranger to my lips,  
An offence to the ear, a shackle on the tongue  
That would fit new thoughts to an abiding tune?  
Answer me now”

The poet questions how could they get away from such imposition presents the reality of the situation. Once a community is distanced from its native language, it results in creating distance in cultural practices which could be understand from his concluding lines of the poem,

“When spring wakens the hearts  
Of the young children to sing,  
what song shall be theirs?”

The above discussed poems are from each category of colonisation: indigenous, Slaves, colonised. They all experienced almost the same kind of powerful imposition of a foreign culture and language and it's never ending powerful condition even in the de-colonised condition. The analysed poets give the turmoil they undergo in their day today life, feel of rootlessness, loss of culture and especially their identity.

Presently from the decolonised countries one could find different viewpoints with regard to the usage of English language. Some writers from the decolonised countries believe that removing English completely is impossible and at the same time one could appropriate English language. Writers like Raja Rao and Chinua Achebe prefer to use English in appropriate format, on the other hand writers like Ngugi wa Thiongo, Bhalchandra Nemade and many prefer to write in their mother tongue than in English. Ngugi believes that education in mother tongue will enable the children to think critically which also restricts colonial alienation

which he compares with headless body or body less head. The paper concludes that from the decolonised condition slowly the writers project the pain of using a foreign language which in a way destroys their mother tongue. Their question to the dominant culture and their language and the realisation of loss of culture and identity creates a change in the society. Many want to take the side of Caliban, that is learning the master's language and with its help to scold them. From the reading it is clear that the select writers have used a foreign tongue to scold their masters and to project the atrocities they had done to the innocent people with a disguise of civilising them. In a way they use it to give back the historical blunders done by the whites.

