

Multicultural Assimilation: A Linguistic Study of Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies and Wole Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman

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Abstract

The paper attempts to linguistically analyse the two texts: Amitav Ghosh's Sea Of Poppies and Wole Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman. Both the texts are important landmarks in postcolonial literature. They are located in two different continents: India and Africa, but what united them is the honesty and loyalty of the writers to their indigenous cultures. Language plays a crucial role in cultural domination which becomes more important with globalization. We cannot subdue the importance of English as a global language yet the threat of homogenization cannot be ignored. The paper endeavors to understand the linguistic aspects of both the texts with special reference to pidgin language and the use of the same by the characters in the text. The texts amalgamate organically the language with the culture and use it to express traditions, situations and circumstances which are local. The paper delves in the role of language in creating/ demolishing hegemony.

Keywords: Multicultural, language, pidgin, hegemony

Amitav Ghosh and Wole Soyinka show a remarkable spirit in maintaining the perfect harmony while expressing their culture in a language which is foreign. The paper endeavors to understand the linguistic aspects of both the texts with special reference to pidgin language and the use of the same by the characters in the text. The texts amalgamate organically the language with the culture and use it to express traditions, situations and circumstances which are local. It has been achieved with the hybrid use of language known as pidgin which refers to the simplified means of communication that develops between two groups which do not have a common language. The paper delves in the role of language in creating/ demolishing hegemony.

Culture is a wide and a difficult concept to define or describe. It would be easier to say that it refers to 'the way of life'. It is an umbrella phrase that encompasses our language, history, festivals and religion. Culture is defined by Watson as, "a common language, a shared history, a shared set of religious beliefs and moral values, and a shared geographical origin, all of which taken together define a sense of belonging to a specific group" (1). Though modern anthropology challenges the idea of different cultures, the desire of men to prove themselves superior has kept this notion alive. The idea of 'multicultural' society has been in vogue as the term culture is a

more positive term than “multiracial” or “multiethnic”. The word “multiculturalism” states not only the differences but also recognizes and acknowledges the equality and value of all cultures. (Harvey 70). There are certain governments over the years who have considered it a threat to nationalism, but they have failed to understand that culture itself refers to the continuous adaptation of people to the past and the present. **Multiculturalism** plays a crucial role in modern times as it helps us to understand the different elements of post colonial nations struggling with issues like ethnicity, class, religion and identity.

Language in any society plays a vital role, as a deeper analysis of it shows that it reflects the beliefs of the society. The set of people who control language, consciously or unconsciously, exercise considerable power over people deprived of language and the political process, at a higher level. Within the structure of any language are embedded the rudiments of discrimination. It does maintain negatives beliefs and serves to isolate people with differences. It plays a crucial role in undermining community integration outcomes, like employment, housing, education and others. Language is intrinsic to the expression of any culture. As a means of communicating values, beliefs and customs, it has an important social function and fosters feelings of group identity and solidarity. It is the means by which culture and its traditions and shared values may be conveyed and preserved.

Hegemony, in common parlance refers to domination or rule, in recent international scenario this word is often used to connote the power exerted by a stronger nation on a weaker nation. It was Gramsci who extended the concept of “hegemony” to culture and ideology. The word owes its origin to the Greek word *egemonia*, whose which means "leader, ruler, often in the sense of a state other than his own"ⁱ. In due course of time, it was used to denote "political predominance, usually of one state over another" (Williams 144). It did acquire a communist flavor during the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, where it was more of a proletariat and bourgeois struggle. Italian Communist thinker, activist, and political leader Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) is perhaps the theorist most closely associated with the concept of hegemony. He uses "hegemony" to encompass not only the necessary condition for a successful overthrow of the bourgeoisie by the proletariat and its allies, but also the structures of bourgeois power in late 19th- and early 20th-century Western European states. The reality and irony is that “hegemony” becomes so much a part of our culture and society that we accept it without any realization as a part of our very being, which thus is very dangerous in itself. It was Raymond William who pointed out that “tradition” never really refers to the legacy of the past but has always been shaped up, which is a part of the cultural hegemony, and is shaped up in a selective tradition. Hegemony is not an ideology or a set of ideas but rather something we learn to live with. Language plays a paramount role in developing, elaborating and transmitting culture, enabling us to store meanings and facilitate communication.

A major way to break the hegemony of language is **Pidgin**. Pidgins are basically contact languages which evolve between people who speak different languages need to interact for work or trade. Their origin can be traced when slaves were shipped from West Coast of Africa to colonies. A pidgin becomes a creole when it is learned as a first language by a new generation.

Creole is a fully functional language while pidgin is not. Pidgins are more like the contact vernaculars. Both the texts selected for the study have the use of Pidgin.

Amitav Ghosh's *Sea Of Poppies* is an example of how the hegemony of language can be broken, partially. The novel set in eighteenth century deals with a wide gamut of characters which range from lascars, English, French, upper caste to low caste people. Thus it provides the writer the opportunity to thus add a new dimension to the novel by exploring vivid possibilities of different languages. Ghosh's use of language demonstrates the way language can unite or divide people, and confuse or clarify situations. The novel may be a little difficult to read for someone not acquainted with the languages as it is filled with strange words, Pidgin English, and unusual sentence structure. There are numerous instances where Amitav Ghosh uses regional languages like in the songs of Deeti:

Kaise kate ab
Biraha ki ratiya?

How will it pass
This night of parting? (398)

In this context, some of the most entertaining passages are the conversations between Mrs Burnham, the wife of a shipping merchant, and an orphan named Paulette, who has been living under her care in their Calcutta mansion. In Mrs Burnham's manner of talking, we get the full measure of how deeply the local language has altered the speech patterns of the Europeans who have been living here for years or decades. She says things like "Don't you samjo, Paulette?" and "Where have you been chupowing yourself? I've been looking everywhere for you." On one occasion she asks Paulette if "little chinties" had got into her clothes. On another, explaining that Paulette is lucky to have received a proposal of marriage from a judge, she says, "I can tell you, dear, there's a paltan of mems who'd give their last anna to be in your jooties...you're lucky to have a judge in your sights and you mustn't let your bunduk waver." The language of lascars is also hybrid and a mix of languages derived from English, Malay, Hindustani, Chinese and Malayalam. (Ghosh 56)

Ghosh simply presents their speech as it is, without italicizing the Indian bits or providing a glossary at the end. Further, he spells the local words not as an Indian reader would recognize them but to reflect the European accents with which they are spoken. The result is that even for a reader who knows the words and their meanings, some of these passages require constant interpretation or extrapolation. Thus, it might be difficult to comprehend the text at certain points, yet by doing so he makes an attempt to break the hegemony of English.

Death and the King's Horseman

The play deals with the life of Elesin, the horseman of the chief of the tribe. In Yoruba tradition, the horseman is supposed to commit a ritual suicide after the death of the chief. The play opens when Elesin is about to perform the ritual. He is stopped by the British officer who considers it inhuman. Elesin's son, Orlunde has been sent by the same officer to London in order to pursue medicine. Orlunde returns and is ashamed by the fact that his father has failed to perform the duty entrusted in him by his tribe. Elesin's failure is partially due to the British interference but majorly due to his own doubts. His son commits the suicide in order to restore the balance of the universe. There are other important characters in the play Jane Pilkings who is unable to understand the African traditions and uses her British mindset to judge them. The play highlights on the tragedy which ensues when we fail to understand each other's culture. The inability to understand with the hastiness to judge leads to clashes. The play is not about human sacrifice but the way people view life and death. The play also has a problematic idea that English as a language is used to convey the thoughts that are alien to them. In the works of Soyinka, language has emerged as a 'battleground for the culture'. This battleground has metaphor from Yoruba religion, Nigerian Pidgin and British English. They merge to create linguistic scenery which is rich with all colors. Soyinka has been criticized for the use of foreign language to express indigenous ideas. He has been targeted for ditching their own culture by using the language which has been instrumental in exploiting them. He has himself confessed Soyinka explains that upon the initial reading of his work, his university professor at Leeds questioned the "sophisticated" style of speech of the characters. In response, Soyinka explained, "Yes, they do speak in such 'sophisticated' terms, they do conceptualize and give verbal expression to the resulting concepts, but – they engage in this routine exercise in their own *language*" (Golnar 174).

[Soyinka] has mastered the power of language to create a reality, and not merely to reflect reality. But this mastery of spoken language is necessarily reinforced by mastery of a second language of music, and a third of the dance. (161)

Amusa speaks what we may classify as pidgin language. Strangely, though the other native people speak flawless English, he struggles to achieve that end. The play thus focuses on the issue of clash of cultures, (though the writer denies it) and language plays a crucial role in it.

English has emerged as the language of international trade and commerce and hence other languages have started to fear its dominance. Cultural and linguistic diversity is a feature of most nations today as people from different groups live together as a consequence of historical events and human migrations. Within multilingual societies, the maintenance of the languages of the various ethnic and cultural groups is critical for the preservation of cultural heritage and identity. The loss of language means a terrible loss of culture and identity. In many societies throughout history, the suppression of the languages of minority groups has been used as a deliberate policy in order to suppress those minority cultures. As a result of this process a large number of the world's languages have been lost. These processes were aided by colonization and migration. It has been estimated that approximately 10,000 spoken languages have existed. Today, only about

6,000 languages are still spoken and many of these are not being taught to children. More than half of these languages are unlikely to survive the next century. (Davis 62)

These are certain measures through which the tyranny and hegemony of language can be shaken, if not completely shattered. Each nation and society should promote bilingualism as a measure to combat this cultural menace. There are countries in which more than one language is spoken and most of these countries have more than one culture. For example Canada has the English-speaking and French-speaking culture, though there are some conflict between English-speaking cultures and French-speaking culture due to the dominance of the English-speaking culture. In Belgium also, there are two types of speakers one is Flemish-speakers and second is French-speakers. Similarly in Spain there are two cultures one is Basque-speaking and the second is Spanish-speaking.

English has emerged as the language of international business community and hence has an undisputed place in world economy and business culture. The importance of this language cannot be underestimated, but to allow it to crush regional languages which make our culture is unjustified. The most important of the measures is to encourage and respect our languages and give them their due. It becomes important also because with our languages our culture is intertwined. A greater understanding and acceptance of other language would play a greater role in acceptance of other cultures and thereby promote tolerance. In the present scenario, with increasing impatience and violence, it would play an important role in promoting peace.

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