

The Disaster of Losing the Only Son to an Alien Culture: A Study of the Short Story “The Son” by Mahashewta Devi

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Abstract

What is there in a language? Is it other than a medium of our expression? This paper, through an analysis of Mahashewta Devi’s short story “The Son” argues that a language can significantly change the mental universe of a human being. Giving a Marxist analysis of Language and referring to *Decolonizing the Mind* by Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, this article points out that English medium school is the root of disaster in the context of the text. A different language brings out the differences in values and ethics. This new language (English in this text) which has a low context culture destabilizes the family values in our culture because this alien language is not capable to effectively cope up with our native context.

Key Words: Language, English Medium, The Son, Culture.

I

“There is no story which is not true.” This line from Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* gives us an opportunity to see every culture from a more open attitude. Anthropological concept of “cultural relativism” is also very much appropriate in this context. When one culture starts dominating others, there must be subsequent clashes. In Mahashweta Devi’s “The Son” English language becomes the reason of the downfall of the native cultural values and ethics because it has established itself as a powerful weapon to colonize the mental universe of the Indian sub-continental people. As there has been an inevitable ambivalence in the whole process of colonization, the native people have somehow unconsciously been made convinced of the superiority of this English language. As a result, Shuvo’s parents sent him to the English medium school hoping that their son would be a “babu” who would become the best of their locality after

getting the education from an alien culture. This paper interprets these issues by arguing that the results of such ambivalence and decisions are disastrous.

In decolonizing the mind, Ngugi Gives remarkable emphasis on African languages-Gikuyu, Swahili etc. - while criticizing Achebe. In the chapter “The Language of African Literature” he refers a speech entitled ‘The African Writer and the English Language’ by Achebe “is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else’s? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling. But for me there is no other choice. I have been given the language and I intend to use it.”(Ngugi 7) With this and also, referring to the 1962 conference of ‘African Writers of English expression,’ which recognized the acceptance of the ‘fatalistic logic of the unassailable position of English in our literature,’ he asserts that “it is the final triumph of a system of domination when the dominated start singing its virtues.

Ngugi presents his life’s story where he used to speak Gikuyu inside and outside home. There were stories in Gikuyu. The language, through image and symbols, gave them a view of the world. The language of their evening teach-ins, and the language of their immediate community and the language of their work in the fields were one.

But the harmony was broken when the colonial school was established. The language of their education was no longer the language of their culture. Thus language and literature were taking them further and further from themselves to other selves, from their world to another world.

Language is a carrier of culture and a means of communication. Language as communication has three aspects or elements. There is first what Karl Marx once called the language of real life. The second is speech and the third is written signs. Nagugi writes “In such a society there is broad harmony for a child between the three aspects of language as communication.” (14)

Communication between human beings is also the basis and process of evolving culture. Language as culture as Ngugi says is the collective memory bank of a people’s experience in history. Language as culture has three aspects: one is that culture is a product of history which it in turn reflects, the second is the image forming agent in the mind of the child. Written literature and orature are the main means by which a particular language transmits the images of the world contained in the culture it carries.

“ Language carries culture , and culture carries , particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our places in the world” (Ngugi 16)

What impact the colonial education brought in the mind of the children? Ngugi asks. “The real aim of colonialism was to control the entire realm of the language of the real life.” (Nagugi 16) The most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonized through culture. The colonialism deliberately undervalued the people’s culture, their art, dances, religions, history, geography, education, orature and literature and the conscious elevation of the

language of the colonizer. Imposing a foreign language and suppressing the native languages as spoken and written, is the way to break the harmony that existed between the child and the three aspects of language. “This resulted in the disassociation of the sensibility of that child from his natural and social environment, what we might call colonial alienation.” (Ngugi 17)

II

The story is about Nirja and Rampati’s son Shuvo who undergoes a kind of metamorphosis after being admitted into an English medium school. Shuvo gets married to Ratna which is termed as ‘marriage for convenience.’ The parents understand that there is a change in the behavior of Shuvo and now they recount the past when they were proud of Shuvo because he was admitted in the best English medium school. They had dreams of a better future with Shuvo. However, things started to change when Shuvo started mistreating his parents’ emotion and cultural sentiment. Finally, Shuvo and Ratna go into their new flat with their son leaving the blind Rampati and broken Nirja at their old home with a dark future.

At the beginning of the story, we see that something is already wrong. “ I am working hard at outside. Why can’t she manage these little household things?” Ratna says while talking about keeping a maid at home. Ratna’s friends also give a hint of future frustrations in the family “ Overall, is it possible to live with father and mother in law at the same house ?” Nirja understands everything but she must remain silent. “Nirja can hear everything; understand all but she is bound to bear the tragedy.” “Dumb, Nirja has been dumb for a long time. Shuvo did not wait for Nirja to find out a bride for him. He married a wage earning girl seeing a circular in the local newspaper.”

The story now recounts the family’s glorious past when they sent Shuvo in an English medium school although Rampati did not have the luxury to spend a large amount of money on his son. Everybody praised Shovo because he could speak English fluently. Rampati said “ He will not be a poet like his father. He has to be someone else.” “When Shuvo will stand, I will have my leave” said emotional Rampati. “ But Shuvo was becoming somewhat unfamiliar to them” says the writer while explaining that Shuvo did not study Bangla texts and he did not have any interest in his father’s poetry. Shuvo only thought of leaving the bond as soon as possible.

Shuvo did not even touch his father’s books .When Shuvo heard that his father was planning to print another new book , he said “ You can print it out but I have no sympathy for those things from where you would earn no money and fame’. Rampati was hurt. Nirja should have understood their future form this incident. Shovo and his parents are already living in two worlds. “ Today, it seems that if Shuvo studied in a local Bangla school,worked as simply as his father did and married a farmer’s daughter, things could have been better than this.

“ Let us make a deposit in the bank in our name” Rampati says while keeping his hand over the head of Nirja “ if I leave, it will be good for you and if you leave, it would be beneficial for me.’ “The son who does not even feel the sentiment of his father..... I am yours and you are

mine and nothing else. Shuvo....Shuvo....” Rampati becomes frustrated while calling his only son’s name.

Now, Shuvo and Ranta prepare to leave for their new flat and Shuvo says to his mother “ you will go there sometimes and I will certainly come to you.” Nirja stares at her only son’s who was one in the hundreds . This is the most devastating moments for the parents when they face the thought of any separation between their son and them. Rampati consoles Nirja saying that when he became blind and useless, they had to accept that too. “ Whatever is to happen, will happen,” “ they were not with us when they were within us” says Rampati. At the end Shuvo and Ranta enters into their new flat with an uncertain and dark future while shuvo says “we will of course make our son educated beyond our ability.” Even in Shuvo, there is a sign of frustration because he knows that the similar things will happen to him very soon.

It is necessary to understand that one’s mother tongue carries one’s own culture and history. A foreign language intrusion can destroy the mental world of the children which can in turn fights back to kill one’s native emotional being. In “ The Son” Shuvo’s entrance in the English Medium school marks the gradual breakdown of his family and his culture. I would like to finish the paper by quoting J.M Coetzee’s *Life and Times of Michael K*’s few lines “There must be men to stay behind and keep gardening alive, or at least the idea of gardening; because once the cord was broken, the earth would grow hard and forget her children. That was why.” (Coetzee 1: 109).

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