IJRAR.ORG E-ISSN: 2348-1269, P-ISSN: 2349-5138

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH AND ANALYTICAL REVIEWS (IJRAR) | IJRAR.ORG

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Colonial Echoes: The Emergence and Development of Commonwealth Literatures

AUTHOR MITALI MISHRA

(Associate Professor, Department of English, Lady Shri Ram College, University of Delhi- 110024)

Abstract

This paper explores the origin and evolution of the term "Commonwealth literature," tracing its roots to the postcolonial context and the implications for cultural identity. Initially coined in the mid-20th century, the term encapsulates the diverse literary expressions emerging from former British colonies. The analysis examines the politics surrounding the use of English in postcolonial nations, focusing on how language serves as a tool of both empowerment and oppression. Drawing on the theories of Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, and Aijaz Ahmad, the paper delves into the complex interplay of colonial legacy, cultural hybridity, and resistance. Furthermore, it critiques Thomas Macaulay's influential minutes on Indian education, highlighting the ideological foundations of English as a language of power. By situating these discussions within the broader framework of postcolonial discourse, the research illuminates the ongoing tensions and negotiations inherent in Commonwealth literature and its role in shaping national and global identities.

Keywords

Commonwealth Literature, Postcolonial, English Language, Cultural Identity, Colonial Legacy

Introduction

The English language holds a unique position in postcolonial societies, particularly in countries like India, where it is intertwined with the legacies of colonialism. This paper argues that English functions not merely as a tool for communication but also as a significant marker of identity, power, and social stratification. The dual nature of English as a medium of empowerment for some and a vehicle of marginalisation for others necessitates a critical examination of its role in shaping postcolonial politics and culture. In present-day India, English occupies a complex sociolinguistic landscape. It serves as a lingua franca in a country characterised by linguistic diversity, enabling communication across various ethnic and regional groups. However, this functional role comes with significant socio-political implications. English proficiency is often equated with educational and economic opportunity, creating a divide between those who have access to English education and those who do not. This divide reflects broader socio-economic disparities, reinforcing existing hierarchies and perpetuating inequalities.

The politics of English language education in India is particularly contentious. The preference for English-medium instruction in schools and universities has led to a proliferation of private English language institutions, often at the expense of regional languages. This trend raises questions about cultural identity and the erosion of local languages. Advocates for English argue that it is essential for global competitiveness and upward mobility, while critics contend that this focus undermines the value of indigenous languages and contributes to cultural homogenization. Despite its hegemonic status, English is met with ambivalence and resistance in various sectors of Indian society. Many view English as a symbol of colonial oppression, leading to movements advocating for the promotion of regional languages. In literature, media, and grassroots activism, there is a growing call for linguistic pluralism that recognizes and values the diverse linguistic

heritage of India. This resistance highlights a broader struggle for cultural autonomy and the reclamation of indigenous identities in the face of globalizing forces. As English continues to play a pivotal role in shaping social and political landscapes, it is imperative to critically engage with its implications. Acknowledging the complexities surrounding English can pave the way for more equitable language policies that honour the rich linguistic diversity of India. Ultimately, the challenge lies in navigating the dualities of English as both a tool of empowerment and a remnant of colonial dominance, fostering a more inclusive discourse that embraces all languages as vital to India's identity.

Macaulay's *Minutes on Indian Education*

The introduction of English in India can be traced back to the British colonial era, when it was employed as a tool for administration and governance. This colonial imposition created a linguistic hierarchy, positioning English as the language of the elite while relegating indigenous languages to subordinate statuses. Post-independence, English retained its prominence, becoming a key language in education, governance, and business. Macaulay's *Minutes on Indian Education*[1], presented in 1835, marked a pivotal moment in the establishment of English education in India, fundamentally altering the linguistic and cultural landscape of the subcontinent. Thomas Babington Macaulay argued for the promotion of English as the medium of instruction, emphasizing that it would facilitate access to Western knowledge and create a class of educated Indians who could serve as intermediaries between the British colonial administration and the indigenous population. This policy was implemented against the backdrop of earlier educational initiatives, such as the Sanskrit College established in Calcutta in 1824, which focused primarily on traditional Indian languages and texts. Macaulay's advocacy led to the establishment of English as the primary language of higher education and administration, effectively sidelining regional languages and promoting a Westernized elite. By the mid-19th century, institutions such as the University of Calcutta (established in 1857) further entrenched English as a dominant language in academia. Macaulay's Minutes not only shaped educational policies but also laid the groundwork for ongoing debates about language, identity, and power in postcolonial India. Gauri Vishwanathan[2] correctly states that there exists a clear relation "between the institutionalisation of English in India and the exercise of colonial power, between the processes of curricular selection and the impulse to dominate and control (Vishwanathan 3).

Commonwealth Literature

Academic curricula are influenced by political, economic and social factors and this is exemplified in the formulation of Commonwealth Literature as an area of study. In 1947, India and Pakistan gained independence, Nigeria in 1960, Kenya in 1963, and the West Indian Federation in 1960. Dennis Walder[3] suggested that the "nationalist strivings" during decolonisation produced literature which had an "international impact" (Walder 1998, 59-60). William Walsh[4] was appointed as the first Chair of Commonwealth Literature at the University of Leeds. He looked at Indian, Caribbean, African and Canadian authors and admitted that these writers may see themselves as emerging from a "historical tradition" and "national context" and not as members of an "amorphous Commonwealth" (Walsh 1970,10). Critiquing the term, Salman Rushdie[5] wrote an essay titled "Commonwealth Literature Does Not Exist". He wrote, "South Africa and Pakistan, for instance, are not members of the Commonwealth, but their authors apparently belong to its literature. On the other hand, England, which, as far as I'm aware, has not been expelled from the Commonwealth quite yet, has been excluded from its literary manifestation" (Rushdie 62).

In *Decolonizing the Mind*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o[6] explores the profound impact of colonialism on language, culture, and identity, arguing that language serves as a vital vehicle for cultural expression and individual identity. He critiques cultural imperialism, which perpetuates colonial power structures while devaluing indigenous traditions and narratives. Central to his argument is the role of literature as a form of resistance against colonial narratives; Ngũgĩ advocates for writing in native languages to reclaim cultural heritage and amplify authentic voices. Furthermore, he examines the colonial education systems that indoctrinate rather than empower, resulting in internalised oppression among colonised populations. Ultimately, Ngũgĩ calls for a concerted effort to decolonise minds by revitalising indigenous languages and narratives, fostering cultural pride and agency in the face of historical subjugation. "Every language has two aspects. One aspect is its role as an agent that enables us to communicate with one another in our struggle to find the means for survival. The other is its role as the carrier of the history and the culture built into the process of that communication over time. In my book *Decolonizing the Mind*, I have described memory as the collective memory bank of the people" (qtd. in Mohanram and Rajan 3-4)[7].

As more countries became decolonised in the middle of the last century, "colonial power and cultural patterns of older regimes collided and colluded with indigenous traditions, myths, and mores to produce a new kind of work, loosely called the postcolonial text" (Mohanram and Rajan 4)[8]. Often the texts were shaped by nationalistic creativity covering a wide spectrum from aggressive postures to romanticised nationalisms, exploring the displaced or exiled subjects. The use of English in these texts has been traditionally seen as either different and unique reflecting its multicultural hybridity or dismissed in Western canon as inferior. In the review of Indian poetry in the *Encyclopedia of Postcolonial Literatures*, CN Srinath[9] says the Indian poets have an "exaggerated interest in language itself" and instead suggests they should "remember that the English language is only a gate leading to the reality beyond, and that it ought not to be the Indian poet's prime preoccupation" (1250-1251).

In the 1950s, the term "Commonwealth" emerged as a descriptive, non-political designation for "literature in English from countries and colonies that had historical ties to Great Britain" (Macleod, 2003)[10]. In 1957, a conference on Commonwealth Literature was held in Leeds, which coincided with the establishment of a new section, Section XII, dedicated to the study of literatures within the Commonwealth. This was followed in 1961 by a survey titled 'The Commonwealth Pen: An Introduction to the Literature of the British Commonwealth', which explored the literary outputs from these regions. Subsequently, in 1965, Oxford University Press launched the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, further institutionalizing the field of study. Norman Jeffares[11] in his inaugural address to the Commonwealth Literature Meet in the University of Leeds said that literature should not be too local or regional but try to sustain international interests. (Press). International is to be read as a euphemism for English first world of course.

Bruce King[12] in his introduction to *Literatures of the World in English* writes that there are "different national literary traditions with values and histories of their own" but "each literature is a part of world English literature, and shares in the heritage of British writing" (King 20-21). This reflects Macaulay's colonial agenda to form "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (Macaulay 249)[13]. Edmund Gosse's looked at Toru Dutts's volume of poetry with its unattractive edition. And judged it to be "a hopeless volume it seemed, with its queer type, published at Bhowanipore, printed at the Sapthikasambad press!" (qtd in Narasimhaiah 1978, xv)[14]. Once he opens the hopeless volume, Gosse is amazed at the quality of Dutt's poetry. When Rabindranath Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913, the citation stated that he had made his poetic thought expressed in his own English words a part of Western literature. Critics have interpreted this recognition as a significant breach of the barriers between Asian and European literary conventions, heralding the emergence of a "new" literature in English that operates independently of British and American influences. Notably, it is often overlooked that the work for which Tagore received the prize was a translation he had produced from the original Bengali. This oversight has led to the perception that the book was originally written in English, thus contributing to the tradition of English literature, albeit from a different cultural context. This phenomenon reflects the underlying rationale behind the term "Commonwealth," which encompasses the literature of diverse cultural nationalities under the umbrella of a shared language. The choice of language for them carried a political baggage that has been commented upon by many theorists. Let us look at a few of the important ideas below.

Central Debates

Edward Said defines Orientalism as a "style of thought based on an ontological and epistemological distinction" (95) between the Orient and the Occident. Describing the imaginary representations of the Self and the Other, Edward Said comments- "to build a conceptual framework around a notion of Us-versus-Them is, in effect, to pretend that the principal consideration is epistemological and natural—our civilization is known and accepted, theirs is different and strange—whereas the framework separating us from them is belligerent, constructed, and situational (Said 24)[15].

Homi Bhabha's[16] theory of hybridity is a central concept in postcolonial studies, emphasizing the complexity of cultural identities formed in the context of colonialism and globalization. Bhabha posits that hybridity arises from the interplay between colonizer and colonized, leading to new, mixed forms of identity that subvert traditional binaries of culture and power. This idea challenges the notion of fixed, essential identities and highlights the fluidity and ambivalence inherent in cultural exchange. In "Signs Taken for Wonder", Bhabha describes hybridity as a "partial and double force that is more than mimetic but less than symbolic, that disturbs the visibility of the colonial presence and makes the recognition of its authority problematic" (Bhabha 173). By neither focusing on the coloniser (Said) nor the colonised (Fanon)[17], Bhabha posits a relational identity. In "Narrating The Nation", Bhabha reinterprets the geographically hierarchised first and third world via the metaphor of a hybrid stage. He states that "the locality of national culture is

neither unified nor unitary in relation to itself, nor must it be seen simply as the "other" in relation to what is outside or beyond it. The boundary is Janus-faced and the problem of the outside/ inside must always be a process of hybridity, incorporating new "people" in relation to the body politic, generating other sites of meaning and, inevitably, in the process, producing unmanned sites of political antagonism and unpredictable forces for political representation" (Bhabha 4)[18].

In "Of Mimicry and Man", Bhabha introduces the concept of 'mimicry' using Foucault's postulation of gaze as power in *Discipline and Punish*. He says that the coloniser demands that the colonised subject adopt the outward forms and internalise the values of those in power. Mimicry expresses the project of civilising mission to transform the colonised culture by making it repeat the coloniser's culture. Since this operates at the ideological level and does not use brute force to dominate, mimicry constitutes for Bhabha "one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge" (Bhabha 96-97)[19]. While one element of colonial discourse envisions the colonised subject's potential for reform and approximation to reach the elevated level of the coloniser under the guiding hand of the benevolent imperialist, another element that is, in fact, essential to maintain colonial power, contradicts the push of the first element by establishing ontological difference and inferiority of the colonial subject. Thus, the subject can be "Anglicised" but not "English". At the centre of mimicry then is a destabilising "ironic compromise…the desire for a reformed, recognisable Other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha 86)[20].

However, Ajaz Ahmad[21] critiques Bhabha's concept of hybridity for its perceived lack of attention to the historical and material conditions that shape cultural interactions. Ahmad argues that Bhabha's focus on the ambivalence of cultural identity risks romanticizing hybridity, thereby overlooking the power dynamics and social inequalities that persist within these hybrid identities. He contends that Bhabha's framework can sometimes obscure the realities of oppression and resistance, reducing complex historical struggles to mere cultural negotiation. While Bhabha's theory offers valuable insights into the dynamics of cultural identity in a postcolonial context, Ahmad's critique serves as a reminder to consider the socio-political implications of hybridity, ensuring that discussions of cultural mixing do not neglect the underlying power structures and historical contexts that inform these interactions. This dialogue between Bhabha's theoretical framework and Ahmad's critique enriches our understanding of postcolonial identities and the complexities of cultural representation.

Conclusion

Ashcroft *et al* provide a summation of Commonwealth writing when they state that these writers reflect on "the way their countries are evolving" but also critique it. Their usage of English enriches it it and creates a "linguistic code, english, which has been transformed and subverted into several distinctive varieties throughout the world" and is different from the standard code, English. (Ashcroft et al 8)[22]. The evolution of Commonwealth literature reflects a tapestry of voices that both confront and negotiate the legacies of colonialism, illuminating diverse cultural identities and social realities. By examining this literature, we gain valuable insights into the complexities of post-colonial narratives and how they challenge dominant discourses. Ultimately, the enduring resonance of these texts invites ongoing dialogue and critical engagement, enriching our understanding of both historical and contemporary global contexts.

REFERENCES

1. Macaulay, Thomas B. "Minutes on Indian Education" Thomas Babington Macaulay: Selected Writings. Ed. John Clive and Thomas Pinney. Chicago University Press, 1972.
2. Vishwanathan, Gauri. Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India. Columbia University Press,1989.
3. Walder, Dennis. *Post-Colonial Literatures in English: History, Language, Theory*. Wiley, 1998.
4. Walsh, Willaim. 'Preface' *A Manifold Voice: Studies in Commonwealth Literature*. Chattoo and Windus, 1970, pp. 9-10
5. Rushdie, Salman. '"Commonwealth Literature" Does Not Exist' *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*. Penguin, 1991, pp. 61-70.
6. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (1986). Decolonising The Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature. Heinemann.
7. Mohanram R. and G. Rajan. "The Concept of English Postcoloniality." *English Postcoloniality*. Ed. Radhika Mohanram and Gita Rajan. Contributions to the Study of World Lit 66. Greenwood Press,1996, pp. 3-18.
8. Ibid 4

9. Srinath, C. N. "India (Poetry)". *Encyclopaedia of Postcolonial Literatures in English.* Ed E. Benson and L.W. Conolly. Routledge, 1994. 1247-1256.
10. https://vst.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Beginning-Postcolonialism-John-McLeod.pdf
11. Jeffares, A. Norman. 'Introduction' in John Press edited *Commonwealth Literature: Unity and Diversity in a Common Culture*. Heinemann, 1965, xi-xviii.
12. King, Bruce. Ed. *Literatures of the world in English*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974.
13. Macaulay, Thomas B. "Minutes on Indian Education" Thomas Babington Macaulay: Selected Writings. Ed. John Clive and Thomas Pinney. Chicago University Press, 1972. pp 249.
14. Narasimhaiah, C. D. 'Introduction' in *Awakened Conscience: Studies in Commonwealth Literature*. Edited by CD Narasimhaiah. Sterling, 1978, (xv-xxi)
15. Said, Edward. (1991). Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient. Penguin.
16. Bhabha, Homi K. "Signs Taken for Wonder: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside Delhi, May 1817. *"Race" Writing and Difference*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. Chicago University Press, 1986, pp.163-84.
17. Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Penguin, 1990.
18. Bhabha, Homi K. "Introduction: Narrating the Nation." *Nation and Narration*. Ed Homi K Bhabha. Routledge,1990. pp1-7.
19. Bhabha, Homi. "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse." *October*, vol. 28, 1984, pp. 125–33. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/778467.
20. Ibid
21. Ahmed, Aijaz. *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*. Verso, 1992.
22. Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffins, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures.* Routledge, 1989.