



Research Paper

## Colonial Influence on English Language and Literature: Tracing the linguistic and literary effects of British colonialism on the cultures of colonized nations.

Dr. Neha Upadhyay  
Faculty for English Language and  
communication skills  
Vikram University, Ujjain (m.p)

### Abstract

*This paper offers a fascinating exploration of the impact of British colonialism on the linguistic and literary traditions of the colonized nations. It mentions the motivations behind the colonization and the methods used to establish British dominance and how the English language was imposed upon the indigenous languages of the colonized nations. The aim of paper is also to explore the language policies enforced by the British colonial administration in education systems and its impact on the indigenous cultures and their literary traditions. There was complex relationship between language, identity, and power in the context of colonialism where language choices affected individual and collective identities in the colonized nations. The paper tries to analyze how authors from formerly colonized nations have used English to reclaim their cultural heritage and challenge colonial legacies.*

**Key words:** *colonization, linguistics, literary traditions, heritage, colonial legacies, cultural heritage, indigenous cultures*

*Received 14 July, 2024; Revised 28 July, 2024; Accepted 30 July, 2024 © The author(s) 2024.*

*Published with open access at [www.questjournals.org](http://www.questjournals.org)*

### I. Introduction

British Empire, a worldwide system of dependencies—colonies, protectorates, and other territories—that over a span of some three centuries was brought under the sovereignty of the crown of Great Britain and the administration of the British government. The policy of granting or recognizing significant degrees of self-government by dependencies, which was favored by the far-flung nature of the empire, led to the development by the 20th century of the notion of a “British Commonwealth,” comprising largely self-governing dependencies that acknowledged an increasingly symbolic British sovereignty. The term was embodied in statute in 1931. Today the Commonwealth includes former elements of the British Empire in a free association of sovereign states.

Great Britain made its first tentative efforts to establish overseas settlements in the 16th century. Maritime expansion, driven by commercial ambitions and by competition with France, accelerated in the 17th century and resulted in the establishment of settlements in North America and the West Indies. By 1670 there were British American colonies in New England, Virginia, and Maryland and settlements in the Bermudas, Honduras, Antigua, Barbados, and Nova Scotia. Jamaica was obtained by conquest in 1655, and the Hudson’s Bay Company established itself in what became northwestern Canada from the 1670s on. The first permanent British settlement on the African continent was made at James Island in the Gambia River in 1661. Slave trading had begun earlier in Sierra Leone, but that region did not become a British possession until 1787. Britain acquired the Cape of Good Hope (now in South Africa) in 1806, and the South African interior was opened up by Boer and British pioneers under British control. The East India Company began establishing trading posts in India in 1600, and the Straits Settlements became British through an extension of that company’s activities.

The Europeans colonized many territories between the 16th century and 19th century, with the main goal being to transform the territories to match their home countries. The Europeans would exert more cultural, economic, and political influence in the world through early modern colonialism. This led to the formation

of **New England** by the English and **New Spain** by the Spanish. Language played a critical role in their colonial efforts.

### **Language colonization**

In some areas, language colonization was rampant, and the colonizers forbade indigenous people from speaking their mother tongue. Those who used their mother tongue when in school were humiliated and beaten. Europeans also used their language as their administrative language in their colonies. The imperialist used this strategy to exclude native people in the colonies from power. If a person could not speak the European language, they could not access the government. Most of those who learned the language were educated elites who mostly worked with the European colonizers.

The terms language colonialism and linguistic imperialism are mainly used in reference to the European Colonialism that began in the 16th century and lasted through the 19th century. The British used language in colonization. This was achieved through building schools where English and western culture were taught. Consequently, most colonies, such as South Africa, adopted English as their national language and have continued using it. The results of language colonialism are evident, with English being the most spoken second language. Most top universities require students to know English, while most workplaces worldwide also require English.

Although language colonialism is mainly associated with European colonialism, the phenomenon has been evident throughout history. For example, Greek and Latin also spread in antiquity in the same way. When Alexander the Great defeated the Persian Empire, the Greek language spread to Egypt, Turkey, and the Middle East. Numerous Greek cities were also established in these areas. Latin also spread in a similar way. A small group of indigenous people living along the Tiber River initially spoke the language. However, the Romans wielded more political power and exerted their influence on Italy, Southern and Western Europe, and some African coastal regions.

### **Linguistic imperialism**

It refers to the imposition of a dominant language on people with a different language. One of the best-known examples is the spread of English across the world. Linguistic imperialism can be caused by different factors, including trade, immigration, and colonialism. Most of the language imposition happened during the colonial period. Many of the countries on which a new language was imposed had diverse linguistic groups. The colonial powers imposed their language on these groups and used them in governance. By influencing other communities to adopt their language, the colonial powers could shape the culture and history in these areas.

The aim of European imperialism and colonialism was to expand the economic and power base of European nations and to assert their superiority. In part, this was achieved by subjugating the local populations. In the case of what are now North America and Australia, for instance, native populations were forced off agriculturally valuable lands that were then taken over by European immigrants. In the Caribbean, native populations were also forced to provide hard physical labour for the colonisers that led to the death of millions of Amerindians. To replace these and to expand economic activities, Europeans then transported Africans as slaves to the Caribbean and the Americas, and forced them to work under horrendous conditions on (sugar, cotton, coffee, etc.) plantations. European slavery is therefore intimately linked to European colonialism and occurred as a direct consequence of the latter. The slave trade allowed European nations and the individuals directly involved in it to considerably expand their economic power but brought about the death of millions of Africans, and led to a significant diminution of the West African population and to major tension including wars between different population groups in the region (Manning 1990). For the enslaved, it meant their brutal physical and social subjugation.

However, force alone was not sufficient to drive European imperialist expansion. The imperialist and colonial enterprise was much aided or ultimately even enabled by the existence of a social system and social ideology in Europe which firmly inscribed, legitimised and naturalised European cultural, social, scientific superiority (Pennycook 1998, Calvet 1974). This social system and ideology created two hierarchically ordered social categories of people endowed not only with distinct sets of rights, obligations and social standing but also with distinct intellectual, social etc. skills and properties. The European colonisers and their collaborators who were consistently identified with the positive or prestigious values were firmly located at the top of the social hierarchy, holding the power in the society and enjoying the highest social standing within it. By contrast, the colonised, being identified with the subordinate position, were assigned low social status and granted little or no social power. Calvet (1987: 72) identifies two steps involved in linguistic colonisation. The first one, called 'vertical step' refers to the social spread of the language. The European language first spread into the 'upper classes' of the colonised people (i.e., those near or representing the colonial power) and was only then spread among members of the 'lower classes'. The second one, called 'horizontal step', involves its geographic spread. The colonial language is diffused from the capital to small cities and from there to villages. The colonisers

spend much effort, mainly through the education system, on instilling this asymmetrical social ideology in their colonial subjects but it was also constantly being reaffirmed and generated by a range of other social and linguistic practices. In relation to language, several distinct but interrelated practices can be identified.

The colonisers were generally described as possessors of culture, history, intelligence, know-how while the colonised were seen as lacking in these vital characteristics. In relation to language, this meant that designations such as 'language' which were intimately tied up with concepts such as 'nation', 'culture' and 'power' were reserved for the colonial languages. The indigenous languages, linked to tribes, 'uncultured' naturalness and lack of military power, were referred to by negative terms such as 'dialect', 'vernacular' and 'patois' implying their inferior status. Terms such as 'broken/bad language' were particularly used in reference to languages which had emerged out of the contact between European and non-European languages such as Creoles. Non European languages were and to a certain extent still continue to be described as ambiguous and imprecise and therefore as unfit for expressing modern scientific thought (Calvet 1974). People's attachment to these languages was considered irrational and a sign of ignorance and resistance to civilisation. Important evidence in favour of their alleged 'inferior status' was evidenced by their lack of a writing system and a literary body. By contrast, the learning of the colonial language was portrayed as an asset in that it presumably 'opens up a person's mind to the (modern world)' and made them civilized, modern human beings (Calvet 1974).

### **Language and identity**

The process of colonization involves one nation or territory taking control of another nation or territory either through the use of force or by acquisition. As a byproduct of colonization, the colonizing nation implements its own form of schooling within their colonies. Two scholars on colonial education, Gail P. Kelly and Philip G. Altbach, define the process as an attempt "to assist in the consolidation of foreign rule".

The idea of assimilation is important to colonial education. Assimilation involves the colonized being forced to conform to the cultures and traditions of the colonizers. Gauri Viswanathan points out that "cultural assimilation [is] ... the most effective form of political action" because "cultural domination works by consent and often precedes conquest by force" (85). Colonizing governments realize that they gain strength not necessarily through physical control, but through mental control. This mental control is implemented through a central intellectual location, the school system, or what Louis Althusser would call an "ideological state apparatus." Kelly and Altbach argue that "colonial schools...sought to extend foreign domination and economic exploitation of the colony" because colonial education is "directed at absorption into the metropole and not separate and dependent development of the colonized in their own society and culture". Colonial education strips the colonized people away from their indigenous learning structures and draws them toward the structures of the colonizers

Much of the reasoning that favors such a learning system comes from supremacist ideas of the colonizers. Thomas B. Macaulay asserts his viewpoints about British India in an early nineteenth century speech. Macaulay insists that no reader of literature "could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia." He continues, stating, "It is no exaggeration to say, that all the historical information which has been collected from all the books written in Sanscrit language is less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgments used at preparatory schools in England." The ultimate goal of colonial education is this: "We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect." While all colonizers may not have shared Macaulay's lack of respect for the existing systems of the colonized, they do share the idea that education is important in facilitating the assimilation process.

Often, the implementation of a new education system leaves those who are colonized with a limited sense of their past. The indigenous history and customs once practiced and observed slowly slip away. Growing up in the colonial education system, many colonized children enter a condition of hybridity, in which their identities are created out of multiple cultural forms, practices, beliefs and power dynamics. Colonial education creates a blurring that makes it difficult to differentiate between the new, enforced ideas of the colonizers and the formerly accepted native practices. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, a citizen of the once colonized Kenya, displays his anger about the damage that colonial education wreaks on colonized peoples. He asserts that the process "annihilate[s] a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves".

Not only does colonial education eventually create a desire to disassociate with native heritage, but it affects the individual and the sense of self-confidence. Thiong'o believes that colonial education instills a sense of inferiority and disempowerment with the collective psyche of a colonized people. In order to eliminate the harmful, lasting effects of colonial education, postcolonial nations must connect their own experiences of

colonialism with other nations' histories. A new educational structure must support and empower the hybrid identity of a liberated people.

Kelly and Altbach define "classical colonialism" as the process when one separate nation controls another separate nation. However, another form of colonization has been present in America for many years. The treatment of the Native Americans falls into the category of "internal colonization," which can be described as the control of an independent group by another independent group of the same nation-state. Although the context of the situation is different, the intent of the "colonizers" is identical. This includes the way in which the educational system is structured. Katherine Jensen indicates that "the organization, curriculum, and language medium of these schools has aimed consistently at Americanizing the American Indian" (155). She asks: "If education was intended to permit native people mobility into the mainstream, we must ask why in over three centuries it has been so remarkably unsuccessful?" (155). In a supporting study of 1990, census statistics indicate that American Indians have a significantly lower graduation rate at the high school, bachelor, and graduate level than the rest of Americans.

### **Post-colonial literature**

Postcolonial fiction writers deal with the traditional colonial discourse, either by modifying or by subverting it, or both. Postcolonial literary theory re-examines colonial and postcolonial literature, especially concentrating upon the social discourse between the colonizer and the colonized that shaped and produced the literature. In *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said analyzed the fiction of Honoré de Balzac, Charles Baudelaire, and Lautréamont (Isidore-Lucien Ducasse), exploring how they shaped and were influenced by the societal fantasy of European racial superiority. He pioneered the branch of postcolonial criticism called colonial discourse analysis.

Edward Said's groundbreaking text, *Orientalism* is a contrapuntal reading of imperial discourse about the non-Western Other. It indicates that the Western intellectual is in the service of the hegemonic culture. In this influential text, Said shows how imperial and colonial hegemony is implicated in discursive and textual production. *Orientalism* is a critique of Western texts that have represented the East as an exotic and inferior other and construct the Orient by a set of recurring stereotypical images and clichés. Said's analysis of *Orientalism* shows the negative stereotypes or images of native women as well. As a result, *Orientalism* has engendered feminist scholarship and debate in Middle East studies. For Said, many Western scholars, orientalist, colonial authorities and writers systematically created the orientalist discourse and the misrepresentation of the Orient. George Orwell as a Western writer experienced imperialism at first hand while serving as an Assistant Superintendent of Imperial Police in Burma from 1922 to 1927. One of Orwell's major concerns during his life was the issue of imperialism and colonialism which is reflected in his first published novel, *Burmese Days*.

Another important theorist of colonial discourse is Harvard University professor Homi K. Bhabha, (born 1949). He has developed a number of the field's neologisms and key concepts, such as hybridity, third-space, mimicry, difference, and ambivalence. Western canonical works like Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* have been targets of colonial discourse analysis. The succeeding generation of postcolonial critics focus on texts that "write back" to the colonial center. In general, postcolonial theory analyzes how anti-colonial ideas, such as anti-conquest, national unity, *négritude*, pan-Africanism and postcolonial feminism were forged in and promulgated through literature.

### **Decolonizing English Language**

Anti-colonial literature is revolutionary and serves as a medium of power, revealing a sense of unity among the oppressed by calling for the abolishment of imperialism. The works of these writers helped spread their passion and devotion to the movement while also voicing concerns exclusive to their communities, dwelling on what the future holds. These works serve as prime examples of anti-colonial resistance literature, some of which are frequently cited by postcolonial scholars to this day. Postcolonialism is a critical theory that evaluates the legacy of colonialism, its goal, and its long-term effect on the marginalized, colonized subject. Reading through this lens allows for the dissection of literature and discloses often overlooked or under-discussed details of colonial history.

As Leela Gandhi remarks in *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, analyzing colonial framework through this theory "[de]mystif[ies] amnesia of the colonial aftermath. It is... devoted to the... task of revisiting, remembering and, crucially, interrogating the colonial past" (4). She further states that a postcolonial reading of the encounter "marks the historical process whereby the 'West' attempts... to cancel... the cultural difference and value of the 'non-West'" (16). Because of the complexity of the matter, postcolonialism aims to make sense of the past and the aftermath of colonization while breaking down European prejudices and the dehumanization of the colonized 'Other.' A critical aspect of the study is that it analyzes works that contribute



to the process of decolonization (an ongoing, unfinished project). Through a postcolonial lens, this thesis will unveil the resistance of various influential novels: Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi*, R. K. Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma*, and Rabindranath Tagore's *The Home and the World*, all of which contribute to the discourse surrounding liberation and dominating versus the dominated.

In her work, Gandhi describes the literature of modern decolonization, specifically naming Franz Fanon and Aimé Césaire (204). Césaire and Fanon, who are pioneers in postcolonialism, advocate for those victimized by Europe and maintain fierce assertions against the West. As previously mentioned, the predominant aspect of the theory emphasizes the dehumanization of the oppressed in colonialism. In his iconic essay, "From Discourse on Colonialism," Césaire presents the equation "colonization = thingification," which probes the exploitation of countries and the erasure of histories, including India (Césaire 42). He echoes sentiments hauntingly similar to those spoken in resistance literature, exemplifying Europe's reach on numerous colonized subjects. The desire for freedom is universal among the colonized, rendering Césaire's essay essential in analyzing the voices of opposition during Independence. Employing Césaire's work and Fanon's views as a frame to analyze the selected novels demonstrates the anti-colonial resistance prevalent across these works. In resistance literature, writers explore themes such as nationalism and the reclamation of personal identity while also tackling the subject of loss. The loss extends to multiple facets of life, from the physical, such as the destruction of landmarks and violence on the body, to the metaphysical and ontological, such as the feeling of displacement in a changing society. Jyoti Puri describes these sentiments in *Encountering Nationalism*, stating, "nationalism was the principle upon which anti-colonial movements questioned the legitimacy of colonial states and made demands for sovereign statehood and self-rule" (214). The desire to free the country from its captor's grasp fueled protests and motivated people to seize the initiative during disorder. Nationalism, to the people, represented the will of the colonized.

Using Aimé Césaire's "From Discourse on Colonialism" and Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, it is helpful to read these writers as they pose comparable ideas surrounding colonization and its aftermaths. These writers provide radical stances in the face of the West, challenging every justification for the colonial mission and discussing the ruins of great civilizations. They vehemently attack the Empire, which has held them back for centuries, preventing their progression as societies, as well as taking an inward look within the colonized societies like Fanon and Césaire, whose works Gandhi discusses as "examples in the literature of modern decolonization," the three selected texts also "[instruct] anyone who cares to listen that colonialism brutalizes the colonizer" (Gandhi 204).

## II. Conclusion

This paper finally seeks to make it clear that the process of decolonization is ongoing and that we are still a long way from achieving this goal. These works of literature are the product of the efforts of renowned writers who were driving forces in the Indian independence struggle. These authors produced revolutionary pieces that target the British colonial legacy in an attempt to restore the colonized subjects' identities, history, and culture while simultaneously contributing to the discourse on colonialism. The question of nationalism, gender, and modes of anti-colonial resistance, to name a few, are the focal points of discussion in this paper. Voices of the resistance express concern about the repercussions of colonialism, which remain prevalent in most of the colonized nations including the Indian subcontinent today.

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