



Language, Identity, And Colonialism In Indian Literature: A Critique

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ABSTRACT

The connections between colonialism, language, and identity in Indian literature are explored in this research. In particular, it examines works written in English and how India's colonial history has affected them. This study delves into the historical development of Indian writing in English, specifically looking at how authors have resisted and expressed themselves via the colonial language. Using postcolonial theoretical frameworks, the research investigates how Indian authors deal with colonialism's linguistic and cultural legacies. Case studies of prominent Indian writers working in English are offered to elucidate these concepts. Looking at how globalization has further complicated the link between language and identity in Indian literature, the research also considers current ideas. Through the integration of literary analysis, historical context, and postcolonial theory, this research aims to contribute to the ongoing discussion around language, power, and cultural expression in postcolonial societies.

Keywords: Indian literature, Postcolonial studies, Linguistic imperialism, Cultural identity

Introduction:

Language, identity, and the ever-present imprint of colonialism form a complicated tapestry that is Indian literature. While India emerged from centuries of British control, its writers were at a unique crossroads: they were inheritors of a rich literary history in Indigenous languages and native speakers of the colonizer's tongue. This linguistic duality has become both a strength and a weakness, shaping Indian literature in profound and perplexing ways. There is a complex web of relationships between language and identity in postcolonial Indian literature. English, once the oppressors' language, has been transformed into a medium for cultural reclamation and creative expression. But this adoption has sparked controversy, questioning its intended readers, its veracity, and even the term Indian literature. This article argues that the complex interplay of language, identity, and colonialism mirrors the intricate dance of power, culture, and self-expression in Indian literature. Through this prism, researcher examines how Indian authors who wrote in English have traversed the postcolonial landscape, crafting narratives that pay homage to and critique their shared language heritage with the colonizers.

Research Questions:

1. What impact has colonialism had on the evolution of Indian literature, especially English-language works?
2. How can Indian writers use language to create, navigate, and convey identity in a postcolonial world?
3. How can post-colonialist theories like linguistic imperialism and hybridity help us comprehend English-language Indian literature?

The present research tries to address these issues. Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, and Amitav Ghosh are just a few of the writers whose use of English to create stories that are uniquely Indian has helped to undermine colonial linguistic norms. Additionally, this article will examine the continued relevance of these concerns in contemporary Indian literature by delving into how the digital age and globalization have further convoluted the bond between language, identity, and literary expression.

Historical Context: Colonialism in India

The literary and linguistic environment of the Indian subcontinent was significantly impacted by the approximately two-hundred-year British colonial period (1757–1947). Between the Battle of Plassey and India's independence, this period profoundly impacted the country's culture, art, and way of life. From its 17th-century origins as a commercial enterprise, the East India Company rose to political domination by the middle of the 18th century. The Indian Rebellion of 1857 led to the establishment of direct rule by the British Crown in 1858, which further solidified colonial power over the Indian subcontinent. Language and culture were also heavily imposed alongside this governmental dominance. The establishment of English as the language of government, schools, and elite discourse was a significant consequence of British colonization in India. Thomas Babington Macaulay's purpose in promoting the English Education Act of 1835 was to produce a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and intellect. The approach succeeded in displacing traditional Indian languages and knowledge systems and establishing a new social stratum of Indians trained in English to mediate between the colonists and the colonized people.

There were far-reaching effects of this language policy:

- **Education:** The bulk of people and the elite class of English-educated individuals grew separated when English became the primary language of instruction in higher education.
- **Administration:** The colonial administration operated in English; hence, language fluency was required for any job application.
- **Literature:** Although vernacular literature continued, particularly in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, English emerged as a new medium for creative expression in India.
- **Social Hierarchy:** The ability to communicate effectively in English has given birth to new forms of social stratification as a measure of social standing and potential for advancement.
- **Cultural Hybridity:** The interaction between Indian and British cultures led to hybrid cultural forms in many areas, including literature, art, and social practices.

During the colonial era, Indian nationalism was also on the rise, and many literary expressions were found. Ironically, many nationalist leaders, like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, used English effectively in their resistance to colonialism despite having grown up in an English-speaking environment.

The printing press, created by the British, revolutionized the distribution and production of books. It facilitated the widespread dissemination of texts, the standardization of languages, and the emergence of novel-like literary forms in Indian languages. The language question became an increasingly contentious issue as India neared independence. Whether Hindi, English, or regional languages should be recognized as the official national language reflected the complex and long history of language use throughout colonization.

To understand how Indian literature in English developed, one must be familiar with the historical context of colonialism. Tradition vs modernity, indigenous appropriation against colonial imposition, and national identity vs external influences are all ongoing struggles in postcolonial Indian literature.

Language and Colonial Power

Given the correlation between language and authority in India, it is critical to comprehend the colonial era. For a long time, scholars have recognized that language is more than just a means of communication; it also has the potential to be a potent instrument of cultural domination, control, and oppression.

Linguistic Imperialism: The 1992 book *Linguistic Imperialism* by Robert Phillipson popularized the term *linguistic imperialism*. It often brings up colonialism as an example of how one language can be superior. This became clear in India when English was proclaimed the *de jure* language of business, government, and education. *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), written and edited by the Kenyan philosopher and writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, is a scathing critique of language imperialism. As Thiong'o puts it, "The cultural bomb is the biggest weapon wielded and daily unleashed by imperialism against that collective defiance." A cultural bomb destroys a people's faith in their names, languages, surroundings, struggle history, unity, abilities, and, ultimately, in themselves.

Language and Epistemic Violence: The concept of *epistemic violence* proposed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is most effective in this context. Epistemic violence, she argues, is an integral part of colonialism alongside physical violence; it refers to the suppression or elimination of indigenous ways of seeing and understanding the world. One may argue that the widespread use of English in India has marginalized indigenous knowledge systems and creative expression, amounting to a form of epistemic violence.

The Colonization of the Mind: Frank Zappa's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) delves into the impact of language on self-awareness and individuality. In his perspective, more important than learning new words is absorbing the colonizer's entire worldview when one adopts their language. This idea takes on further significance in a country like India, where English has become a symbol of progress, modernization, and social mobility.

Language Policy as Divide and Rule: Colonized communities were frequently divided by colonial language regulations. English language education both worsened and generated new socioeconomic divides in India. The elite with English education frequently cut off from their cultural origins. It served as a middleman between the colonists and the general populace.

Resistance Through Language: Despite its role in colonial domination, language eventually became a site of resistance. The intellectuals and writers of India took up the English language. They utilized it to critique colonial rule and advance nationalist causes. This fits nicely with what postcolonial historian Bill Ashcroft calls *The Empire Writes Back*, a strategy wherein colonizer tools are used to challenge colonial authority.

The Emergence of Indian Literature in English

One of the most intriguing tales in the history of world literature is the ascent of Indian writing in English. During its time, this section was characterized by new ideas, debate, and societal adjustments. In this part, paper delves into, how this literary legacy came to be, analyzing key works and characters and delving into the complicated arguments about Indian writers' use of English.

1. **Early Beginnings:** It wasn't until the late 18th and early 19th centuries that the earliest recognized works of Indian literature written in English appeared. *The Travels of Dean Mahomet* (1794), written by Indian author Dean Mahomed, is supposedly the first book written by an Indian author in English. Among the initial pieces, so the story goes. However, it wasn't until the mid-nineteenth century that Indian English literature started gaining traction.
2. **The Bengal Renaissance and Early Pioneers:** Indian English literature was greatly influenced by the sociocultural and theological reform movement known as the Bengal Renaissance. Michael Madhusudan Dutt and Raja Ram Mohan Roy were the earliest to express themselves creatively in English. Many people consider *Rajmohan's Wife* by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1864) the first Indian book written in English.
3. **The Rise of Indian English Poetry:** The book *Poems* by Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, sometimes referred to as the founder of Indian English poetry, was released in 1827. Indian English poetry gained more recognition in literature because of Toru Dutt's works *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* (1876) and *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* (1882).
4. **The First Wave of Novelists:** English-language novels by prominent Indian writers began to appear in the early 1900s. The trio of Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, and Mulk Raj Anand is commonly called the *Big Three* of Indian English literature. Their English-language writings, including Anand's 1935 *Untouchable*, Narayan's 1935 *Swami and Friends*, and Rao's 1938 *Kanthapura*, explored Indian themes and experiences.
5. **The Rushdie Effect:** The 1981 novel *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie was a turning point in Indian English writing. Its popularity showed that Indian writers could be recognized globally while artistically representing Indian reality in English. By fusing English with Indian languages and sensibilities, Rushdie's linguistic invention gave Indian writers new avenues to explore.
6. **Contemporary Landscape:** Indian English literature is thriving and varied these days. Authors with both critical and financial success include Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, and Jhumpa Lahiri. The sensation of being dispersed has gained prominence as a subject, signifying the worldwide scope of modern Indian identity.

Negotiating Identity Through Language

Postcolonial literature provides a framework within which Indian writers working in English negotiate their identities. This language choice is more than just pragmatic; it is a symbolic gesture that represents the multifaceted nature of contemporary Indian identity. Salman Rushdie and other Indian authors have shown how English may be *remade* to reflect Indian realities, leading to what he calls *chutnified* English. Postcolonial people, who often move between different languages and cultures, are exemplified by the hybridized language. In addition to accomplishing the work's aesthetic purposes, incorporating Indian syntax, rhythms, and vocabulary into English literature highlights cultural contrasts within the colonial language. Writing in this innovative way challenges the idea that Western experiences and ideas absorbed into standard English apply to a global audience. Writing in English also shows an interest in connecting with readers abroad and at home, which helps to put Indian identity in a global perspective. However, this decision also raises questions of representation and authenticity, as authors must balance reaching a larger audience and turning off Indian readers who do not know English. Language becomes a perpetual arena for self-reflection, reimagining, and identity struggle in the works of Indian writers. This indicates the broader dynamic and developing nature of postcolonial Indian society.

Postcolonial Theory and Indian Literature

A comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the complex interplay of language, identity, and colonialism may be achieved by examining Indian literature from the standpoint of postcolonial theory. This section explores the writings of prominent postcolonial theorists like Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha and how their concepts illuminate the complexities found in Indian literary productions.

• Homi Bhabha's Concepts in Indian Literature

When trying to make sense of Indian literature, it is essential to consult Homi Bhabha's ideas, particularly his thoughts on hybridity, imitation, and the third space. Hybridity, in Bhabha's view, is the product of colonialism's mixing of cultures; indigenous identities are maintained while colonized civilizations absorb and modify colonial influences. Characters in many Indian literary works show this blending of Western ideas with more traditional Indian values as a result of colonial rule. Hybridity is symbolized in Indian literature by

blending languages, customs, and cultural practices. For instance, in *Midnight's Children*, written by Salman Rushdie, the characters speak a mix of vernacular and English, symbolizing the collision and cohabitation of many cultural components. This portrayal of postcolonial India's hybrid identity is fitting. Bhabha also proposed the idea of mimicry, a means by which colonized people create a space of resistance by reflecting the characteristics of their oppressors while still making their unique contributions. This mimicry is a form of subversion that weakens the colonizer's power. Indian literature is rife with characters that mimic Western speech and customs; nonetheless, these mimics are defined by subtle variations that cast doubt on and even challenge the dominance of colonialism. As an extra-critical term, *Third Space* refers to a period of transition during which new cultural identities are formed. This area allows for negotiating meaning and identity beyond the colonizer-colonized dichotomy. Indian literary works frequently delve into this Third Space, revealing the ever-changing nature of identity in a postcolonial context.

• **Gayatri Spivak's Theories and Indian Literature**

The critical framework for Indian literature provided by Gayatri Spivak's revolutionary work in subaltern studies and the notion of the *subaltern* is indispensable. Spivak highlights the exclusion of voices in colonial and postcolonial discourse by investigating the subaltern's ability to speak by crafting narratives that convey other viewpoints and challenge dominant colonial histories; Indian literature often gives voice to these marginalized beliefs. The critique of essentialism and the focus on strategic essentialism, in which oppressed people temporarily adopt one identity to organize politically, are prominent in Indian literary works that depict collective resistance against colonial and postcolonial oppression. This is something that Spivak argues for. Focusing on the various identities and experiences in Indian society, these stories challenge stereotypical portrayals of culture and identity. Her concept of *epistemic violence*, which she defines as the repression of marginalized perspectives by dominant narratives and institutions, is also present in Indian literature. Novels like *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy show how minority characters overcome oppressive systems and how colonial and postcolonial powers keep quiet about it.

• **Application of Postcolonial Theories to Indian Literary Texts**

Applying the theories of Bhabha and Spivak to specific works of Indian literature helps us understand how these works reflect and critique the colonial and postcolonial experiences. In Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, the protagonist struggles with questions of cultural identity and belonging, which mirror Bhabha's thoughts on hybridity and the Third Space. The protagonists in the novel grapple with complex identities as they traverse many cultural contexts, delving into the diaspora experience.

It is possible to apply Spivak's theories to examining Mahasweta Devi's stories by looking at them through the eyes of indigenous and disadvantaged populations. Devi challenges the dominant cultural and historical narratives in her writings by presenting the subaltern experience and their fight against systemic oppression.

Contemporary Perspectives

With new vigour and ingenuity, modern Indian writers are engaging and expressing the issues of language and identity in this age of globalization. Changing cultural dynamics and the ongoing impacts of colonial legacies in a globalized world are mirrored in modern Indian literature, which explores these subjects in this area.

• **Language and Identity in the Works of Contemporary Indian Authors**

The complex interplay between language and identity is an ongoing theme in modern Indian writers like Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, Aravind Adiga, and Amitav Ghosh. By exploring how language reflects and creates identities in a dynamic and unpredictable environment, their works frequently bring attention to the conflict between regional languages and English as a worldwide language.

Arundhati Roy: In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy uses multilingual storytelling techniques, combining English with Hindi, Urdu, and other Indian languages. This language diversity reflects the multiple identities of her characters, who come from diverse ethnic, religious, and financial origins. While critiquing globalization for its homogenizing impacts, Roy stresses the importance of cultural and linguistic diversity in his writings.

Jhumpa Lahiri: In works like *The Namesake* and *The Lowland*, Jhumpa Lahiri delves into the experience of being a diaspora, focusing on characters who navigate many cultures and languages while managing their identities. The fact that Lahiri is now writing in Italian reflects her studies in language and culture. Her writing highlights the importance of language to one's sense of self and position in today's global society and the flexibility of identity in this context.

Aravind Adiga: The protagonist's rise from poverty to affluence is shown through language in Adiga's *The White Tiger*, highlighting the substantial socioeconomic disparities in contemporary India. The book deftly captures the complexities of modern India through its honest and raw language. Traditional identities are constantly being renegotiated in this place due to social and economic turmoil.

Amitav Ghosh: Historical and geographical locations are expected in Ghosh's novels, such as *Sea of Poppies* and *The Hungry Tide*, which demonstrate the persistence of colonial legacies in shaping contemporary

identities. While representing India's vast cultural variety, his use of many languages and dialects draws attention to the links between language, history, and identity.

• The Impact of Globalization on Indian Literature

Every aspect of Indian literature, from subject matter to narrative style, has been affected by globalization. More globalization and cross-cultural exchange have increased the visibility of Indian literature by giving contemporary authors a platform to share their authentic, locally rooted stories with audiences all around the globe.

Digital and Online Platforms: With the democratization of literature through the growth of digital media and online publication, a wider range of opinions may now be voiced. Authors like Chetan Bhagat have leveraged these platforms to engage with tech-savvy young people and address contemporary issues like modernization, urbanization, and the aspirations of India's middle class.

Cross-cultural Collaborations: Modern Indian writers increasingly draw from and contribute to a worldwide literary canon, bridging cultural gaps. This exchange enriches their works by allowing them to explore hybrid identities and the intersections of several cultural narratives.

Global Themes: Transnationalism, migration, and climate change are more common topics in Indian writing nowadays. Writers such as Kiran Desai and Kamila Shamsie examine these worldwide issues, considering how they affect people's lives and transform cultural identities.

• Identity in a Postcolonial and Globalized World

The legacy of colonialism affects contemporary Indian literature through authors' struggles with cultural sovereignty and the aftereffects of colonial power structures. Globalization has made redefining one's identity easier and more challenging.

Reclamation of Indigenous Narratives: More and more contemporary Indian writers are reclaiming and celebrating Native American stories, languages, and traditions. Easterine Kire and Mamang Dai are the only two writers from India's northeastern regions whose works highlight the cultural heritage and tackle the marginalization of these communities.

Intersectionality: Many works of modern Indian literature explore the complex web of identities that include gender, caste, religion, sexual orientation, and other non-linguistic factors that impact Indian language and culture. Two authors who tackle these complex intersections are Perumal Murugan and Meena Kandasamy. Through their stories, they advocate for social justice and inclusion.

Diasporic Voices: As more and more authors explore the experiences of Indians living abroad, the diaspora remains a significant topic in contemporary writing. All too often, these narratives highlight how diasporic identities are shaped by the tension between home and host cultures, touching on themes of alienation and belonging.

Conclusion:

By looking at how language, identity, and colonialism have evolved and affected Indian literature, one can see how these themes have shaped literary expression and public opinion. From the linguistic impositions of the colonial era which led to the marginalization of Indigenous languages and the rise of English as the dominant force to the postcolonial celebration of hybridity and resistance, Indian literature presents a rich tapestry of narratives that reflect the complexities of identity in a diverse and dynamic society. Cultural sovereignty and self-definition are perennial struggles, and the examination of colonial power structures by thinkers like Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak shows how these consequences persist. The contemporary era's already complex language and identity crisis has become much more so due to globalization. Indian authors like Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, Aravind Adiga, and Amitav Ghosh continue to tackle these issues in their works by depicting communities and individuals that deftly navigate the intricate relationship between local traditions and global influences. Their work sheds light on the fluidity of identity, showing how individuals constantly negotiate their sense of self among global movements, cultural assimilation, and migration. Interest in regional languages is rising again, and Indigenous narratives are being reclaimed. This is all part of a broader cultural movement to preserve and revitalize local identities in the face of homogenizing global forces. Additionally, contemporary Indian literature offers a platform to marginalized communities while delving into issues of social justice and inclusion, as well as how gender, religion, sexual orientation, and caste interact with one another. This approach emphasizes the importance of many viewpoints in building a shared cultural identity, challenging dominant narratives, and advocating for a fairer and more inclusive society. Indian literature enriches the global literary canon and promotes cross-cultural understanding when it is included in global conversations about language and identity.

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