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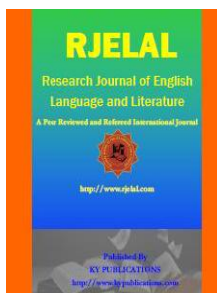


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POWER, PRESTIGE, GLAMOUR AND ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

Language and the empire go hand in hand. Therefore, language, particularly the English language occupies a pivotal role in the field of postcolonial studies. This paper attempts to explore how English has emerged as one of the most dominant languages of the world in general and India in particular? What impact does colonialism have in expanding and promoting the English language and culture? What are the devices employed by the colonizers in disseminating English in its colonies, particularly in India. In this regard the paper traces the historical roots of English in India. The paper also attempts to shed light on the status of English in the present times. It seeks to elucidate how English has retained its past glory and prestige even in the postcolonial times. The paper also seeks to delineate how English and 'Englishness' is seen as a glamorous language especially by the glamour world of Bollywood, and in doing so how has it distorted the true essence of a language?

KEYWORDS: English language, Discourse, Colonialism, Postcolonial, Linguistic Imperialism, Power, Prestige, Glamour.

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... whereas once Britannia ruled the waves, now it is English which rules them. The British Empire has given way to the empire of English (Phillipson 2007, p. 1).

At the surface level language seems to be simply a system of sentences, set of patterns or a fixed set of rules. However, language is not always transparent and innocent the way it seems. The real operation or practice of language results in discourse which generates power. To put it simply, discourses are manipulative use of language that shapes our views, ideas and opinions. It establishes and naturalizes certain norms of behavior, conduct, etc., which are unquestionable. As Pramod K Nayar echoes Foucault's notion that certain authorities in the society "constructed, organized, shared and used" knowledge "through particular forms of speech,

writing and language – or what is called discourse" (*From Structuralism* 35) in order to control a particular section of the society through disciplinary mechanism. These discourses are instrumental in constructing and legitimizing unequal power relations. The discourses have the power to classify subjects; subsequently in constructing the identity of the 'other' as 'sick', 'criminal', 'mad', etc., so that they can be controlled and observed by certain authorities. Language has always been a fundamental debate in the field of postcolonial studies. Language and the Empire go hand in hand. The colonial conquest of the native culture has itself begun through its control over the native language through insidious means. In her book, *Masks of Conquest*, Viswanathan shows how the English curriculum had the impulse to dominate and control

the native subjects. "The curriculum is conceived here not in the perennial sense of an objective, essentialized entity but rather as discourse, activity, process, as one of the mechanisms through which knowledge is socially distributed and culturally validated" (*Masks* 3). The discourses deployed by the colonizers are instrumental in asserting their power over the natives. In this regard, it is pertinent to ask how and why English, the language of our colonial masters, has emerged as the most dominant languages of the world today. What is the role of English in postcolonial times? Has English been able to retain its 'prestige' which it had gained during the colonialism? How has the glamour associated with English has enormous impact on the lives of the common people (general educated public), and what impact does it have on the language itself? This paper seeks to address and explore such queries. However, a historical knowledge of English in India is essential to delineation and understanding such issues in depth and accuracy.

In a time of hazardous transition, various factors had led to the emergence of English as a discipline of study in Victorian England. However, the role of Colonialism in the expansion of English is immensely noteworthy. In fact, writers like Gauri Viswanathan, Ania Loomba and others are of the opinion that the discipline of English literary studies was an invention of Colonial India. Viswanathan states that "English literature appeared as a subject in the curriculum of the colonies long before it was institutionalized in the home country" (*Masks* 3). She further points out that while England was still reigned by the study of classical literature, English "as the study of culture and not simply the study of language" (3) has already made its entry into British Indian curriculum. English was primarily introduced in the colony to serve the needs of the British administration; to educate a class of Indians who could function as "interpreters between the British administrators and the millions of Indians they governed". To put in Lord Macaulay's words, "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (quoted in Phillipson 2007:110). According to Viswanathan, the British need for a disciplinary branch of

knowledge emanated from its compulsion to perform the task of administering their colonial subjects. Similarly, Ania Loomba states that "The rise of literary studies as a 'discipline' of study in British universities was in fact linked to the perceived needs of colonial administrators" (*Colonialism* 75). However, this "disguised form of authority" (*Masks* 23) has complemented as a mask that concealed the actual terrors of colonialism. These discourses of administration are actually powerful devices of subjugating the native culture. By imposing their language upon the natives the colonizers conquered the cultural space of the natives. As Ngugi Wa Thiong'O says, "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 place in the world" (*The Postcolonial* 290). It can be proposed that the imposition of any language over others is actually a powerful device of cultural conquest.

To a certain extent, translation has also complemented the purpose in the colonial enterprise. The Orientalist project of translation which was led by William Jones and others was actually an attempt to domesticate and control the native systems of knowledge. Translation enabled the Colonizer to gain access to the culture of the natives, and speak on their behalf. In Tejaswini Niranjana's words:

...(a) the need for translation by the European, since the natives are unreliable interpreters of their own laws and culture; (b) the desire to be a law-giver, to give the Indians their "own" laws; and (c) the desire to "purify" Indian culture and speak on its behalf. The interconnections between these obsessions are extremely complicated. They can be seen, however, as feeding into a larger discourse of Improvement and Education that interpolates the colonial subject ("Translation, Colonialism and Rise of English" 774).

These various discourses employed by the Orientalist underscores the fact that the chief aim of the colonizers was to control the natives' culture, and to ensure their authority over them. Although,

the Orientalist showed interest in protecting the culture/language of the natives, the colonial project of translation by the Orientalist ultimately gave way to the expansion of English by labeling the native culture as erroneous and evil. This implies that the discursive or representational aspects of colonialism are instrumental in the economic, political and even military conquest. Representational aspects as translation was a device of colonial control is very much evident in Brian Friel's play *Translations*. The play is about the colonial struggle of Ireland which attempts to show the manner in which the British cartographers had transcribed the names, maps and places of Ireland with Gaelic names. With the assistance of Irish OWEN the English Yolland seeks to rename the Irish places as:

YOLLAND: Yes. I'm listening. What do you call it? Say the Irish name again?

OWEN: Bun na hAbhann

YOLLAND: Again

OWEN: Bun na hAbhann

YOLLAND: Let's leave it alone. There's no English equivalent for a sound like that (*Translations* 35).

The Conversation between Owen and Yolland sheds light on the entire colonial project of naming and mapping to regulate their cultural conquest over the natives. The play basically elucidates the powerful role language, and the cartography plays in facilitating the terrors of colonialism. From the light of the above discussion it is clear that Colonialism has huge impact on the dissemination of English in its colonies. In this regard devices of control such as translations, cartography, and so on "attempts to re-order worlds that were often incomprehensible to the masters and make them more manageable, comprehensible for imperial consumption" (*Lomba* 88). The assertion of power through language is also true to other colonies like South Africa and Australia. Robert Phillipson in his book *Linguistic Imperialism* talks about one of the British colonies of Africa, Sierra Leone. Phillipson states that when the first Inspector of West Africa was employed in Sierra Leone, he dismissed the indigenous languages in favour of English on the grounds that "the local languages were still imperfectly reduced to written form, the dialects were no more than locally useful,

England was a country 'of which they ought to know something' and English was the language of commerce and ruling power" (116). Thus, it is evident that although the discourses which were employed by the colonizers had differed in each colony, the effects of Colonialism on the expansion of English is tremendous. Colonialism has ultimately given impetus to the contemporary phenomenon of English as the most dominant language of the world. However, what troubles people like Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, Balchandra Nemade, and Robert Phillipson is the continuing dominance of the English language through remote control means which Phillipson terms as "Linguistic imperialism". In his book of the same name, Phillipson discusses how the colonial linguistic inheritance has still retained and reiterated its power through various agencies like the British councils in the Third World countries. He also describes the way English has been successfully promoted and has been eagerly adopted in the global linguistic marketplace. Phillipson's definition of English linguistic imperialism is worth noting in this context:

A working definition of English linguistic imperialism is that the dominance of English is asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages. Here structural refers broadly to material properties (for example, institutions, financial allocations) and cultural to immaterial or ideological properties (for example, attitudes, pedagogic principles) (*Linguistic* 47).

The working definition by Phillipson elucidates the fact that linguistic imperialism is a primary component of cultural imperialism which is often operated by the authority in power; institutions and organizations.

From the light of the above discussion it is clear that English has emerged as a powerful language right from the colonial times, and even today its dominance is perpetuated and promoted by various apparatus. However, English as a subject and discipline enjoyed a different status altogether even during the colonial times. This is evident from Ram Mohan Roy's appeal to the British authorities

to advocate Western knowledge in India. In a highly diplomatic letter to Lord Amherst, Ram Mohan Roy requested the government for the implementation of English education as opposed to the Sanskrit system of education:

... the Sanskrit system of education would be best calculated to keep this country in darkness, if such had been the policy of the British legislature. But as the improvement of the natives is the object of the government, it will consequently promote a more liberal and enlightened system of instruction embracing mathematics, natural philosophy, chemistry, anatomy, with other useful sciences" (*Letter Web 8/8/15*).

Ram Mohan Roy's appeal to the government for the promotion of Western education and English language had basically reformatory motives in it. However, the prestige associated with English cannot be undermined. Even during the colonial era, the native elites insisted "on receiving a classical knowledge of the English language and literature" (*Masks 40*). Sir Edward Hyde, chief justice of the supreme, reports how a group of citizens of Calcutta had requested him for a "college offering European education and English system of morals" (*Masks 40*). The educated elite preferred English medium schools for their children rather than regional mediums during colonial rule. However, the striking fact is that English is still been able to retain its prestigious status in contemporary era. To quote Burchfield, "English has also become a lingua franca to the point that any literate educated person is in a very real sense deprived if he does not know English" (quoted in Phillipson 2007:5). Burchfield's quote is very much applicable in the context of India. While a few people like Balchandra Nemade seek to "defend –the-local-language-against-English" (*Postcolonial 249*) for a large number of the general public having English is a matter of pride and dignity. For any literate person the deprivation of English means deprivation of knowledge itself. With the impact of globalization, it is almost impossible for the world to function without English. English has become the language of management, business, economy; the language of dispute resolution and communication. In such context, the prestige of the

English language has increased over the years after globalization. However, in a world, where the sky is the limit for ambitions, everyone quees up for power and prestige. In a country like India, prestige equals to speaking of English. Therefore, a large section of the society lines up for the consumption of English which often comes in various packages. The morning newspaper is replete with advertisements of spoken English, communicative English and Englishes of various kinds which claim to make people efficient in English within a short span. However, it is pertinent to ask what standard do the agencies maintain while marketing the English language? Language which is very much a part of one's self is often distorted when it is viewed as merely as a 'skill' to be acquired. Moreover, the arising need among the lower sections of the society to educate their children in English medium schools has impacted their very lives. Personally I know a few neighbours of mine who work as domestic labours in several households just to put their children in English medium schools. It calls for a critical analysis of the pernicious results that arise while considering English as a marker of social status and prestige.

Undoubtedly English has retained its prestigious status and power in India right from the colonial era despite the resistance advocated by a few academic elites. However, this privileged position of English has also resulted in making it a glamorous language particularly in the Indian scenario. The degree of attention and glamour which English has enumerated is very much evident from the earnest desire of English from the celebratory world in India. Although, the word glamour has larger connotations, and is applicable to anything that is attractive and appealing, I am basically relating it to the glamorous celebrity world; Bollywood and the glamorous world of soaps, serials and so called reality shows in the Indian context. Bollywood which is "the sobriquet for the Hindi language film industry, based in Mumbai, India, is more formally referred to as Hindi cinema" (Wiki/Bollywood). However, in contemporary times English has become an indispensable part of the so called "Hindi cinema". Since English is considered as one of the Indian languages, there is no harm in incorporating English in the Hindi cinemas. But what

is to be underlined is that apart from a few realistic reformatory movies, most of the Hindi cinemas have hardly any 'Hindiness' in it. Claiming to retain their patriotic fervour, most of the actors become millionaire in New York or England through constant struggle, but somehow they seem to be diasporic/diasporas. The songs in Hindi movies are incomplete without adding a few English lyrics. The glamour of the movie is highlighted by setting it in the US or UK. Fortunately, most of our actors have good educational background and are very well versed in English, but it is really painful to hear the distorted version of English from a few others. Pathetically beautiful looks and riches won't make them glamorous; in order to sustain in the glamorous world they need the final element-English. This is, of course, true to soaps and serials. The television rating point (TRP) has so much to do with 'English' and 'Englishness'.

It is important to state that the intention of this paper is not malicious. It does not mean to undermine or show favoritism to any language; neither to English nor to any other regional languages of India. But as a student of English discipline, it is essential for me to interrogate the role of English in our own times. As I have already argued above language is an indispensable part of our own selves. It is very much rooted to one's community as many postcolonial critics have argued. Extinction of a language leads to the endangerment and extinction of a community. Therefore, considering it as one of our own languages, it is our responsibility to protect the language from being carried away by the waves of glamour and prestige. In this regard, it is important to note that in the Postcolonial context, there is no authentic 'Standard' English as such. In the contemporary period English has been multiplied and hybridized subsequently giving rise to immense variety in the types of English: 'Creolization', 'Chutneyfication', 'Hinglish' 'Asian Englishes' to name a few. But these variations are adaptations rather than distortions. But when we think of any language in terms of power, pride and glory the very language is likely to be distorted. English is no exception in this regard. The hype of English knowing has reached to an

unimaginable level that those who know, especially speak, English are considered 'omniscient'.

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