The Appropriation and Abrogation of Language in Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies

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***Abstract*—This essay attempts to examine Amitav Ghosh's re-structuring of the English language in his postcolonial masterpiece Sea of Poppies. In this remarkably well-researched historical narrative, Ghosh exemplifies the re-moulding of language in a multilingual society colonised by the British. He introduces and blends an array of languages through his varied and diverse characters, resulting in a powerful abrogation of "standard" English and a deliberate appropriation of a language that was used to rule over the colonial subjects. This constant shift and transformation in the linguistic landscape of Ghosh's novel offers a rich perspective into the reality of language use in history; dismantling the idea of a "standard" or correct way of using a language**
The primary point of reference for this study has been The Empire Writes Back by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin; wherein a part of their work focuses on the re-structuring of language that inevitably results due to colonialism.
This paper investigates the unapologetic use of appropriation and abrogation concepts explored in The Empire Writes Back that arms Ghosh's linguistic exploration of the "languages" used by the characters and the narrative form of the text itself.

***Index Terms*—Postcolonialism, language, linguistics, appropriation, abrogation, Amitav Ghosh, Sea of Poppies.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Sea of Poppies is a ground-breaking novel by Amitav Ghosh. Thoroughly researched in terms of history and language and exceptional in its accuracy of nautical-pidgin, Ghosh presents a compelling piece of postcolonial, historical fiction. Set in the 1800s, the novel is the first book of the Ibis trilogy. Set at a time period that marked the onset of the Opium War, the novel traces the effects of Opium Trade from the grassroots, including the hardships faced by peasants; right to the people at the top the rich and power-hungry British businessmen.

The Sea of Poppies "is a fine balance between the author's craft and his deep research. It enthrals (the) reader with 19th century Bhojpuri songs, slangs and swears spoken on Indian streets, minute details of opium cultivation…the peculiar language of the laskars (sailors), botany, the engineering details of ships and intricacies of sailing them on the high seas (and) the Indianized English spoken by East India Company officials" (Choudhury 3)

This exceptional text is a product of postcolonial literature. Postcolonialism refers to "the historical period or state of affairs representing the aftermath of Western colonialism" (Ivison) It represents the ways in which colonialism continues to affect education, culture and language long after the departure of the colonial authorities. Postcolonialism has a lasting impact on language hierarchy, wherein it decides which language is treated as the 'standard' and which languages are marginalised. Thus, language becomes one of the most important battlegrounds of postcolonial resistance.

The Empire Writes Back is one of the foundational texts in postcolonial literary theory. It is "the first major theoretical account of a wide range of post-colonial texts and their relation to the larger issues of post-colonial culture" (Ashcroft et al. 2). It attempts to dissect the ways in which post-colonial societies' literature and language are irreversibly affected by cultural and political changes as a direct result of colonisation.

"One of the main features of imperial oppression is control over language. The imperial education system installs a 'standard' version of the metropolitan language as the norm, and marginalizes all 'variants' as impurities…Such power is rejected in the emergence of an effective post-colonial voice."

(Ashcroft et al. 7) It is precisely this linguistic hierarchy that Amitav Ghosh in Sea of Poppies challenges, using abrogation rejection of the colonial standard, and appropriation restructuring English to suit native expression. He plays with these phenomena of language and power, concocting a zestful mixture of a plethora of languages narrated in a truly Indian voice.

The Sea of Poppies, within the fabric of the English language weaves in a patchwork of different languages and dialects including Bhojpuri, Bengali and a concoction of Laskari that encompasses flecks of Arabic, Malay, Hindustani, etc.

At the heart of the novel, is the ship Ibis, that essentially brings together this vast variety of languages and dialects through the text's diverse characters, the passengers aboard the ship.

The first character we come across is Deeti, a poor peasant woman, who flees her abusive family with her lower caste lover Kalua. We then come across Neel Rattan Haldar, the Raja of Raskhali, who is wrongfully dispossessed and convicted as a criminal, aboard the Ibis is Zacharay Reid, a mixed race American, who passes off as white, as well as other many other characters including Babboo Nob Kissin, Paulette, Serang Ali and Benjamin Burnham. However, for the sake of brevity, this paper focuses on three characters Deeti, Neel Haldar and Zachary Reid; as, arguably, Ghosh's use of abrogation and appropriation emerges the strongest through them.

II. ANALYSIS

Abrogation and Appropriation:

The central character of the Sea of Poppies, Deeti, lives in northern Bihar and is the wife of an opium addict who soon dies. Deeti's character speaks pure Bhojpuri, snippets of which Ghosh has incorporated within the text, often without any translation. This act of Ghosh is noteworthy; as through this, he allows his English narrative to bend towards Deeti. These Bhojpuri snippets form a natural part of the narrative, compelling the reader to understand the text through context. This effort allows the reader to hear Deeti's authentic voice, forging a stronger connection with her character, it also serves as an enriching medium to hear the authentic voice of common Indian peasants in Bihar, the language of those at the margins of society, the oppressed subaltern, thus given linguistic space in the novel. "One does not need to know meanings of all the words to enjoy a novel, says novelist Amitav Ghosh, who reveals that his ignorance of exotic sounding recipes like pot beef did not stop him from reading books." (Press Trust of India) Ghosh emphasises on how understanding the context can help readers understand untranslated words in an English novel. At the very beginning of the text, Ghosh writes, "laying out a freshly washed dhoti and kameez for Hukam Singh, her husband, and preparing the rotis and achar he would eat at midday." In this sentence, Ghosh uses Bhojpuri words like "dhoti", "kameez", "roti" and "achar", without offering any translation and without even italicising them. This act deliberately compels the readers to see these words, not as foreign, but as a natural part of the narrative.

Ghosh in this way abrogates the English language, refusing "its illusory standard of normative or 'correct' usage" (Ashcroft et al. 37). According to Ashcroft et al. this act is vital in decolonising the language.

Neel Rattan Haldar, is an English-educated, westernised aristocrat who at the beginning of the novel is very privileged and performs what theorists describe as mimicry mirroring the English in their speech and refined mannerisms, "he swirled his brocaded shawl protectively over his chest as he folded his hands together in welcome: 'Mr Burnham, Mr Doughty I am most greatly honoured to be afforded this privilege.'" (Ghosh 88) Neel is thus firmly positioned within and endorses the colonial linguistic order.

However, when he is wrongly dispossessed and convicted, Neel's viewpoint of the English language and colonial authority transform, he discovers the facade of colonial refinement and repurposes his fluency of the language as a weapon of resistance, to subvert the "purity" of English. He appropriates the language to assert power. In a moment of deliberate subversion, he addresses a British officer in polished English "'Sir,' he said, 'can you not afford me the dignity of a reply? Or is it that you do not trust yourself to speak English?' The man's eyes flared and Neel saw that he had nettled him, simply by virtue of addressing him in his own tongue a thing that was evidently counted as an act of intolerable insolence in an Indian convict, a defilement of the Language." (Ghosh 228) Neel realises that as a convict, speaking to the colonial oppressor in his own language is disconcerting for the officer, perhaps a reminder that the convict is as

human and deserving of dignity as he himself is. Thus, Neel undergoes a linguistic shift from mimicry to appropriation, turning English into a language of retaliation. Thus, Neel effectively demonstrates the power of subversion and appropriation in postcolonial, linguistic identities.

Zachary Reid is one of the most linguistically adaptable characters in the book, being able to switch from one dialect to another with ease, he embodies the "syncretic and hybridised nature of the postcolonial experience." (Ashcroft et al. 40). Coming from Baltimore, he speaks the African American Vernacular English, presumably his mother tongue "Ain nobody never gave me nothin like this before." (Ghosh 21), a dialect that already exists as a subversion of standard English. With the lascars, he quickly picks up their dialect and communicates with Serang Ali efficiently in the multilingual Lascari pidgin.

"Zachary had to familiarize himself with a new set of provisions he had to learn to say 'resum' instead of 'rations', and he had to wrap his tongue around words like 'dal', 'mas ala' and 'achar'. He had to get used to 'malum' instead of mate, 'serang' for bosun, 'tindal' for bosun's mate, and 'seacunny' for helmsman; he had to memorize a new shipboard vocabulary, which sounded a bit like English and yet not." (Ghosh 18)

Moreover, Zachary also speaks the refined standard form of English when he is in the company of elites like Mr Burnham, his family and his ward, Paulette "'Consider it done, Miss: you can count on me. I will speak to our serang. A place on the crew won't be hard to arrange." (Ghosh 121) Zachary's mastery over these various dialects and registers exemplifies a postcolonial adaptability that destabilises the colonial hierarchy of languages. This "code-switching… achieve(s) the dual result of abrogating the Standard English and appropriating an English as a culturally significant discourse" (Ashcroft et al. 45)

III.CONCLUSION

Amitav Ghosh's The Sea of Poppies is thus not just a nod to, but an embodiment of how "the empire writes back", literally. Ghosh's act of abrogation, wherein the language of his text embraces marginalised voices and dialects, appropriation of the English language by Neel Rattan Haldar, who repurposes and weaponises his fluency of English, and Zachary Reid, who effortlessly code-switches between dialects to suit his audience and purpose. All of this serves to exemplify the reality of a postcolonial linguistic landscape that was fluid and constantly shifting. Standard English, as a direct result of colonisation, and by extent postcolonisation, as The Sea of Poppies effortlessly exemplifies, was thus decolonised, repurposed and restructured to suit the native people, who made the English language truly their own.

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