

Language As Power in African and Indian English Literature

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Abstract

Language in postcolonial literature is not merely a medium of communication but a powerful instrument of control, resistance, and identity formation. African and Indian English literature reveal how language operates as a site of power shaped by colonial history. This paper examines how English—once imposed as a colonial language—has been appropriated, reshaped, and resisted by African and Indian writers. Through selected works by Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Raja Rao, Salman Rushdie, and Arundhati Roy, the study explores how language functions as a tool of domination as well as empowerment, enabling postcolonial writers to reclaim voice, culture, and authority.

Keywords: Language, Power, Postcolonialism, African Literature, Indian English Literature

Introduction

Colonialism not only occupies land and resources; it also dominates minds through language. The imposition of English in Africa and India functioned as a means of administration, education, and cultural control. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o argues, language carries culture, and to control a people’s language is to control their worldview. In postcolonial societies, English occupies a complex position—it is both a reminder of oppression and a potential tool for global communication and resistance.

African and Indian English literature demonstrate how writers negotiate this tension. By bending English to local realities, incorporating indigenous expressions, and challenging colonial narratives, postcolonial writers transform language into a site of power. This paper analyses how language operates as power in African and Indian English literature by examining its role in colonial domination, identity formation, resistance, and cultural assertion.

Language and Colonial Power

During colonial rule, English was positioned as the language of authority, education, and intelligence, while indigenous languages were often dismissed as inferior or primitive. This hierarchy created linguistic alienation among colonized subjects. Those fluent in English gained access to power, employment, and prestige, while others were marginalized.

In both Africa and India, colonial education systems promoted English literature that reflected European values and histories, sidelining local narratives. Language thus became a mechanism of control, shaping how colonized people perceived themselves and their cultures. The internalization of English superiority contributed to cultural displacement and loss of indigenous identity.

African Literature: Language as Resistance and Reclamation

Chinua Achebe

Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* demonstrates how English can be appropriated to tell African stories authentically. Achebe uses English infused with Igbo proverbs, idioms, and speech patterns, thereby reshaping the colonial language to reflect African thought systems. By doing so, he challenges colonial narratives that portrayed African societies as voiceless or uncivilized. Achebe famously argued that English could be used to carry the weight of African experience. His strategy turns language into a form of resistance—English is no longer solely the colonizer’s tool but a means of cultural assertion.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o

In contrast, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o takes a radical stance by rejecting English altogether in favour of African languages such as Gikuyu. In works like *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ argues that writing in English perpetuates cultural domination. For him, true liberation lies in reclaiming indigenous languages. Ngũgĩ’s position highlights language as power by emphasizing that linguistic choice is political. His rejection of English exposes how deeply language is tied to freedom, identity, and resistance in African literature.

Indian English Literature: Language, Identity, and Hybridity

Raja Rao

Raja Rao, in the preface to *Kanthapura*, acknowledges the difficulty of expressing Indian sensibility in English. He argues that English must be “Indianized” to reflect local rhythms and cultural contexts. Rao’s narrative style adapts English syntax to Indian speech patterns, demonstrating how language can be transformed rather than merely adopted.

This adaptation shows language as power by allowing Indian writers to assert cultural identity while using a global language.

Salman Rushdie

Salman Rushdie celebrates linguistic hybridity. In *Midnight’s Children*, he blends English with Hindi, Urdu, and Indian idioms, creating a hybrid language that mirrors India’s multicultural identity. Rushdie argues that English no longer belongs exclusively to the British—it has been reshaped by former colonies.

Rushdie’s work illustrates how linguistic hybridity empowers postcolonial writers to challenge purity, authority, and fixed identities. Language becomes a space of creativity and rebellion rather than submission.

Arundhati Roy

Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* further demonstrates how language can disrupt power structures. Roy breaks grammatical rules, invents words, and plays with capitalization to reflect marginalized voices and childhood perspectives. Her manipulation of English challenges standard norms and exposes social hierarchies related to caste, gender, and class.

Comparative Perspective

Both African and Indian English literature reveal similar struggles with language as power. While Achebe and Rushdie choose appropriation and hybridity, Ngũgĩ advocates

rejection. These differing approaches reflect varied responses to colonial legacy, but all recognize language as deeply political.

African literature often emphasizes language loss and recovery, while Indian English literature tends to focus on linguistic blending due to India’s multilingual context. Despite these differences, both traditions use English strategically—to question authority, reclaim identity, and assert narrative control.

Conclusion

Language in African and Indian English literature is far more than a neutral medium; it is a site of power shaped by colonial history. Whether through appropriation, hybridity, or rejection, postcolonial writers expose and challenge the dominance embedded in language. By reshaping English or returning to indigenous tongues, these writers reclaim agency and voice.

Ultimately, language becomes a tool of empowerment—allowing formerly silenced cultures to speak back to history. African and Indian English literature thus transforms the colonizer’s language into a powerful instrument of resistance, identity, and cultural survival.

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