

English - Colonial to Postcolonial: The Problematics of Writing in English in Mauritius

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ABSTRACT

In view of the rich flowering of literatures in English coming from the Commonwealth, one wonders whether those who legislated for the teaching of English in the Empire in the early nineteenth century ever predicted that countries like India, Africa and the Caribbean islands might one day produce many of the best writers in the world, including a few Nobel Prize winners of Literature. Since Mauritius is part of the Commonwealth, there is a tradition of complaint that a Mauritian literature in English is not taking off as expected. This paper seeks to explore the issue of whether an English language education is developing in Mauritians the required type of proficiency for it to be used as a medium for cultural or personal expression. Although the written language is always the product of some form of schooling, most writers work within the tension produced between the schooled character of writing and the less formal ways in which we learn to speak and to articulate our thoughts and emotions. I wish to argue that the process of institutionalisation of the English language in Mauritius, being the medium of the parliament, the judiciary and administration, has affected the conditions of possibility for writing in English.

INTRODUCTION

Mauritius is a multilingual society. In the last census (1983), 52% of the population were described as Hindu, 17% as Moslem, 3% as Sino-Mauritian and 29% as 'General Population'. Both the Hindus and the Moslems are Indian, which means that they constitute two thirds of the population. The most important language spoken by this group is Bhojpuri; however, it is not considered politically as a full-fledged language, but rather as a dialect. Thus, Hindus will describe themselves as speaking Hindi and Moslems Urdu. Other Indian languages to be found are Marathi, Tamil and Telegu. The Sino-Mauritians speak Hakka or, to a lesser extent, Cantonese. The

'General Population' ranges from the white Franco-Mauritians to the mulatto or mixed population ('Gens de Couleur' or 'Creoles'). The language of the 'Gens de Couleur' and the Franco-Mauritians is French while almost everyone speaks French-based Creole.

Mauritius was captured from the French in 1810 and remained under British control for over 150 years, but they did not change its existing laws, customs and religion. Consequently, French continued to be used and French customs dominated society. English, however, became the official language used by administrators and teachers. After independence in 1968, the same policies were maintained by successive governments. Attempts at introducing Creole as the official language of education proved unpopular with the majority of the population. While English, therefore, is the dominant language of education and state institutions like the parliament, judiciary and administration, no group in the population actually speaks it as a mother tongue. English is taught as the first language in school and its functional use in society is in formal correspondence inside and outside Mauritius. Increasingly it is also being used as one of the languages within the limited register of the tourist trade.

For many Mauritians, an English language education has meant a gateway to success; a stepping-stone to a fairly well-paid employment. For some, a hard-won mastery of English has been a means of overcoming the stigma of marginality, while, for others, it has meant frustration, inability to speak a language we apparently need to prosper in a world dominated by developments in communications technology and economic globalisation. Failure to meet standards of English has also meant denial of employment opportunities, social exclusion and marginalisation. Very few Mauritians realise, however, that the English language, which pervades every sphere of our cognitive and intellectual life, is linked up with issues of power, history and identity. The entire discourse around English in Mauritius seems to be restricted to the issue of 'falling' standards which, of course, must not be shrugged off as a minor problem, although it was to be expected in view of the rapid expansion of the educational system in this country during the past twenty or thirty years.

This paper aims to address, instead, the issue of whether our English language education is developing in Mauritians the required level of proficiency for it to be used as a medium for cultural or personal expression. English being the most audible legacy of the British Empire, I shall begin by making a survey of the history of English teaching in the Empire to show how what constitutes 'English' and how it is taught is heavily influenced by social, political and economic factors. In the second part of the paper, I shall refer to postcolonial societies like India, Africa and the Caribbean countries, with which Mauritius shares lots of things in common, and summarise the

kind of debates taking place around English in these places. This will serve as a fitting context to take up the issue of English as a language of literary expression in Mauritius.

ENGLISH AND THE EMPIRE

It would be of some interest to note that the term 'English teacher' was first used in England in 1587, and the teaching of English as a subject appears to be fairly well established by the year 1600. The sixteenth century actually ended with a sense of national pride in the language of England and an awareness of its ideological potential. The spirit of Elizabethan nationalism dictated that English should have as much respect throughout Europe as the English political and military presence. One of the figures who urged that English be given priority over the classical languages like Latin and Greek was a man called Alexander Gill (1565-1635), a puritan who first proposed using written works in English in the classroom to propagate religious principles and improve conduct, because, he said, 'the divine declarations' were expressed 'a thousand times better ... than in Latin'.

The English universities, however, only slowly introduced English studies. In the public schools, even by the 1860s, English studies as such had very little role, and remained neglected, the reason being that, from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, a classical education (with a knowledge of Latin) had the highest prestige in England.

In the earlier part of the nineteenth century, there were several views on English, and these need to be judged against the social, political and economic background prevailing at that time. This was a period during which Britain was transformed from an agricultural to an industrial society, which appeared to demand more widespread literacy and high levels of literacy as a means of social and economic advancement, and as a means of breaking down the old class barriers. Language and class have always been associated but this was particularly remarked and noticeable in nineteenth century England.

It is interesting to see how English got to be taught. One approach was to discourage the teaching of reading and writing to the mass of the population. Another was to teach reading but not writing. Quite different was the view, seen as dangerously democratic, that literacy in English should be available to all.

The view that the children of the poor in England not be taught to write continued well into the nineteenth century. Robert Lowe, who was a

member of the Liberal party government, at that time, the equivalent of Minister of Education, and later to become Home Secretary and Chancellor of the Exchequer, wrote in 1861 :

'The lower classes should be educated to discharge the duties cast upon them. They should also be educated that they may appreciate and defer to a higher cultivation when they meet it; and the higher classes ought to be educated in a very different manner, in order that they may exhibit to the lower classes that higher education to which, if it were shown to them, they would bow down and defer'.

(Cited in Gordon and Lawton, 1978 : 183).

In both Ireland and Wales, subjected to some form of colonial rule, the use of English as a language of instruction in government - funded schools was accompanied by the suppression of Welsh and Irish, in part because of their associations with anti-English movements. In Scotland, too, Gaelic was suppressed and English was used in Scottish schools, with the result that Scotland knew consistently higher levels of literacy in English than obtained in England.

When we turn to India and other parts of the British Empire, we find a different situation. It is interesting to notice that there was no attempt, as in Britain, to eradicate the local languages. British rule was less concentrated in India than it was in Ireland and Wales, and the approach used was a different one. In India, and elsewhere in Asia, English was introduced as the language of the elite and as the language of higher education. Its function was in some ways like that of Latin in medieval and Renaissance Europe in that it was the language of administration and of 'high' culture.

In India, the purpose for teaching English was to prepare an elite that would cooperate with the British; the purpose was not to ensure a literate population in English (or any other language). The Indian students were mainly boys from the middle and upper classes, whereas those in England included the poorest, boys and girls, but tended to exclude the wealthier who would have had a private education.

If we now look at the development of English studies in the universities in England, the picture that emerges is that English as a university subject in England is relatively recent. The universities of Oxford and Cambridge did not teach English to their undergraduates until the end of the nineteenth century and saw no point in doing so. Those who could read classical literature could easily read books in English at leisure, and neither Oxford

nor Cambridge would admit a course in English studies which seemed, in their eyes, to lack academic rigour and prestige.

Professorships had been established in English at University College, London, in 1828, and in English Literature and History at King's College, London, in 1835. But at the University of Durham, founded in 1832, no place was given to the teaching of English until the end of the century. The late recognition of English studies at these universities has a simple explanation. English was not thought to be a proper academic study; it was not an intellectual discipline. The teaching of English literature was frequently combined with History, and there were several joint Chairs in the two subjects.

The situation in nineteenth century India, and elsewhere in the Empire, is, however, different. In such countries, Britain first faced the possibility of having to teach English to a body of people who were important to Britain and to continuing British rule, and whose literary and educational backgrounds were in languages other than English.

Gauri Viswanathan, the author of 'Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British rule in India' (1989), argues that the general tendency of the colonial administration in India was to avoid religious instruction in order not to offend the colonised people, so this led to a search for another means by which the laws of social order and morality could be inculcated. This medium, she claims, was English literature. The teaching of English in India, in other words, can be seen as an experiment in the use of English as a form of social, cultural and political control.

The British saw Hinduism as idolatrous superstition, and the weakening of Hinduism was seen as a sign of moral advancement as, of course, was conversion to Christianity. Macaulay's Minute (1835) is generally quoted as the categorical statement of what came to be called the 'Anglicist' movement which favoured a European style of education using English. Macaulay argued that the wealth of literature and science in English and its global spread meant that :

'Of all foreign tongues, the English tongue is that which would be the most useful to our Native subjects'.

(Cited in Mahmood 1895:50)

He argued for English as a civilising force, he thought English education for the elite would have a trickle-down effect :

'We must at present do our best to form ... a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect'.

(Cited in Mahmood 1895)

In 1836, Macaulay wrote to his father :

'It is my firm belief that, if our plans of education are followed up, there will not be a single idolater among the respectable classes in Bengal thirty years hence. And this will be effected without any efforts to proselytise; without the smallest interference with religious liberty; merely by the natural operation of knowledge and reflection'.

(Cited in Trevelyan 1909:330)

What all the participants - Indian and European - shared was a principal concern with the education of the (male) élite. English medium education of a high quality was envisaged only for the 'respectable class of native'.

The legacy of this elitist tradition is still with us, as in many of the postcolonial countries, including Mauritius, where a high level of ability in English either indicates or defines an elite.

DISCOURSE ON ENGLISH IN POSTCOLONIAL CONTEXTS

As regards the postcolonial contexts, we need to grasp the discourse around English to see how English is related to issues of history, power, politics, identity and social consciousness. Writers in the postcolonial world, for whom English is not their mother tongue, have a good deal to tell us about language and culture generally. I shall focus on what has been called the 'New Literatures in English', and specifically on a number of writers for whom dilemmas over the language have been particularly difficult, since they approached writing and English through schooling within a colonial or ex-colonial society.

In 1981 Ngugi wa Thiong'o, a Kenyan writer, delivered a paper called 'The Language of African Literature' at a conference of African writers. That paper is now a chapter in a collection of essays called 'Decolonising the Mind' (1986) which explains the promise he made when his novel 'Petals of Blood' was published in 1977, to stop writing in English and to write from that point onwards in either Gikuyu, his first language, or Kiswahili, the

kenyan national language. For Ngugi, his hard-won mastery of English remains contaminated by the politics of its acquisition, by the history of Kenya's colonial past, by the part played by English in education and other forms of social control, by the fact that the poorest, most oppressed groups and individuals in his country are unable to read English.

'One of the most humiliating experiences was to be caught speaking Gikuyu in the vicinity of the school. The culprit was given corporal punishment - three to five strokes of the cane on bare buttocks - or was made to carry a metal plate around the neck with inscriptions such as I AM STUPID or I AM A DONKEY The attitude to English was the exact opposite : any achievement in spoken or written English was highly rewarded; prizes, prestige, applause; the ticket to higher realms. English became the measure of intelligence and ability in the arts, the sciences, and all the other branches of learning. English became the main determinant of a child's progress up the ladder of formal education'. (Ngugi 1986:27-8)

Ngugi was influenced by Frantz Fanon who advocated total rejection of the standards of the colonizing culture, including his language. According to Fanon, 'the colonized is raised above jungle status (in the eyes of the colonizer) in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards'. The reasoning is that he who has taken up the language of the colonizer has accepted the world of the colonizer and therefore the standards of the colonizer.

On the other hand, Achebe, the older Nigerian writer, has a different appreciation of the English issue. Achebe wrote an article 'English and the African writer' which was first published in 1965. Here, he argues strongly for a 'national' as opposed to what he calls an 'ethnic' literature. He too argues from what he sees as the 'reality' of an Africa, where alienation has indeed been an inevitable consequence of the kind of education a carefully selected minority of children received. Achebe's 'reality' includes, however, the dozens of languages spoken in addition to English. For him, though, the imposition of English, however arbitrary, has made it possible for Africans to talk to one another. If, as he puts it, the British failed to give Africans a song, they 'at least gave them a tongue, for sighing'. He acknowledges that English is 'a world language which history has forced down our throats', but is convinced that to insist that 'any true African literature must be written in African languages ... would be merely pursuing a dead end, which can only lead to sterility, uncreativity and frustration'. He continues :

'What I do see is a new voice coming out of Africa, speaking of African experience in a world-wide

language. So my answer to the question, Can an African ever learn English well enough to be able to use it effectively in creative writing? is certainly yes. If on the other hand you ask : Can he ever learn to use it like a native speaker? I should say, I hope not. It is neither necessary nor desirable for him to be able to do so. The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use'. (Achebe 1965:29).

In other words, for Achebe, his use of English entails 'altering', 'making new' a language which may have been forced on him but which, by now, he has claimed as his own. This appropriation of the language of the coloniser constitutes a strength for Achebe.

Achebe and Ngugi have different visions of the future of African countries, and therefore of the role that English and other languages will play in them. For Achebe, the future demands forms of compromise with the rest of the world, in so far as they encourage African unity and productive two-way communication between African and other countries. For Ngugi, the future must start from revolutionary change within a country like Kenya, and with the recovery and remaking of Kenya's own identity. We need not be reminded that attitudes to language are always political.

In the Indian subcontinent, one of the first writers to talk about the business of writing in English is R K Narayan. Indeed, R K Narayan is the first Indian novelist in English to secure international recognition. He began his career in the 1930s during the heyday of Indian political mobilisation and the campaign of civil disobedience against British imperialism. "The English Teacher" (1945) was published two years before formal Indian independence - at a time when the Indians had to position themselves vis-à-vis British colonialism and Indian nationalism. And yet, neither colonialism nor nationalism occupies a central position in his novels. What is more interesting is that Narayan gives no sense of having a problem about writing in English. Indeed, he has written :

'We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as a part of us. English both is and isn't 'an alien language'; it is the language of Indians' 'intellectual make-up' but not of 'their emotional make-up' '. (Narayan 1988:53)

Such allusions seem to tell an ambivalent story about Narayan's relation to the political and nationalist movements that were popular across India during his early writing period.

For many - perhaps most - writers, there is probably no question of having a choice of languages in which to write, as Ngugi and Achebe have. R K Narayan seems not to have considered writing in his home language Tamil or Kannada. But if we take the case of V S Naipaul, it appears that Hindi was never a possible language for him to write in. In the Caribbean situation, slavery, indentured labour and all the other material deprivations of colonialism have simply or almost completely obliterated people's languages. In the English-speaking Caribbean, writers have never had a serious alternative to writing in English. In spite of that, these writers are confronted with issues of identity and of history and power.

V S Naipaul grew up in an East Indian Hindu and rural community in Trinidad, and although he was brought up in a Hindi-speaking family he seems always to have regarded English as his principal language. Naipaul has made a career as a travel writer, and he writes that travel

'broadened my world view; it showed me a changing world and took me out of my colonial shell; it became the substitute for the mature social experience - the deepening knowledge of a society - which my background and the nature of my life denied me' (Naipaul 1984:11)

So for V S Naipaul, writing in English has meant a life of restless movement. The complex world of the Caribbean, in which he grew up, was unable within his view to provide 'mature social experience'. So writing for him has meant articulating his rootlessness and his isolation. It has meant a life where he needed to recognise and understand new things, to return again and again to the Caribbean and to other parts of the world to which Indians have moved and tried to make lives for themselves.

The 'New Literatures in English' may be read as a legacy of British colonialism. The British who governed the Empire could scarcely have dreamed that the worldwide dissemination of the English language might produce not just readers and listeners of English but writers of English too. One wonders whether those who legislated for the teaching of English, for example, in India in the early nineteenth century ever predicted that India might one day produce many of the best writers of English in the world, let alone Nobel Prize winners of Literature.

THE PROBLEMATICS OF WRITING IN ENGLISH IN MAURITIUS

Why we Mauritians, with our English language education, have not produced our own Arundhati Roy or Salman Rushdie or V.S. Naipaul is

open for discussion. But I'll try to identify one or two problematic areas in writing English in Mauritius which, perhaps, might explain why Mauritians complain about a Mauritian Literature in English not taking off as we would have liked it to be. Does English as a language of literary expression have a future in Mauritius? Is it possible, as the Indian writer Raja Rao asked in the introduction to *KANTHAPURA* (1938) to 'convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own'?

Before addressing this question, I would like to refer to Achebe's notion of the appropriation of the coloniser's language - the process whereby the language is seized and re-placed in a specific cultural location, and then examine whether this process has actually happened in the Mauritian context. For Achebe, the appropriation of the English language is a *sine qua non* for creative writing in a post-colonial context. In an essay, called 'Colonialist criticism', published in 1975, he writes:

'And let no one be fooled by the fact that we may write in English for we intend to do unheard of things with it'. (Achebe, 1988:50)

It is significant that for writers who approach writing and English through schooling within a colonial or ex-colonial society, the choice of language is an intensely personal issue, a matter of identity and of cultural allegiance. Although the written language is always the product of some form of schooling, most writers work within the tension produced between the schooled character of writing and the less formal ways in which we learn to speak and to articulate our thoughts and emotions. A language needs to be absorbed into the fabric of social life to acquire a momentum and vitality of its own, to express one's own values and identities, and to develop in ways which reflect local culture and languages.

Now, when we Mauritians speak of receiving our education through the English medium, we are speaking of a different scenario from the type of schooling that people in India, anglophone Africa and Caribbean countries receive. In these countries, English plays the role of a genuinely 'second' language (ESL), it plays a 'social' role in the community and functions as a recognised means of communication among members who speak some other language as their mother tongue - in a context where 'unheard of things' can be done with the language. The peculiar sociolinguistic situation of Mauritius is such that English is seen as the language of institutions like the parliament, the judiciary and administration; English has not yet become an integral part of our identity repertoire, or part of our cultural allegiance. It is significant that the few writers in English in Mauritius (e.g. Shakuntala Hawoldar, Lindsey Collen) spent their childhood in contexts (e.g. India,

South Africa, respectively) where the English language was part and parcel of their identity and social consciousness.

It is often said that English in Mauritius has a clear advantage in the sense that it has acquired a 'neutrality' in a linguistic context where other languages have acquired undesirable connotations. However, the notion of neutrality can both be an asset and a liability : an asset, insofar as it offends no one; a liability because of the risk that very few can feel, or therefore think deeply, in a language which can be emotionally neutral. The vast majority of Mauritian learners are being taught English in what can be called an 'acquisition poor environment' as opposed to an 'acquisition rich environment', and, as a result, the language does not become a usable means of communication. The only contact that takes place with English is in a context of formal instruction. And it would be interesting to see what actually takes place in the name of 'instruction'. Does the teaching of English in our classrooms emphasise creativity and individual development, or rather does it emphasise conforming, learning of rules and adhering to standards? When we remember that creative writing also involves the breaking of rules, standard or otherwise, we can begin to understand the problematics of writing in English. Obedience to rules and conventions is part of how we relate to language, but, as Achebe's article suggests, notions of theft and appropriation have their place too. We need to appreciate how writers attempt to 'alter' language, to remake it, in order to say what has not yet been said, to represent or reflect experiences and points of view which have been absent.

In order to come to grips with the problematics of writing in English in Mauritius, it is important to determine the exact sociolinguistic position that it occupies in our country - not as it is laid down in the constitution or in other regulations, but as it affects the existing knowledge and use of the language here. For this, we need to use objective sociolinguistic parameters to find out what is our knowledge of the language, the communicative situation and speakers' attitudes towards it, among others.

Sociolinguists (Schmied 1991) generally apply categories such as 'English as a native language' (ENL), 'English as a second language' (ESL), 'English as a foreign language' (EFL) to countries as well as to individual speakers. In recent years, another category has been added, subdividing EFL into EFL proper and EIL ('English as an international language'). This means that English is referred to as EIL when used among non-native speakers and EFL when used by non-native speakers talking to native speakers.

How do we establish the classification of English in Mauritius? Is it a native language, a second language, a foreign language or an international language?

1. Let's first look at our context of acquisition. Mother tongues are obviously acquired from parents (hence the name), second languages are usually acquired in social contacts, especially among peer groups, but also in the home or in early formal education. (This is not the case for Mauritian learners). Our context of acquisition would place us as an EIL country because international languages are learnt through formal education only.
2. A second feature we look at is the communicative range of English. Countries where English is either a native language or a second language use English for intranational as well as international communication. Again, do we Mauritians use English for intranational communication? Just because English is a medium of instruction in schools, just because most of the books are in English, one cannot argue that English really has an intranational function here.
3. My third point has to do with the degree of multilingualism in our society. Due to its intranational functions, multilingualism in countries where English is a second language comprises large sections of society, whereas in countries where English is an international language, it is basically only individuals who are polyglots as a result of their special training or individual experience.
4. Another feature which will help us determine the position of English in Mauritius is the kind of 'motivation' for language acquisition. A second language is learnt because a learner wants to integrate into the ESL speech community. We speak of the 'integrative' function of learning English. But, in Mauritius, the prime motivation for learning English is 'instrumental', to pass an exam and get a job and to use the language for restricted communicative purposes in one's occupation (e.g. teaching).
5. In terms of fluency and stylistic range, too, we can observe that, if we were learning English in a genuinely ESL context, we would expect to find more stylistic variation from Standard English. We speak of an Indian variety of English, or of a Nigerian variety of English, but I am not sure that we can speak of a Mauritian variety of English. Speakers of English as an international language have only a small range of expression in formal style.

CONCLUSION

So, in the light of the classification established above, the position of English in Mauritius, I think, would more closely resemble an EIL country rather than an ESL one. This classification is crucial for designing any educational programme, if we are to meet the language needs of our Mauritian learners and promote a truly equal but diverse society. It should also prompt a debate about the aims and purposes that we wish to accomplish in the teaching of English in Mauritian schools. Is it meant to guarantee the existence of literate professional and business élites, to produce poets and novelists, or is teaching English meant to make a population more governable and a workforce more conformist by keeping everyone in their place?

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Post-colonial criticism also questions the role of the Western literary canon and Western history as dominant forms of knowledge making. The terms "First World," "Second World," "Third World" and "Fourth World" nations are critiqued by post-colonial critics because they reinforce the dominant positions of Western cultures populating First World status. This critique includes the literary canon and histories written from the perspective of First World cultures. What does the text reveal about the problematics of post-colonial identity, including the relationship between personal and cultural identity and such issues as double consciousness and hybridity? What person(s) or groups does the work identify as "other" or stranger? How are such persons/groups described and treated? I'm no expert in the Post Colonial theory, but Achebe's lecture/essay is certainly where to start. 87 views · View upvotes. Against this backdrop, I would argue that the literature of Victorian excess, not least in battle and in colonial exploitation (what else, indeed?), is nowadays more ignored than picked over and analysed. Call it a defence mechanism, if you like, and far easier certainly than any idle attempt at justification. Appropriation of Colonial Languages. Postcolonial writers have this thing they like to do. They take the language of their colonizer (English or French, for example) and turn it on its head. A writer from the Caribbean, for example, may write a novel or play in English, but he or she may twist the English around, write in dialect, make the language sound spoken instead of written, pepper it with native phrases and terms. It's still English, but it's a different kind of English. Why do postcolonial writers do this? Because it's a way for them to challenge the authority of the colonial language. Postcolonial writers are really interested in nationhood and nationalism. A lot of these writers are very patriotic. They write books on behalf of their nations.