

Reorienting the Postcolonial Educational Practices: Perspectives and Possibilities

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Abstract: The paper has reviewed the western agenda behind teaching English language and culture into the colonized countries, and demonstrated the result in the form of self-denigration and neocolonialism consequent upon adopting them. It has also demonstrated how the postcolonial writers have been working hard to regain their lost identity, dignity, language, history and cultural heritage by using national/postcolonial theories and perspectives. Demonstrating the colonist's objective to teaching English and the consequent cultural implications in the postcolonial societies, the article has argued for the paradigm shift in the teaching practice to improve the educational practice in the postcolonial societies and enhance the human condition of life.

I. INTRODUCTION

The postcolonial countries have accepted the educational baggage from their former colonizers without any interrogation. The focus of the present study is to contest the colonial educational policies and demonstrate the consequence of adopting such an educational system. In the article, an in-depth analysis of the colonial objectives in teaching English and the empirical study of the result of such an education has been demonstrated. The study has emphasized the need to re-orient the educational practice to the respective postcolonial countries to facilitate the people in their best possible ways. The conviction of the study is to provide a rationale to re-orient the educational systems of the postcolonial societies.

II. COLONIAL EDUCATIONAL MISSION

From the 16th century to the early 18th century, the British started spreading their trade and business across many parts of the world, and soon they started colonizing these foreign territories. All along the process of trading and politically colonizing, they have been teaching their religion, culture and language. This process of colonization took place in all the aspects of the society: psychological, cultural, social, political, educational and linguistic. Chinua Achebe (2009), one of the most powerful postcolonial writers from Africa, explained, "British penetration of West Africa in the second half of the nineteenth century was not achieved only on the field of battle, as in Benin, but at home also, in churches, schools, newspapers, novels, et cetera by the denigration of Africa and its people." (p. 62)

A critical analysis of "The Minute of Indian Education of February 1835" by T. B. Macaulay, one of the powerful British colonist thinkers serving India from 1834 to 1838, illuminated the objectives of teaching English in the British colonies like India. He argued for the introduction of English in India: "We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, --a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" (Macaulay, 1935, Para. 34). This project is to create a class of people who were later termed by Postcolonial critics as the neocolonial agents of the former colonizers in the postcolonial countries. For an effective educational, psychological, cultural and social colonization, he advocated to design an educational system that denigrates the knowledge systems of the colonized. Macaulay propagated "that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia" (Macaulay, 1935, Para. 10). For a systematic subjugation and elimination of the whole knowledge and power systems of the colonized, he proposed an educational policy where it will be projected that "...there are no books on any subject (from India and Arabia) which deserve to be compared to our own, whether, when we can teach European science, we shall teach systems which, by universal confession, wherever they differ from those of Europe differ for the worse..." (Macaulay, 1935, Para. 13).

This attitude of dominating and containing the people, the languages and the cultures of other nations was still noticed to be pervading even in the twentieth century. Robert Phillipson documented one such attitude in his famous book *Linguistic Imperialism* when he quoted the director of International House, (from International House brochure, 1979): "Once we used to send gunboats and diplomats abroad; now we are sending English teachers" (Phillipson, 2000, p. 8). Phillipson illustrated the politics and the process of colonization through the linguistic discourses: ". . . many of the terms used in analyses of language and imperialism are ideologically loaded. They reflect a European way of conceptualizing the issues, and tend to

reinforce Eurocentric myths and stereotypes.... Many Eurocentric concepts conform to the pattern of how racism is affirmed, namely by means of 1) self-exaltation on the part of the dominant group which creates an idealistic image of itself, 2) the devaluation of the dominated group, and the suppression and stagnation of its culture, institutions, life-styles and ideas, and 3) systematic rationalization of the relationships between both groups, always favorable to the dominant group” (Phillipson, 2000, p. 38).

The effect of the prolonged teaching of English language and culture as a means and source of civilization to the colonized people is such that people of the colonized culture started suffering from self-denigration about their own people and culture. Achebe gave one such incident from the school of his Nigerian society where a school boy felt ashamed of using the African word ‘harmattan’ in referring African weather. To quote Achebe (1990), “Today things have changed a lot, but it would be foolish to pretend that we have fully recovered from the traumatic effects of our first confrontation with Europe. Three or four weeks ago my wife, who teaches English in a boys’ school, asked a pupil why he wrote about winter when he meant the ‘harmattan’. He said the other boys would call him a bushman if he did such a thing! Now, you wouldn’t have thought, would you, that there was something shameful in your weather? But apparently we do. How can this great blasphemy be purged?” (p. 44). The incident demonstrated the self-denigration and self-abasement with which Africans were grappling.

Achebe cogently argued that it was his responsibility and a part of his business as a writer, “to teach that boy that there was nothing disgraceful about the African weather, that the palm tree is a fit subject for poetry.” (Achebe, 1990, p. 44) This re-education of the postcolonial population about their dignified history and proud cultural heritage is important because during the colonial period the colonizers attempted to devalue all the educational, cultural and intellectual foundations of the colonized people to weaken them from inside and to construct a justifiable pretext to colonize them. To invalidate and disown the Western educational mission in the colonized world, Achebe (2009) cogently argued, “Colonization may indeed be a very complex affair, but one thing is certain: you do not walk in, seize the land, the person, the history of another, and then sit back and compose hymns of praise in his honor. To do that would amount to calling yourself a bandit; and nobody wants to do that. So what do you do? You construct very elaborate excuses for your action....Therefore the agenda of the colonist did not, could not, make provision for the celebration of the world of the colonized...” (p. 112). When the colonized people have internalized this colonial propaganda for a long period of time and started believing in them, they started demonstrating the symptoms of self-abasement and self-denigration about their own identity and culture.

III. THE CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS OF USING ENGLISH

After getting independences from the British colonial rule, these postcolonial countries have started recovering from the trauma of the psychological, social, cultural, linguistic and political colonization, and actively decolonizing themselves in all the spheres of the society.

In this decolonization process, language has become one of the most examined issues of the Post-colonial societies. The role of English language as an agent for the cultural change engendering the indigenous languages, identities and cultures has been provoking the question: should postcolonial countries in their decolonizing drive use English or do away with it? This debate has been agitating and stimulating almost all the postcolonial writers.

The question is whether one should reject one’s own mother tongue for the language of one’s colonizer. And what is more crucial is that it is not just there as a value neutral and passive means of communication, rather it is very much active in constructing realities. The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure believed that language is ‘arbitrary’, ‘relational’ and ‘constitutive’ which means that our perception of truths and realities depends on the language we use (Barry, 2002,p. 36). So, English language, the language of the colonizer, will bring further alienation and devastation in the native culture and world-view. To respond to this problem in the decolonizing process, there emerges two basic groups of critics—one for the disapproving of the colonizer’s language and the other for the recreation of it.

NgugiWaThiong’O of Kenya is one of those radical decolonizers who wanted to liberate each and every aspect of life and culture. To realize this end, he disapproved the colonizer’s language. NgugiWaThiong’O (1981) cogently argued:

...Language was the most important vehicle through which that (colonizer’s) power fascinated and held the soul prisoner. The bullet was the means of the physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation...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...Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relation to the world...I believe that my writing in the Gikuyu language, a Kenyan language, an African language, is part and parcel of the anti-imperialist struggles of Kenyan and African peoples.(p. 287-290)

Such radical intellectuals are also working in every post-colonial country to decolonize the society. Pal Ahluwalia (1999) quoted the agony of the South African writer and critic Ezekiel Mphahlele, “Must the educated black from abroad come back to recolonise us?...It is all so embarrassing” (p. 21). Referring to the use of English language, Mahatma Gandhi, himself a prolific Indian prose writer, commented, “Is it not a painful thing that, if I want to go to a court of justice, I must employ the English language as a medium, that when I become a barrister, I may not speak my mother tongue and that someone else should have to translate to me in my own language? Is not this absolutely absurd? Is it not a sign of slavery? Am I to blame the English for it or myself? It is we, the English knowing Indians, that have enslaved India. The curse of the nation will rest not upon the English but upon us” (Quoted in Ahluwalia, 1999, p. 21).

Although Chinua Achebe (1975) intended to use English language, he lamented, “Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else’s? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling” (p. 62). He emphasized that, to use English, the country needs to recreate it to suit the specific socio-cultural milieu of Africa. Achebe (1975) opined, “The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use...I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English,...altered to suit its new African surroundings” (p. 61-62).

Though Achebe used English language he had made it clear that African culture and her identity will remain distinct from that of Europe. He asserted, “Most African writers write out of an African experience and of commitment to an African destiny. For them that destiny does not include a future European identity...”(Achebe, 1975, p. 7). Thus the writers of Post-colonial countries are experiencing a sense of doubt and uncertainty in using the coloniser’s language lest they should again get recolonized by the imperialist’s ideological weapon.

IV. NATIONAL/POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVES

The emergence of new ideas in the field of language, literature, history, culture and society has helped form the Postcolonial Studies. It has shifted its orientation from Europe to the specific postcolonial country to achieve the optimum facilitation of the people and societies, and created a lasting impact in the ways of reading literature. Post-colonialism has been formulating a new way of looking at culture and literature undermining the claim of universalism of Western culture and their canonical works which had been the yard stick of progress and development until recently. In the postcolonial literatures, the native way of life and their literature have been evaluated by the native values and perspectives. It has helped in justifying such an understanding by producing an adequate rationale. The postcolonial theory has provided a theatrical and intellectual support to empower the native people and their culture and to help them overcome their self-denigration and self-abasement.

It criticized the European understanding and depiction of postcolonial countries and illustrated how these countries have been misrepresented and subjugated. The change of perspectives from outside that is European to the inside has challenged the concept of universalism and has encouraged the marginalized and other alternative literary works to stand at least in equal status. It disapproves the assumption that the great or canonical literature has a timeless and universal significance and tries to carve out a room for every kind of literature, whether oral or written, in English or in the regional languages irrespective of cultural, social, regional or national variations in experience and outlook.

Postcolonial approach gives validity to and upholds the ideals of the native way of life, tradition, culture etc. It is their conviction that each and every socio-linguistic society is unique and distinctive and that it is an intellectual bankruptcy to mould all the societies of the world only in the ‘Western’ way. Chinua Achebe (1975) asserted: “I should like to see the word ‘universal’ banned altogether from discussions of African literature until such a time as people cease to use it as a synonym for the narrow, self serving parochialism of Europe...” (p. 7).

Post-colonialism had its intellectual foundation in the writings of Frantz Fanon. In his notable book *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Fanon explored how a nation’s past and present have been reconstructed in the colonial period from the colonizer’s perspective. Fanon (1961) argued, “Colonialism is not satisfied with snaring the people in its net or of draining the colonized brain of any form or substance. With a kind perverted logic, it turns its attention to the past of the colonized people and distorts it, disfigures it, and destroys it” (p. 149). Now, it is the fundamental responsibility of the nation to recover its lost history and heritage, and to protect it against the forces of the colonizer’s ideology, which has negated it so far. This recovery of one’s own past will help the nation grow out of the problem of self-denigration and alienation.

Edward Said is one of the most powerful figures in the postcolonial studies. His notable book *Orientalism* (1978) is a projection on how Europe has taken for granted that it is universal and superior and regards any deviation of it as ‘the Other’, and hence inferior. To Europe, the Orient is ‘the Other’. He says “...The European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self...” (Said, 1978, p. 3). He argued that the Orient is a construct in the

European imagination full of those things which they do not like to be identified with themselves like cruelty, sensuality, decadence, laziness to mention but a few. Since people of the Orient started looking at themselves through that prejudiced lens of Europe, they lost the knowledge of their true selves and positive images, and became self-denigrant.

The postcolonial critics are now rediscovering their own languages, identities and cultures. It is the task of exploring one's own roots in order to interpret them from their due perspectives, and get "re-educated and regenerated" (Achebe, 1975, p. 45) with new vigour and confidence. For the culturally denigrated people it is a struggle for survival with an identity. And to do this they will have to emerge from all those stereotyped images that had been leveled against them so that they can know themselves. This journey to self-realization, for the culturally colonized, is more than a search for identity. It is a part of their struggle to free themselves from the process of subjugation and self-denigration resulting from the process of imbibing Western language and culture. Fanon suggested, "A colonized person must constantly be aware of his image, jealously protect his position" (Fanon, 1961, p. ix). A highly ambitious decoloniser may go for his native language and will undertake it as a task to discover such metaphysical questions as how we have been living, how we are supposed to live, how we have been led to imagine about ourselves, how "we come to perceive our place in the world" (WaThiong'O, 1981, p. 285), how our language has been trapped and we have been "chained"(R. Parthasarthy complains his tongue being "in English Chains", quoted, in Naik, 1992, p. 203) in a foreign language. Raja Rao (1938), one of the most famous Indian English novelists, once commented, "The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own" (p. 296). The post-colonial world, Achebe (1975) once reflected, is a world where "what we need to do is to look back and try and find out where we went wrong, where the rain began to beat us?" (p. 44) and how we can get "re-educated and regenerated" (p. 45) and live afresh.

In arguing for the re-orientation of the educational practices to the specific country to facilitate both the people and the society in the best sense, Kate Goodpaster (2009) pointed out "European culture is the norm for Europeans, and was made the norm for non-Europeans during colonialism" (p. 5), and called it a kind of 'Cultural Oppression' in his notable article, "Cultural Oppression in Post-Colonial Education". He illustrated, "Cultural oppression institutionalized in education systems imposes foreign culture and neglects the creative and intellectual power of local culture" (Goodpaster, 2009, p. 7).

In her notable book *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (1999), GayatriChakravortySpivak believed this re-writing of one's history and culture re-orienting the education on one's root and culture is particularly important to defeat a situation where "the 'native' see themselves as 'other'" (p.212) in the educational process. She further argued that this task is necessary to defend oneself against the "colonialist presupposition of an un-inscribed earth" (p.228).

V. CONCLUSION

The study has identified that, ignoring native language and culture, if a post-colonial country retains western education system including its language, it will alienate and marginalize the people and weaken itself in the holistic development of the society. This study has demonstrated the need to orient the educational system back to the specific socio-culture context of a country by providing convincing evidence from the writers across the postcolonial countries. It has identified the negative consequences of colonial educational systems in the form of neo-colonialism and attempted to provide the empirical validation for customizing the educational practices to facilitate an indigenous society in the best sense of the term. The article has contributed towards a better understanding of the post-colonial educational practices and reflected on the ways of recovering from this embittered historical situations.

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