

Babu English: Mimicry and Subversion in Language

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Abstract: Babu English is the verbose, unidiomatic and funny variety of Indian English. The phrase has its origin in the Raj period and was originally used by the English colonizer to refer to the English (language) used by Indian Babus. This paper studies select specimens from three 19th century collections of Babu English - miscellaneous specimens written by Indians in English. These were compiled by their English masters for amusement, linguistic studies etc. I have used Homi. K. Bhabha's concepts of postcolonial Mimicry and Hybridity to analyse the subversive nature of these literature. It looks at how the interlock of powers through mimicry and ambivalence is reflected in written language.

Keywords: Babu, Babu English, Mimicry, Hybridity, Indian English, letter writing, officialese, Pidgin.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Over two centuries of colonization of the Indian subcontinent did not rest merely on the muscle power of imperialist military forces. In order to maintain its hold strong and long enough, the imperialists wielded many other hegemonic strategies, one of which and arguably the most powerful, was the education in English language and literature. The syllabus of English literature offered in the Indian universities were strategically designed to create "... a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" Macaulay (1835) exactly as Macaulay envisions in his infamous minute.

Popularly known as Babus or Baboos, this class of men, the "brown sahibs", is painted in contradictory images in the common man's lexicon – that of an educated, dignified man or of a corrupt, deceitful clerk. Dubbed as the mimic men, they were the favourite objects of lampoon of many Indian and English fiction writers and ironically they were ridiculed for the same facts they were admired for – their knowledge/a little knowledge of English, their (almost successful) aping of other symbols of Englishness and the apparent, relative proximity to the colonial master.

The evolution (or counter evolution) of the term *Babu* is in itself testimony to the process of denigration that the class suffered in the wake of colonisation. Although it is used as a courteous term of address in many Indian languages, the raj period bestowed it with a contemptuous sense. Many writers cite the word *baba* meaning "father" in several Indian languages as the source of the term *Babu*. The India-L Archive traces the etymology of the word:

The word 'Babu/Baboo', despite its present day pejorative status (denoting a corrupt, work-shirking, government clerk), has its origin in the respectable Sanskrit word "va-pruh" – which means a father. It became 'baba' in Persian/ Arabic (and so in Urdu/Hindi) – meaning "father, grandfather, old man, holy man, leader" – etc. its derivatives are Babul, babaji, bawaji, and finally Babu. Babu can mean a small child, a clerk – and also a very respected, venerable senior citizen.

Today the use of the word in the sense of a clerk, representing the Indian bureaucracy, the red tape, holds sway. Tirumalesh quotes definitions of *Babu* from different sources. Though there are several definitions of *Babu*, the ones that are important according to him are "an Indian clerk who writes English" Tirumalesh (1990: 98) Mahal defines *babu domas* "bureaucracy as allegedly created and perpetuated by babus. Also called babucracy." Mahal (2006: 6 - 7) Consequently, Indian linguists like Braj Kachru describe Babu English as officialese. As Sailaja (2009) points out, the meaning of the term Babu now includes any Indian who wrote imperfect English.

One of the most significant aspects of the Babu's repertoire is his knowledge and use of the English language. These men worked for the English bureaucracy and used English for official purposes. "[C]olonial structures depend on native scaffolding" Al-Jubouri (2014:134). The limited knowledge of the various styles and registers of English resulted in the Babu's extension of the officialise to other contexts of language use. This eventually resulted in one of the most popular varieties of Indian English – Babu English.

German linguist Schuchardt in his study of Indian English identifies five varieties of Indian English, one of which is Babu English. He describes "Indo-English" as a pidgin and thereby implies the same definition to Babu English too. Indian linguist Braj Kachru describes it as a register of officialese English. "The style is marked by excessive stylistic ornamentation, politeness and indirectness and the discourse organization is that of a South Asian language." Kachru (1994: 512)

An attempt to trace the origin of the pejorative connotations of the term, leads to a few 19th century compilations made by the English colonial officers in India under the label "Babu English." These are collections of miscellaneous specimens written in English by Indians with lesser education and prospects. The first collection, '*Baboo English; or, Our Mother-tongue as our Aryan Brethren Understand It: Amusing Specimens of Composition and Style*' was compiled and edited by T.W.J and was published in 1890. It is also titled *English as Written by some of Her Majesty's Indian Subjects*. A similar text is Arnold Wright's *Baboo English as 'tis Writ* published in 1891. Wright's collection contains specimens exclusively from Indian press. The third one is Ellis Underwood's *Indian English and Indian Character* published in 1885. The specimens are of various genres: letters, advertisements, poetry, news articles, reports, answer papers etc. This paper analyzes select specimens from these three collections exploring elements of postcolonial mimicry and ambivalence in them.

It is argued here that these letters written in English were sites of contest where power was both exercised and challenged constantly in language performative between the colonizer and the colonized. The paper examines Babu English within the framework of Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial concepts mimicry and hybridity. Bhabha's concepts like mimicry, ambivalence, hybridity etc. explores the subversive elements in various colonial practices and discourses. In this paper these concepts are used as theoretical framework to explain the typical Babu discourse in these collections. Such a contrapuntal reading divulges the various subversive aspects of the variety that is hitherto mitigated by many as "the funny English written by Indians" ("Comical Baboo-English")

I have used Bhabha's notion of mimicry to argue that Babu English is a materialization of ambivalence resulting from colonial mimicry. It is the product of mimicry sought through English education and reveals the fracture in the discourse of the civilizing mission of western education. Mimicry is a postcolonial concept that denotes the process whereby the colonized mimics the manners, attitude, language and other aspects of the colonizer's culture. Bhabha describes it as an opportunistic pattern of behaviour. While copying the master, the colonized suppresses his own identity and hopes to be accepted into the master's fold.

In his essay "Of Mimicry and Man," Bhabha describes mimicry as unintentionally subversive. According to him, mimicry is a kind of performance that exposes the artificiality or hypocrisy of all symbolic expressions of power. It is an exaggerated mimicking and exaggeration produces repetition with difference. Mimicry thereby mocks and undermines the pretensions of colonialism and empire.

"... colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable

Other, as a *subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*.

Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference." Bhabha (1994: 122)

The "excess or slippage" produced by the ambivalence in mimicry ruptures the colonial discourse and converts the colonized into "a partial presence", an incomplete presence that is defined by some strategic drawback within the discourse itself. "The success of colonial appropriation depends on a proliferation of inappropriate objects that ensure its strategic failure, so that mimicry is at once resemblance and menace." Bhabha (1994: 123)

Bhabha cites several texts as example, one of which is Macaulay's Minute in which Macaulay conceives of "a class of interpreters between us and themillions whom we govern-a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, butEnglish in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect." as the products of English education. Here Bhabha says "The great tradition of European Humanism seems capable only of ironizing itself." Bhabha (1994: 124)

The colonizer is thus in a dual psychic stage informed by both desire and derision for the native which results in the creation of stereotypes. This fractured nature of the colonial discourse creates a dual state of mimicry by the native for which Bhabha uses the term hybridity. The colonizer and the colonized enter the Third Space where the hierarchy is subverted resulting in a complex power relationship. "It is from this area between mimicry and mockery, where the reforming, civilizing mission is threatened by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double" Bhabha (1994: 123) his instances of mimicry arise.

The notion of the white man's burden, the noble task of civilizing the morally and intellectually deficient natives, through instruction in the English language and literature takes a setback in the case of the Babu. The comical Babu and his funny English being products of the English education offered in India reveal the ambivalence and rupture in the discourse of the civilizing mission of imperialism. In the attempt to elevate

themselves to the levels of their masters, they end up being laughing stocks. Their English is still poor, their moral standards base, and as Bhabha puts it, becomes a “comic turn from the high ideals of the colonial imagination to its low mimetic literary effects” Bhabha (1994: 122) The Babu is a caricature of the Englishman – anglicized but not English.

It is the ‘slippage’ the ‘excess’ and the ‘difference’, the inherent flaw in the mimicry, that makes Babu English funny and ridiculous. Humour results largely from transgressing the norms of language and propriety which manifests in the form of extremely obsequious discourse and verbose, ornate language. Babu English is defined as a register of officialese English. However the limited exposure of the Babu to different registers of English often renders him incapable of strictly sticking to the nuances of different kinds of official letters – be it addressed to a superior officer, a newspaper editor or a teacher.

Most of the letters addressed to the English master, especially the request letters are exceedingly servile. The following is the opening of an application for leave: “With deep regret and unfeigned sorrowfulness your poor slave approaches his poor tale to the footsteps of your honours throne feeling sure he may meet with forgiveness of his sins from your wisdom and goodness.” TWJ (1890: 6) The extremely obsequious discourse makes these letters sound ridiculous and unreal to the point that they appear opportunistic and seem to mock the addressee and ridicule his powerful position.

The Babu used his smattering of the language that he acquired from his English classrooms as well phrases and lines from the novels he read, in writing leave letters or job applications in order to appear erudite and thereby bestow credibility to his Englishness. An appeal from a very literary application for job reads thus: “here on earth who have I but thee . . . unless your milk of human kindness is showered on my sad state . . .” T W J (1890: 9) Such a discourse is the influence of the English literary canon that these men were taught at the universities. Meenakshi Mukherjee in her essay “Nation, Novel and Language” argues that Indians had access to the English canonical texts in their syllabus as well as to popular/ pulp English fiction from outside the universities. However the education did not equip them with the competence to differentiate between these genres and this reflected in the early English novels written by many Indian authors. The following is a stanza from a poem by a Babu that marks the height of this feature, and the writing turns almost gibberish:

The dadalian deep dalliance,
Sooner subdued somber silence,
Succeeded concupiscence well a day,
There a ballet helter skilter,
Had a vice versa encounter,
Life is not lasting it is lost, let it be lost yet we may not lose.
Underwood (1885: 26)

The poet seems anxious to reveal his mastery of high sounding vocabulary in English to please the readers that included his masters too. He probably reflects the pitiful status of the Indian student to whom the canonical English writers make as good sense as this.

Arnold Wright’s introduction to his collection *Baboo English as ‘tis Writ; Being Curiosities of Indian Journalism* declares that the press in its modern sense was well established in India by the 1890s. He comments that native newspapers in English like the ‘Hindoo Patriot’, the ‘Indian Spectator’ and ‘The Hindu’ were “conducted in a scholarly manner and written in irreproachable English” Wright (1891: 6). Naturally the specimens that appear in Wright’s collection are from native papers of lesser standards and hence termed “Baboo English”. As is evident from the material that got published in these, it is clear that exposure to the new medium left the writers unclear about its nature. Here is an instance of a letter to the editor:

SIR, - Will any of your numerous readers oblige me by their answering of the following questions:
Where was the Garden of Eden situated? After Adam and Eve had sinned where did they live? Was Adam endowed with Animal’s language, and what kind of fruit they had eaten. Wright (1891: 100)

It recalls Bhabha’s instance of hybridity in “Signs Taken for Wonders” where the Bible or the English book is as an emblem of colonial rule, desire, discipline, and ambivalence. Though the natives readily accept the authority of the Bible, they can appreciate it only within the bounds of their cultural framework. When the native translates the Bible into his context it becomes an act of subversion. It is “repetition with a difference”, an instability in the discourse that provides a potential for resistance. This illustrates the *ambivalence* which characterizes colonial mimicry. It “marginalizes the monumentality of history, quite simply mocks its power to be a model, that power which supposedly makes it imitable.” Bhabha (1994: 88)

Most request letters conclude with blessings and prayers for the receiver (a very Indian discourse), in the hope of favours likely to be received from the colonial master. This is very odd in a formal letter and sounds funny due to the incongruence between the genre and content, along with the odd language. An instance from an application to a PWD official: “I much pray for your honor’s head, and waiting for honor. Also may all your honor’s posterious childrens be safe for evermore. I remain your honor’s humble servant.” T W J (1890:

144) In both these instances the writers inhabit a hybrid space and their discourse is a complex intermingling of Indian and English.

It also endorses the argument that the motivation for learning English among the middle and lower classes was instrumental unlike the elite for whom, as Mukherjee suggests, it was the language of the personal space and creative expression. This argument is supported by the fact that a good number of letters in these collections are requests for jobs or economic assistance, the claim to which being the writer's high proficiency in English (the state of which of course his letter betrays).

Sir,

Being educated in the Calcutta and by your favour passed B.A. examination I now venture to approach the throne of your goodness...

SIR, I am an expert in many things and desire only to be tried to show my agility in mathematics and other languages being hopeful to stand on my own bottom without help... TWJ (1890: 7)

The following is an advertisement:

"Notice is hereby given that this Medical Court is advantageous to every patient suffering from feet swelling, who can be cured by my Medical treatment. Any man belonging to this or any out country, suffering from Magic or Devils that cannot be cured by English or Native doctors, is sure to be cured by my treatment. . . Asthma or Cough will be cured by me and Empress of India shall receive the blessings of such cured Patients." TWJ (1890: 48-49)

The Babu here makes a mockery of the benign aims of English education. One among the numerous of its kind, this advertisement, is an instance of colonial appropriation on the part of the colonized who uses English, the language of rationality and power and the modern medium of press to sell his native superstition.

Sly Civility is another term that Bhabha uses to describe the act of mimicry. He defines it as an "off-turning" response, as "the native refusal to satisfy the colonizer's narrative demand." Bhabha (1994: 141) It denotes a refusal cloaked in the outward form of obedience, both civility" and "slyness" in one. In response to the master's demand, the colonized exerts a surreptitious counter pressure, performing their indirect speech act of evasion or passive resistance under the cover of a direct speech act of acquiescence. In the letter below, the writer's requests for a job in the PWD is highly servile. Throughout the letter he expresses the difficulty in caring for a "grate family, large suns and dauters with magnified appetites." TWJ (1890: 141) He addresses the receiver "Most Preserved Sir" and calls himself "humble man" and "poor man". He then goes on to say

... and your honor is the P W Department which is great sirculated Department, building big walls and bridges which falling down, no matter for that, make the money. And though because your mighty honor is now compleately dismissed for procuring the cash yet still much influence is with your honor in wide space of Area of P W Department. TWJ (1890: 141)

The 'poor man' very slyly hints at the corrupt nature of the English officer and thereby challenges his authority, implying that the officer cannot deny his claim for the job.

The response of the English to these specimens and their collection is equally remarkable. They collected these specimens and published them not only for plain amusement but also as matter needing grave attention. T. W. J. in the introduction to his collection clearly states the ambivalent state of "the system of Education introduced and supported by the State, which has already caused a vast amount of misery among the working classes." TWJ (1890: i) There were also textbooks of grammar meant exclusively for Indian students. George Clifford Whitworth in his book *Indian English: An Examination of the Errors Made by Indians in Writing English* says his purpose is "perfectly serious" (as opposed to that of the compilers of Babu English), which is to "render them a small service by showing them how their admirable knowledge of our language may be made still more complete." Whitworth (1907: 6)

Within the Third space the Englishman tries to please the colonized and appear benevolent. He argues for the need of the Babu's education, laments the failure of the system and offers correction. The title of one of these texts has the phrase "our Aryan Brethern". The colonizer moves down the hierarchy to reach down to the Indian and he seeks a brother - "almost the same but not quite" as the next moment he also stereotypes the Babu figure. Bhabha states that the locus of the stereotype lies within the ambivalence, that is, "ambivalence of the object of colonial discourse - that 'otherness' which is at once an object of desire and derision, an articulation of difference" Bhabha (1994: 67)

Both the Babu and his English were stereotyped and stigmatized by the English. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 1911 defines a Babu as "a native Indian clerk" and adds that the term "... is generally used contemptuously as signifying a semi-literate native, with a mere veneer of modern education." (n.p.) The Hobson Jobson defines a Babu as "[p]roperly a term of respect attached to a name like Master or Mister. . . it is often used with a slight savor of disparagement, as characterizing a superficially cultivated but often effeminate Bengali . . . the word has come often to signify 'a native clerk who writes English.'" Yule & Burnell (1986: 44)

As the title of his book *Indian English and Indian Character* suggests, Underwood derives conclusions about the character of Indians from the English (rather the letters) they write. Citing various kinds of letters, he proves that Hindus are over complaisant and dependent. He adds that the education has failed to induce morality, referring to letters that request for free/undeserved marks in exams. He also notices their strong "susceptibility to emotions" Underwood (1885: 76) in a letter where a student on realizing his failure in mathematics exam exclaims "Ah!! death why does thou not put end to my life." Underwood (1885: 74)

The Babu or mimic man is a recurrent figure in many colonial, postcolonial literatures representing the ridiculed/traumatized colonized. However writers and critics are seldom interested in his language. The analysis of Babu English presents the emanations of mimicry in written language and in a non-fictitious genre. It also sheds light on several features of Indian English as both share many linguistic, discursive features. The collections of Babu English also contain letters and other articles that are written in impeccable English. By branding these 'Babu' the colonizer marginalizes them as funny and derisive. In *Orientalism* Edward Said argues that "representations of the 'Orient' (...) contributed to the creation of a dichotomy between Europe and its 'others', a dichotomy that was central to the creation of European culture as well as to the maintenance and extension of European hegemony over other lands." In Loomba (1998:44) The compilation, classification and the framing of a particular knowledge as Babu English is yet another instance of Orientalist politics.

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