

A Thematic scrutiny of Hegemony in Postcolonial Alternative Narratives: A Stylistic Analysis of Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008)

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Abstract

Amidst the twentieth century, as many formerly colonised nations gained independence, a wave of literary euphoria swept through what are often referred to as "third world countries." The process of liberation did not solely rest on the mere depart of the coloniser, but rather it has shaped a protest against the hegemonic perspective of the coloniser which has primarily dominated the narrative discourse. Hence, this paper attempts to cast light on the importance of the postcolonial discursive struggle to debunk the Eurocentric hegemonic discourse of the former coloniser. By adopting a stylistic approach, this research seeks to expose the fallacies inherent in colonial rhetoric in order to reveal an alternative reality. Amitav Ghosh's novel *Sea of Poppies* (2008), set in colonial India, serves as a critical site of resistance against the linguistic and cultural consequences of colonisation. It acts as both a linguistic challenge and a historical reflection on the injustices of the British Raj and the opium trade's devastating effects on the Indian populace. The paper concludes that a central task of postcolonial Endeavour is to challenge and disrupt the dominant narratives produced by colonial rule. It proves that the construction of alternative voices is effectively capable of exposing the limits and biases of colonial discourse. By developing a more credible and grounded counter-narrative, postcolonial thinkers seek to reclaim historical agency for colonized peoples. Ultimately, such efforts aim to reshape collective memory and open space for more just and plural understandings of the past.

Keywords: Counter-discourse, dominance, postcoloniality, stylistic analysis, linguistic resistance .

Introduction

The Ever since the dawn of creation, several wars were waged for the sake of achieving glory, dignity and liberation. The struggle for freedom has taken countless shapes throughout the course of history; one of the most notable forms of resistance is discourse. The unbalanced equation of power in the modern world was determined by colonization, a staggering historical event that altered several nations destiny. The process of colonization did not merely rest on lands' acquisition but it rather extended to dominate culture and discourse in order to impose its hegemony . What motivates this research particularly is the immense influence of the hegemonic perspective of colonizers on the discourse of the colonized. Taking Amitav Gosh novel *Sea of Poppies* (2008) as an example, allows us to scrutinize the ex-colonizer linguistic ascendancy over the language and the culture of the colonized nations through following a stylistic approach.

Being part of the postcolonial realm, a literary body of thought that emerged as counter discourse aiming at reflecting on the postcolonial nations' past and cultural heritage , Gosh's novel consists a textual tribune and a counter account that strives to disrupt the ex-colonizer grand narratives. Henceforth, the present paper seeks to elucidate the discursive postcolonial protest against the Eurocentric hegemony as far language is concerned. This prerequisite is obtained through analysing how Indian population tend to appropriate the language of the colonizer and modify it as an act of resistance. Finally, this research tends to unveil the significance of the linguistic struggle to fight back the discursive hegemony of the colonizer which is a prime venture for postcolonial literatures.

1. Reading Sea of Poppies as a Postcolonial Discourse

To begin with, post-colonialism is a term that refers to the historical period reflecting the aftermath of the western colonialism. With the dawn of the 1950's, liberation movement sprung out across different parts in Africa and Asia resulting in the exclusion of the colonizers. These newly liberated countries embarked in a journey of decolonization that was not only aiming at freeing their nations from the tight grip of the ex-colonizers physical presence but it rather extended to encompass different forms of resistance including history, culture and discourse. The term postcolonialism was for the most part forwarded in the seminal work of *The Empire Writes Back* written by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (2006: 11) wherein. In this token, they suggest that:

We use the term "post-colonial" however, to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day. This is because there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression. In the quotes above, it is elucidated that postcolonialism refers to the study of the effects of colonization that tend to mark signs of continuity even after the departure of colonizers. It looks into the cultural, social, economical and linguistic impacts of colonization and the ways that the postcolonial nations pursue in order to achieve a complete liberation.

Postcolonial writers consider themselves as political activists that harness their pens to retain the history of their nations and to join the struggle of freeing their populations from the hegemony of the colonizer especially the one related to language. Among the most relatable novels to this claim is *Sea of poppies*, a historical novel that engages with postcolonial concerns by picturing the multifaceted effects of the colonial rule in India. It brings to the fore the aftermath of the British Raj and its legacy that was primarily witnessed through the opium trade and how this latter along with the cultural discrepancy shapes the lives of the novel's characters who stem from different backgrounds.

The novel constructs a textual site of resistance as Amitav Gosh successfully delves into the core of the postcolonial manifesto through showcasing the dilemma that postcolonial subjects face in order move forward without being held back by the heavy burdens of their colonial past. *Sea of Poppies* also discusses the linguistic complexities resulting from the colonial encounter which makes it a postcolonial work by excellence.

2. A stylistic Approach to the Concept of Linguistic Hegemony in the novel

The diversity of the characters backgrounds in the novel can be apprehended as an attempt to disrupt the binary of superior/inferior that has always placed the colonizer on a

supreme position over the colonized. One of the most evident manifestations of hegemony is recognized through language and discourse. In this vein, abrogation is a key concept in the postcolonial theory that indicates the style of postcolonial writers who refuse to use fully correct English in their writings. As far as the fields of discourse analysis and stylistics are concerned, a text can be defined as a linguistic communication through written or spoken medium.

The spoken text is expressed via phonemic sounds and sound waves. Contrarily, written text is articulated through scripts and symbols on any given surface. What enables us to detect the existence of texts is the presence of auditory as well as visual aids. A text does not compose of a cacophony of sounds or a set of scripts; rather, it is a collection of consequential and significant categories in a particular language. Its existence is tied with context or is situated in meticulous speech. This can be found in four ways such as material world, within relationships, in history and in inter-languages (Jones 2012: 3). In the postcolonial realm, a text is a means of resistance and a tribune of self representation to clarify the false assumptions that are forwarded by the West concerning Africa , Asia and all what is not White.

3. Abrogation as an Act of Resistance

While appropriation refers to the way the colonized people use English in their speaking as if it is something that belongs to them , e.g.: they may add or omit syllabuses from the words or utter them differently ,or they may use directly native words to refer to some cultural elements. Terms go hand in hand when it comes to the linguistic form of a novel, thus our case of study is very rich with examples of abrogation and appropriation.

In *Sea of Poppies*, English is mixed with terms from different Indian dialects to make the dialogues of the characters; the author also used a lot of Indian terms and phrases throughout the novel. In some parts, the novel is very hard to read and understand for English readers, sometimes the reader knows that he is reading English yet he does not understand this kind of English. Here is some examples of abrogation and appropriation from the novel:

As the weight of this responsibility sank in, Zachary sat on the bunk and covered his face. "Youdon know the livin deal of what you askin", he said "six months back I was nothin but the ship's carpenter. Lucked out getting to second mate. Forget captain: that's way above my bend. Ain gon happen; not bi me by, not ever."

" can do", said Serang Ali, handing him the Dosootieshirt ," by'm'by can do. Malum Zikri plenty smart bugger inside. Can do 'come genl'man"

" what makes you think I can do it anyways?"

" Zikri Malum sabbitok pukka-talk no? said Serang Ali. "Hab heard Zikri Malum tokMistoh Doughty sahib-fashion". (Gosh 2008:34)

This passage describes a dialogue between the American Zachary and the lascar Serang Ali. We can clearly see the extent to which the speech is fragmented and difficult to grasp. These two characters speak the same language "English" but both seem to utter it in a different way from how it is originally spoken. Gosh intends to create characters who cannot speak correct and formal English. He uses

abrogation in order to alter the power dynamics and grant his people a a control over a valuable part of the colonizer's identity and culture .Zachary is written the "ing" form is shortened to

“in”; words like “living, asking ,and nothing” became “ livin, askin, and nothin.” “by and by “ became“ bi me by”.

Serang Ali the Indian sailor accepts to speak English but does not adopt the English culture and does not sustain the linguistic and cultural superiority of the colonizer. He chooses to speak it his own way in order to prove that language is nothing but a means of communication and not an instrument of hegemony or power.

in his speech and mixes it with Indian for example instead of saying “Mr. Zachary knows very well how to talk properly, no? “ he said” Zikri Malum sabbitok pukka-talk no?”, even the name Zachary becomes for him Zikri.

3.1. Language Appropriation and Hegemony

Among the most important key concepts in postcolonial theory is hegemony. This latter is originally defined as a process wherein a particular social force goes beyond its narrow interests to universalize their project to other social forces and subaltern groups. These social forces are within the ruling class itself, but also within the subaltern classes. Hegemony initially referred to the process by which the working class could overthrow the ruling class and establish itself as hegemonic. It was Gramsci’s adoption of the concept that saw it being applied to the bourgeoisie. (Thomas 2009:32)

The term hegemony was first forwarded by Marxist thinkers including Vladimir Lenin to indicate the political control of the working class in democratic revolutions. Nevertheless, the rationalization of term comes with the Italian thinker Antonio Gramsci (1971) who further explained the concept as the power of the superior class to convince the lower ones that they are inferiors. In the postcolonial context, it is defined as the bitter attempts of the colonizer to impose its culture, identity and language over the colonized nations and persuade them that colonization does not aim to destroy their development and their cultural personae but rather it is a benevolent project that aims at bringing civilization to their lands.

Language appropriation stands for the consideration of the use of the colonizer’s language as a war trophy not as a sign of their superiority nor the inferiority of the colonized. In this context, the language of the colonizer is used with its correct spelling and pronunciation. This postcolonial term is not applicable in the characters of Sea of Poppies but it is pertinent to the postcolonial writers, among whom Amitav Gosh is classified. As mentioned earlier in this paper, postcolonial writers tend to create textual spaces through which they voice their existence and refusal to be represented by the West. They defend their cultural heritage and identity by stopping the colonizers assaults on them by providing the reliable version of the narrative.

3.1.1. Language as an Instrument of Power

The role of language in society is not limited to neutral communication; it also functions as a vital tool for exercising, negotiating, and reproducing power.’ The sociological model introduced by Pierre Bourdieu (1991) offers exceptional clarity on this matter.... Bourdieu characterizes language as a type of capital that is symbolic and socially decentralized. In this sense, linguistic proficiency is not only about grammatical proficiency but also about the aptitude to use legitimate forms of expression that are recognized and approved by dominant institutions.

In this outlook, language functions as a system of differentiation: those who possess the “legitimate language” acquire symbolic legitimacy, while those with non-standard linguistic tendencies are frequently excluded or disqualified. Additionally, This phenomenon highlights the interdependence of linguistic practices within wider social hierarchies, where individuals with dominating influence can only determine what is considered "proper" language or correct. The idea of linguistic normativity and its role in conferring social legitimacy is closely intertwined with this. Cultural conventions, educational systems and institutional discourse are linguistic norms that function as regulatory framework for speakers to establish hierarchies. Knowledge of standardized forms of speech becomes an indicator of social status and intellectual influence, which reinforces existing social classes. As a result, linguistic legitimacy is not an intrinsic feature of language but rather reflects social constructions and power structures.

3.1.2. Linguistic Appropriation: Definitions and Stakes

When speakers from diverse social or cultural backgrounds adopt, adapt, or recontextualize elements of a language's discourse, it is considered linguistic appropriation. Nonetheless, it is essential to differentiate this concept from related phenomena like hybridization and even acculturation. While appropriation typically involves an asymmetrical power relationship, hybridization is characterized by linguistic integration into new, syncretic forms through hybridizing. However, this process can be more complex and reciprocal. Conversely, acculturation generally refers to the gradual development of language and cultural characteristics in environments with high structural inequality.

Linguistic appropriation poses several stakes, including identity, politics, and culture. The act of appropriation can serve as a platform for artistic expression and cultural exchange, leading to the development of novel linguistic forms that reflect intricate identities. Nevertheless, it can also involve decontextualization and commodification, which involves the removal of linguistic features's cultural essence and their replacement within dominant frameworks for aesthetic or commercial purposes.

Language serves as a fundamental identity, providing ambiguity and belonging. What does this mean? The use of borrowed or restored linguistic forms can serve as a mechanism to assert autonomy, restore marginalized groups once again and challenge dominant narratives. Inequality can be perpetuated by political practices that do not acknowledge the historical and social factors that lead to their linguistic forms. Culturally, the conflict between appropriation and authenticity poses significant questions about ownership (opposite site) representation in practice, or the ethical considerations of language exchange in an increasingly globalized society.

4. Resisting Colonial Linguistic Manipulation by Female Characters in *Sea of Poppies*

Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* portrays a linguistically divided world where language functions as merely blotches and is widely dispersed, with subaltern individuals being the primary targets of imperial power. However, female characters in the novel engage in intricate resistance strategies that redistribute language as an arena for self-determination.

A close examination of the works of characters like Deeti and Paulette reveals that opposition to colonized language is not necessarily expressed through direct conflict, but rather in the form

of cultural practices like appropriation, code-switching, and semantic alteration that weaken internal control.

By utilizing a postcolonial sociolinguistic perspective, which is grounded in the concepts of linguistic capital by Pierre Bourdieu (1991) and cultural hegemony by Antonio Gramsci (1971), this analysis seeks to explore how linguists and scholars alike confront overlapping power dynamics. English and other formalized language forms such as Hindi serve as symbols of power and legitimacy, placing indigenous and vernacular expressions in relinquishing status; in the novel's colonial context, Ghosh deliberately breaks away from this order by emphasizing a polyphonic narrative that includes Bhojpuri, Hindustani, and creole idioms. This is both symbolic and materialistic because it highlights the importance of dialectalism to express subjectivity. Despite being subject to dominant linguistic norms, Deeti maintains her vernacular speech patterns and preserves a mode of expression that's closely tied to her cultural identity and experiential reality; instead, her language becomes reliant on memory and resistance, allowing her to document her own journey beyond the epistemic constraints of colonial discourse. Paulette's position is characterized by a blend of French, English, and Indian languages, as she avoids being integrated into any one linguistic structure; this multiplication allows her to bypass fixed categorizations and inhabit liminal space where she can subvert colonial classifications. This is both advantageous and counterproductive.

The fact that these forms of resistance are not ambiguous is noteworthy, as they can both seize and subjugate hegemonic structures, suggesting an uncertain nature of language-related power in colonial settings. Additionally, the Ibis vessel becomes a model of linguistic negotiation, where female characters and other excluded individuals participate in the development of an alternative, hybrid language that surpasses traditional lexical boundaries. This emergent dialogue serves as exemplars of what could be considered hegemonic counter-talk, because it redefines communication terms that are collectively negotiated rather than institutionally established. Resistance is not primarily about rejecting the dominant language, but rather about altering it to reflect subaltern beliefs.

This perspective takes on different meanings and uses. Finally, Ghosh's portrayal of female characters highlights the ability of underprivileged people to engage critically with languages attempting to characterize them, suggesting that within rigidly institutionalized colonial systems, language is still a dynamic and highly competitive terrain where one can both exercise and resist power.

5. The Reliability of the Postcolonial Counter-discourse in Disrupting the Hegemonic Perspective of the Colonizer in *Sea of Poppies*

The ideology of the Western superiority has been strongly emphasized by the Eurocentric narratives. They produced a wholesome body of thought that would make it easy for them to inflict their authoritative mindset on all what they considered as the other or the Orient. In the same vein, this idea was manipulated by the colonial powers to substantiate their geographical and political domination over the Orient and it is all done via discourse. This latter is embodied in the use of "Language" to formulate a set of theories and philosophical tendencies to assert the inferiority of what they label as "the Orient". Henceforth, all what is related to the it was regarded as prima-faci, a right owned by the West.

Being part of the postcolonial protest against the continuous influence of the colonizers even after their departure, Edward Said, A Palestinian expatriate, a thinker and a theorist argues that the European colonial powers namely Britain and France worked together to secure not only geographical domination but most importantly, a sustainable cultural hegemony. The latter is accomplished what Said describes as “Orientalizing the orient”(qtd in. Hamadi) which is, according to his views, an academic European project constructed by western scholars to keep the orient under supervision and constant control. This is done by framing it and reshaping it in specific molds to serve Europe’s imperialist and expansionist aims.

Gosh’s *Sea of Poppies* (2008) provides a multidimensional illustration of this dichotomy; it showcases a vivid reflection of the contrasting worlds on all the scales of life starting from the mere interaction between the colonizer/colonized to the macroscopic issues related to economy and politics. The novel forwards various descriptions of India provided by the Occident which is represented by Britain in this case. The description of the orient is loaded with aspects of exoticism. India is portrayed as an exotic primitive land that is in the process of civilization by the representatives of the British Raj. It is described as a world of virgin nature and deep spirituality, a world of rich natural resources and very naïve people who do not know how to make good use of their land : “Zachary Reid had his first look at India: what he saw was a dense thicket of mangroves, and a mud bank that appeared to be uninhabited until it disgorged its bumboats- a small flotilla of dinghies and canoes , all intent on peddling fruit, fish and vegetables to the newly arrived sailors.” (Gosh 2008: 6) In the quote which depicts Zachary’s initial perception of India shows their influence by the stereotypical views that are forwarded by the West. He deemed the land to be primitive and its inhabitants to be naïve because of the exotic nature of the land. Relying on the quote above, it becomes evident that India, just like any other country categorized as Oriental, is alluring for westerners its exotic nature and its unfamiliar atmosphere inspired a sense of inquisitiveness and astonishment for the westerners.

6. The Subversion of English as a Decolonizing Act in *Sea of Poppies*

In *Sea of Poppies*, Amitav Ghosh constructs language itself as a terrain of colonial struggle, relying (even unintentionally) a stylistic approach to expose and subvert the mechanisms of linguistic hegemony. English, as it was mentioned before , functions as more than a medium of narration in the novel. It represents the institutional authority and cultural dominance of the British Empire. Ghosh illustrates how mastery of “standard” English becomes a marker of class and legitimacy, while indigenous languages are marginalized. As in one of the instances in the novel when one of the subaltern voicessays : “The government to you is what God is to agnostics(only to be invoked when your own well-being is at stake” (Ghosh2008 : 44), a remark that brings to the fore the alienation between imperial discourse and the colonized subject. Yet, rather than reproduce this hierarchy, Ghosh fractures English from within, flooding his novel with the multifaceted polyphony of Hindi, Bhojpuri, Bengali, and Laskari) a creolized sailors’ dialect that blends multiple linguistic heritages. The narrator notes that “From the silmagoors who sat on the ghats, sewing sails, Jodu had learnt the names of each piece of canvas, in English and in Laskari (that motley tongue, spoken nowhere but on the water...)” (Ghosh 2008: 108). This “motley tongue” symbolizes a hybrid linguistic platform wherein cultural contact resists domination, turning language into a vessel

within which identities intermingle. Ghosh deliberately refrained from translating many vernacular expressions, compelling the Anglophone reader to experience a form of estrangement historically imposed on colonized peoples. Through this strategy, he reverses the power dynamic by creating a counter discourse forcing English to accommodate rather than absorb. His portrayal of shipboard dialogue between Zachary and Serang Ali, written in phonetic pidgin) “‘No,’ Zachary laughed. ‘N’how bout you? Serang Ali catchi wife?’ / ‘Serang Ali wife-o hab makee die,’ came the answer. ‘Go top-side, to hebbin. By’mby, Serang Ali catchi nother piece wife...’” (Ghosh 208 :14) transforms “broken” English into a legitimate, expressive medium of global interaction. Far from invoking any sense of humor, such language becomes central to the novel’s vision of a creolized world. By embedding nonstandard grammar, transliteration, and rhythm into his novel, Ghosh destabilizes the linguistic purity that the Empire once upheld. As Sharma notes, Ghosh’s “linguistic inventiveness undermines the grand monologic narratives of history” (Sharma 2022), reclaiming the colonizer’s language as a tool of resistance. Ultimately, *Sea of Poppies* enacts a stylistic decolonization: Ghosh transforms English into a porous, plural medium through which the suppressed voices of the colonized nations (in this case, the sailors, laborers, and women) can be heard, reimagining language not as a means of control but as a vivid archive of survival, hybridity, and liberation.

7. Conclusion

To conclude, language transcends its primary purpose of communication and emerges as one of the most powerful embodiments of culture, identity, and historical consciousness. It is not merely a neutral instrument for the exchange of ideas but a living archive of a people’s worldview, beliefs, and struggles. When controlled or manipulated, it can perpetuate dominance and shape the

destinies of entire populations; when reclaimed, it becomes a force of resistance and regeneration. In the context of postcolonial thought, theorists and writers alike—among them Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Edward Said, and Homi Bhabha—have long recognized that linguistic hegemony represents a continuation of colonization by other means. Thus, the act of writing back, of reshaping the language of the oppressor into a tool for self-definition, constitutes one of the most profound forms of intellectual and cultural liberation.

Amitav Ghosh, through his remarkable novel *Sea of Poppies* (2009), offers precisely such a counter-discourse. He transforms the English language, the very emblem of colonial power, into a medium of resistance and rebellion. By interweaving English with Hindi, Bhojpuri, Bengali, and Laskari, Ghosh asserts his right of self-representation and restores the multiplicity of Indian voices that colonial narratives once suppressed. His stylistic experimentations dismantle the illusion of linguistic purity and expose the cultural hegemony embedded within the colonial enterprise. Through his historical novel, Ghosh not only documents the sufferings of his nation under the British Raj but also reclaims narrative authority, rearticulating history from the perspective of the colonized.

Ultimately, through a stylistic approach grounded in diction analysis and linguistic hybridity, this paper has demonstrated how *Sea of Poppies* exemplifies the role of discourse in challenging Western hegemony and unveiling the ideological foundations of empire. Language, in Ghosh’s hands, becomes an act of defiance, a means to expose the colonizer’s contradictions and to reaffirm the richness of indigenous languages. All in all, the present

research concludes that the struggle for liberation does not cease with the political departure of the colonizer; rather, it extends into the deeper, more enduring battle against the cultural and linguistic domination that lingers in the postcolonial consciousness. True emancipation, therefore, lies not only in reclaiming lands but also in reclaiming the word in restoring to language its plural, liberated, and authentically human voice.

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