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Editor-in-Chief

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www.the-criterion.com
criterionejournal@gmail.com

Linguistic Imperialism: Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

Satpal Singh

Assistant Professor of English
Lovely Professional University
Jalandhar, Punjab, India, 144806

The objective of this article is to discuss how Adiga has used English language through the lead character's narrative style in the award winning novel *The White Tiger* and to explore the fact whether English has become a necessity or is it imposed on as linguistic imperialism through which public's minds are manipulated by outer agencies as well inner.

Adiga's exploration of typical Indian society's psyche and its infatuation with English language and commodities display the dominant but negative traits of Indian working and high society.

The White Tiger depicts the journey of the protagonist, Balram, from darkness to metropolitan city to become a self made entrepreneur and his urge to be in elite class. He is the symbolic representation of the working class that has been under the influence of upper strata. I combined my analysis of the novel and linguistic imperialism with the examinations of others made about this thought provoking novel and linguistic domination.

Introduction

Neither you nor I can speak English, but there are some things that can be said only in English.
(3)

In present era, the global expansion of English is seen as the subtle example of linguistic imperialism as it was imposed on the speakers of the colonies colonized by English. They came to India and exploited its wealth, natural resources and minds of Indians and affected their way of thinking and behavior. They were made to leave India in 1947 but they left many things behind. Some became like scars on the body, some addictions and some necessities. Unfortunately or fortunately English language is one of them. There are more than 6,000 languages in the world and majority of the population on earth communicates only in a few of them. English is the most common of them. It has become lingua franca after the World War II. British imperialism in 19th and 20th century is closely related to its spread. Adiga's mouthpiece, Balram, asserts this fact:

In 1947 the British left, but only a moron would think that we became free then.(22)

In the beginning, Balram flatters Chinese premier saying that 'britishers tried to make you their servant.'(5) Later he asserts the fact that 'only three nations have never let themselves be ruled by foreigners: China, Afghanistan, and Abyssinia.' (5)

Chinese resisted the control of British in past and even strictly guarding their native languages never allowed English to be in vogue. Now, they have succumbed to the pressure of learning this common language. It is not surprising to notice that more than 300 million Chinese are studying English. During the mega events like CWG in India and Olympics in China, people were trained

to speak in English with foreigners. Adiga writes, “Rickshaws are not allowed inside the posh parts of Delhi, where foreigners might see them and gape.”(27)

The situation in Afghanistan is quite similar where the inclination toward English language has increased sharply after the fall of Taleban in 2001. Now the employers want the employees well versed in English. Latest step by Afghan President to create graduate force to meet the demands of economy is to send Afghan students with scholarship to Lovely Professional University where the common medium of learning will be English rather than Hindi or any Afghan dialect. These steps by Asian countries usher to:

the glorious twenty first century of man. The century more specifically of yellow and the brown man. (7)

Content:

Philipson defines English linguistic imperialism:

the dominance asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages. (47)

On the other hand Scholars like Timothy Reagan believe:

The rejection of the linguistic legitimacy of a language--*any* language used by *any* linguistic community--in short, amounts to little more than an example of the tyranny of the majority. Such a rejection reinforces the long tradition and history of linguistic imperialism in our society. The harm, though, is done not only to those whose languages we reject, but in fact to all of us, as we are made poorer by an unnecessary narrowing of our cultural and linguistic universe. (48)

Linguistic imperialism, branch of sociolinguistics, asserts that wherever a dominant language such as English takes its firm place in a foreign country, small prone languages will disappear. This thing hasn't happened only in India but in most colonies where languages got defunct and succumbing under the pressure of dominant lingua franca.

Mobile companies, mostly international, in India have made some English words household vocabulary and people are comfortable with it. For ex. recharge, top up, message pack, tower, and the killer missed call. Even the road names as mentioned in the text for instance- Archbishop Makarios Road, Connaught Place, Mall road, Cool road, Nicolai Copernicus Marg (125) are symbolic of English language domination. The change of the names of metropolitan cities to Kolkata and Chennai from Calcutta and madras has been considered as counter attack to this linguistic dominance.

It has extended its horizon to other languages like Punjabi, Urdu and Bhojpuri, Bollywood songs are explicit examples of the linguistic imperialism. It is not only confined to urban and semi-urban areas of the Hindi-speaking states of India but is gradually spreading into rural and remote areas of these states via television, mobile phones and social networking sites like facebook, twitter etc. Movies in Bollywood, once the presenter of beautiful depiction of Hindi language, now mostly have either titles or tag lines in English. It seems that Hinglish has become the lingua franca of India's young middle class. Adiga depicts this trend, when Balram comments:

Pinky madam would sit in the back of the car, chatting about life, about India, about America mixing Hindi and English together. (47)

Balram has learned the phrase ‘what a fucking joke’ (7) from Pinky madam, born and bred in US. Indian mass is so fascinated with this language that it has changed the nomenclature of newly opened shops and even names of kids and pets. Balram’s owners have two Pomeranions in the house-‘Cuddle and Puddle’. (78) He makes his own website – www.whitetiger-technologydrivers.com (46) and the novel ends with his email address- boss@whitetiger-technologydrivers.com (321)

He is a keen listener. He picks many English words like ‘red light district’ (250), ‘replacement’, ‘driver’, ‘local’ (268), ‘start up’. (301) European traders have understood the nerve of Indian mass. People get impressed by things simply because those are promoted and propagated with a tool named English language. Balram is mesmerized:

The mascot of the gym – An American with enormous muscles – smiles at me from above the slogan (in English). (220)

A rickshaw puller – an illiterate – after being stuck in a rush answers to the passenger with a wry smile, “*Sir, traffic jam hai.*” (Sir, there is traffic jam) 75% of his sentence is in English and he might have never gone to a school. Another thing to notice in public offices is the argument of a common man with a clerk when dispute takes a serious turn and person starts to speak in English to emphasize his point.

Balram differentiates between rich and poor with an example of ‘Indian’ and ‘English’ liquor men. English liquor is costly and showed off as status symbol. The nomenclature of these liquors (not to mention in English) is so fascinating that people take pride in saying the brand names in their vernacular accents. It may be amusing to notice that when a normal person is drunk, he starts to mumble in English. It can be conscious or unconscious. The linguistic imperialism in brand names is dissolved in the personality of the person after he gets drunk.

The leaders of India and bureaucrats want their kids to be educated in western way and send them to foreign colleges and universities. Mr. Ashok in the novel comes from America. The corrupt commissioner in the novel has two sons ‘both studying in America’. (310) He needs to earn extra to meet expenses. It has resulted in more corruption. Hence, it adds to the plight of down trodden. Even Balram, in Banglore, has put his nephew in a school and takes pride in saying:

He goes to a good school here in Banglore - an English school. Now he pronounces English like a rich man’s son. (316)

Now, if speaking English is not enough for people, they have started imitating exotic accents. Sometimes, it creates a ridiculous situation when someone tries to impress audience by speaking in American or British accent and fails by mixing those accents with his own twist of native language touch. Although standard R.P. (received pronunciation) is sufficient still the speakers are under the illusion that only that accent will make them perfect speakers. Balram at the end of

the novel reveals new trend of making money by opening an English medium school where he can invest his money. He broods:

After three or four years in real estate, I think I might sell everything, take money, and start a school – an English medium school. (319)

The possibility of political motives that seek to establish English in India as the important official language cannot be denied and it should be explored deeply. But it favors Indian situation. It seems to unite different communities. There are many languages in India and people believe sternly in regionalism than national spirit. It can be argued that Indian Government's policy of having English as second official language is not to accept merely the dominance of English language but cultural necessity to keep unity in adversity.

There are people like Atal Bihari Vajpayee (in UN address) and recently Amitabh Bachchan (in Cannes) who dared to speak in their native tongue than English to international audience. But it is unfortunate that those adamant people who are striving to save a dying language employ drastic measures like raising their posterity in that dying language.

Another side of the coin is that there are many words of Indian languages which have got place in the novel. Adiga through the medium of Balram has used significant number of words of native language. For ex. Sadhus (15), namastes (4), halwai, paan (13), ghat (16), Heyaa (30), rotis (33), charpoy (54), gulab jamun (63), ladoos (65), pooja, biryani (100), pucca (129), dosa (141), asana (149), maharaja (153), mandala (205). Some of these words are globally known. With advent and expansion of communication systems, world has become a global village. So, it is not the one sided acceptance of English words and language in our country. Language sharing and code switching is common and comfortable these days.

Conclusion:

The White Tiger clearly displays the use of English as matter of esteem and utmost need of the hour through the vivacious narration by Balram. He is unconscious that he has fallen in the trap of linguistic imperialism besides the rooster coop. He is able to come out of the rooster coop but remains infatuated with English language till the novel ends. He takes it to the next level by putting his nephew in English school and brooding the whim of opening an English school. This colorful presentation of contemporary society's attempt to adopt and adapt lingua franca in the novel needs appreciation.

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