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Subtexts of English in Derek Walcott, Wole Soyinka and Nissim Ezekiel

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Abstract

The Caribbean Islands, the African and the Asian nations that added English to their character during colonialism, use the language most strikingly in their everyday transactions as well as literary pursuits in the postcolonial period. Literatures in English from these regions are compelling for both their choice of subject and use of language. The idea of English language dominates the creative process of writers from these once colonized islands and nations in the post-independence era. It is not unusual therefore to find a candid, subtle or implied reference to English language in many of the Caribbean, African and Indian poems written in English. In such poems, the writers show a keen awareness of the power of English as both users and observers of the language. In effect, English becomes the subject of the poems from political, cultural and linguistic standpoints. This article discusses the subtexts of English in three poems that exemplify the English phenomena: Derek Walcott's "A Far Cry from Africa," Wole Soyinka's "Telephone Conversation" and Nissim Ezekiel's "Poet, Lover and Birdwatcher."

The countries to which Derek Walcott, Wole Soyinka and Nissim Ezekiel belong – Saint Lucia, Nigeria and India – are known for their linguistic diversity. Although English is an official language in these countries, there are other national, regional and vernacular languages. Hence, the poets have a tough task at hand: to make English language their own in their poems, in order to speak to the readers at home and, at the same time, readers abroad. The article takes a close look at what English means to the three poets by analyzing the varied ways in which the language is employed in their poems.

English varieties of the regions such as the Caribbean, Africa and South Asia are distinct from one another and from the English varieties of the United Kingdom and the United States. Although English is a recent entrant in the cultures of the Caribbean, Africa and South Asia, its presence in these regions, owing to British influence in the colonial and American influence in the postcolonial period, is not a mere presence: an undercurrent of English runs in the cultures of Caribbean, Africa and South Asia and a subtext of English operates in the literature written in English from these regions.

In their seminal work *The Empire Writes Back*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin place language at the center of postcolonial experience and writing:

One of the main features of imperial oppression is control over language.... Language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of ‘truth’, ‘order’, and ‘reality’ become established. Such power is rejected in the emergence of an effective post-colonial voice.... [T]he language, with its power, and the writing, with its signification of authority, has been wrested from the dominant European culture. (7-8)

Similarly, Salman Rushdie’s statement more than two decades ago that “[t]he English language ceased to be the sole possession of the English some time ago” asserted the multiple ownership of the language (373). Recognizably in the twenty-first century, English language has moved from its two centers – the UK and the USA – towards many other centers such as the Indian subcontinent, the Caribbean and Africa. Today there are not just more number of English speakers in the erstwhile British colonies than in the United Kingdom and the United States put together, but there are writers who write in English and known for their creative use of English language as much as they are for their imaginative prowess.

The choice of English as a medium for expression by writers in countries where English is not the first language is indeed a conscious one from the standpoints of history, politics, culture and art. The writers who write in English from the multilingual nations in effect are the immediate representatives of their nations’ literature to the outside English-speaking world. Derek Walcott, Wole Soyinka and Nissim Ezekiel are arguably the most important poets of their respective countries. Although their backgrounds and preoccupations in their poetry vary, they represent countries that have adopted English as one of the languages; their poems are originally composed in English; and there is a direct or indirect reference to English language in their poems, or sometimes a conscious maneuvering of the “foreign” tongue, or even a deliberate attempt to erase the foreignness of the English language.

Jahan Ramazani explains the wounds of history, a major concern in postcolonial poetry, as follows:

The movement of metaphor across ethnic, regional, and gender boundaries is well suited to the hybrid and inter-cultural character of postcolonial literature and finds perhaps its fullest articulation in poetry, from Walcott to Eunice de Souza, Agha Shahid Ali, and Wole Soyinka. Forced and voluntary migration, crossings of one people with another, linguistic creolization, and racial miscegenation – these are the sorts of displacements, wanderings, and interminglings that poetic metaphor can powerfully encode in the fabric of a postcolonial text. (414)

History unfolds as Walcott’s “A Far Cry from Africa” moves the setting from the present to the past. The poet looks not at the happenings of the land of his living, the Caribbean, but happenings in the land of his origin, Africa, and points at the twin inheritances from the past – the colonial injustices and the English language. Soyinka’s “Telephone Conversation” moves in the opposite direction of Walcott’s poem. It is not set in the poet’s native land Africa but, strikingly, in the heart of the colonizer’s land, London. Incidentally, the setting is the place which holds some hope for the poet, at least at the beginning of the poem. The poem moves to a point where English becomes more potent in the words of the speaker of African origin.

Ezekiel's "Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher," however, is not set in any place or time. The poem moves in timelessness and speaks of universal characters. The underlying fact that this poem is about poetry and aims to indicate the universals of aesthetics makes the reader stop and think and wonder how the poet is claiming English as "naturally" his, albeit implicitly.

In Walcott's native St. Lucia three languages are spoken: English Creole, French Creole and the St. Lucian dialect of English. There are also various dialects English spoken in different islands of the West Indies. As English language expert David Crystal notes, it is

creole English which rapidly came to be used throughout the southern plantations, and in many of the coastal towns and islands. At the same time, standard British English was becoming a prestige variety throughout the area, because of the emerging political influence of Britain. Creole forms of French, Spanish and Portuguese were also developing in and around the Caribbean, and some of these interacted with both the creole and the standard varieties of English. (40)

Walcott's own plays contain many passages of Creole but his poetry is seldom written in Creole. Hence, it is possible to assume, Walcott's engagement with English is more intense in his poems.

Nigeria, Soyinka's African nation, "is one of the most multilingual countries in Africa, with some 500 languages identified in the mid-1990s. Its population in 2002 was over 126 million. About half use pidgin or creole English as a second language (Crystal 52)." Soyinka draws heavily from Yoruba culture in his plays which contain many Yoruba words but in his poems relays mainly on his ability to exercise the English language. For this reason, studying his poetry, especially a poem like "Telephone Conversation" with its focus on the nuances of English language, is perhaps a better way to understand Soyinka's take on English language.

Ezekiel writes from a country where hundreds of languages and thousands of dialects and several versions of English are spoken, for "In terms of numbers of English speakers, the Indian subcontinent has a very special position, probably outranking the combined totals of speakers in the USA and UK (Crystal 46)." Some of Ezekiel's poems like "Farewell Party to Miss Pushpa T S" and "Professor" deal overtly with the comical English usage in India. These poems are as much about the people who speak as they are about the dialect spoken. "Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher," on the other hand, is a poem that makes no reference to English language but if the reader works back to its background and all things that are embedded in it, it reveals what language means to a poet or, to be specific, what English means to Ezekiel.

The three poems chosen for analysis in this study deal with the English language on three different planes: the poet in "A Far Cry from Africa" speaks directly about the English language he loves and hence English tongue stands parallel to Africa with respect to his situation; In "Telephone Conversation," the conversation takes place in English between an English lady and an African immigrant in London and fine distinctions of English language allocated by the poet to the speakers sets the stage for verbal maneuvering; and "Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher" takes a stimulating journey delicately through the lanes of English language, for, the idea of English language operating here as a subtext can be drawn largely by inference.

Derek Walcott's "A Far Cry from Africa," Wole Soyinka's "Telephone Conversation" and Nissim Ezekiel's "Poet, Lover and Birdwatcher" were written when the poets had just about embarked on their literary careers. The poets went on to write many impressive poems in their literary careers; and they wrote, importantly, on the theme of English language in their poems in a sustained manner. Many poets of the succeeding generations have inherited the legacy and the debate as to what English language means to poets of the erstwhile colonies in the postcolonial era and how they deal with it continues.

In all three poems the words mostly have their universal meanings, yet the sense of being the "Other" exists in "A Far Cry from Africa" and "Telephone Conversation" in the feelings of the speaker, for these poems are attempts at conquering "otherness." "Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher" is different in this concern as it obliterates the other at the very outset and assumes the position of power by assigning the protagonist the role of writer or watcher or lover. Here both time and space are not constrained.

Africa, the Caribbean and English language form a triangle in Walcott's "A Far Cry from Africa." Africa and English language are overtly dealt with in the poem and the Caribbean is an important point for the poet is writing from here. A triangle in the Caribbean context immediately brings to mind the "Middle Passage." The poet's middle passage, rather right of passage as the poem exemplifies, although obtained under painful circumstances, is the English language. It is historically a well-known fact that English has worked as an empowering tool in the colonized world. And in his poetry, Walcott doesn't seem compelled to use the Creole in his poems. Tejumola Olaniyan gathers from Walcott's essay "Poetry – Enormously Complicated Art" the poet's position on English:

For the question, "Creole or English?," made popular by the political turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s, Walcott has little regard. "One works within a language," he says, arguing that it is "a futile, stupid and political exercise to insist on 'creating' language." The linguistic form the West Indian writer must forge should be a hybrid. "The dialect of the tribe" must be purified by English, the language "learnt by imitation." Creole must be apprenticed to English, but the "feelings" must be local, must "have their roots in [the writer's] own earth." (488)

In the West Indian context, Braithwaite defines "nation language" as "the language which is influenced very strongly by the African model, the African aspect of our New World/Caribbean heritage. English it may be in terms of some of its lexical features. But in its contours, its rhythm and timbre, its sound explosions, it is not English, even though the words, as you hear them, might be English to a greater or lesser degree" (13). Walcott deals with the geographic and linguistic complexities in several of his poems, notably in "Schooner *Flight*" where he declares:

I'm just a red nigger who love the sea,
I had a sound colonial education,
I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,
and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation. (346)

It is always a difficult assumption to make whether the poet's psyche is fragmented by the wrongs of history or he has assimilated into his self the cross-cultural influences. As for the linguistic environment, Walcott believes it was advantageous for him: "I have a three language background: French Creole, English Creole, and English. With three languages, one oral, and access to, say, English Literature.... Well, having all of those things inside me was a privilege" (Hirsch 287). Yet choosing to write in English, the colonizer's language, is never easy for a postcolonial writer. In "A Far Cry from Africa," Walcott uses the technique of both panning and close-up focusing. He pans the vast African landscape to obtain a panoramic vision. The bird's-eye view is reinforced with reference to ibises. The close-up focus in the poem is brought home through the worms. Worms and birds form the food-chain but humans killing humans, poet accentuates, lacks meaning in nature. The pan vision shows the gorilla wrestling the super-human and the close up shot captures the divided veins of Walcott.

Perhaps the most important word in "A Far Cry from Africa" is "divided." A deeper look at the word reveals the painfully divided self of the poet – divided geographically between Africa and the Caribbean, racially between the African and the European and linguistically between Creole and English. There are more indications of division in the poem through pairs of words that carry opposite meanings: "savages" and "gorilla" are references to the African and "divinity" and "superman" are references to the European. There are a few more words that are riveting in the poem. The words "delirious" and "contracted" are used in a negative sense suggesting madness and disease. The word "Cool", with an ironic tinge, reinforces the sultry African landscape with which the poem opens and where the poet's sympathies are – all painful, yet beautifully expressed in the English tongue he loves. In the line "Betray them both, or give back what they give?" one can sense Walcott's anguish. Yvonne Ochoy observes, "While he is intellectually drawn to those values which he acquires from the colonized, he is emotionally drawn to the life of the masses which runs in his roots" (51); and Alexander Irvine points out, "For Walcott, Western literatures framework of referentiality must be disrupted in an analogous way if Caribbean literature is to find expression (130)". Indeed, Walcott is reclaiming the territory by writing about it; and even as he writes, he draws from the resources of English language. "A Far Cry from Africa" demonstrates Walcott's linguistic preference while it speaks of his socio-cultural background. It is as if the poet is standing in the middle of his African past and the literary future. English language becomes his "middle passage" connecting his past and future. The poem embodies Africa, which is poet's lineage, his cultural roots, and English language, which is his love and literary career.

"Telephone Conversation" is among Soyinka's poems of immigrant experience such as "My Next-Door Neighbor" and "The Immigrant". Tracing influences on the poetry of Soyinka, Tanure Ojaide observes, "His influences are blended into a new authenticity consonant with a native-culture-conscious Nigerian intellectual who is Western-educated and widely traveled" (776).

In "Telephone Conversation" landlady's words are all deliberately in capital letters suggesting authority and dominance, by extension colonial power, and the man's words are within regular grammatical boundaries of English grammar suggesting ordinariness and supplication. Through the act of writing the poem, "Soyinka reaches for a new breathing space, for a poetry that allows poets to acknowledge the power of personal resistance and at the same

time confront the social and political ramifications of power, especially the abuse of power” (Thomson, 94). Soyinka in one of his essays speaks of his relationship to English and how a postcolonial writer like him can exercise the language:

[W]hen we borrow an alien language to sculpt or paint in, we must begin by co-opting the entire properties in our matrix of thought and expression. We must stress such a language, stretch it, impact and compact, fragment and reassemble it with no apology, as required to bear the burden of experiencing and of experiences, be such experiences formulated or not in the conceptual idioms of that language. (107)

In the poem, Soyinka chooses a word in the first few lines that he applies to both the individuals in conversation. The word gains two different shades of meanings with two people. Intriguingly, the word is “silence” – a word which denotes the absence of any sound/utterance. When the British woman is silent on hearing that the man is an African, it is “silenced transmission of pressurized good breeding.” But when the African is silent upon hearing the question “ARE YOU LIGHT OR VERY DARK?,” it is “ill-mannered silence, surrender.” The word silence appears again, for the third time, and it is the silence of the woman when she hears the man say “West African Sepia... Down in my passport.” She is confused, it doesn’t sink, and hence, it is “Silence for spectroscopic fancy.” There is also a final silence, unmentioned by the poet at the end of the poem – a silence which means impasse.

A clever image in the poem is chocolate. Identifying the color of the skin with milk and plain chocolate by the man is his attempt to make the skin color look childish on the one hand and on the other, sweetish. Indeed he tries to equate the desirability of chocolate – whether plain or milk – to skin color – whether black or white.

Further, play on the phrase “public hide and speak” is easily recognizable as it hints at hide and seek, a game played by two individuals in this instance in a telephone conversation. The “game” takes place on two levels. On the surface level, the woman finds out about the man that his color is black, which is what she sought to find out once she heard the word African. This one word was enough to trigger her racist thinking. On a deeper level, the woman’s racist attitude is exposed by the poet for the reader. The reader also discovers the plight of the African man and his presence of mind; the former caused by social, cultural and historic necessities and the latter developed owing to the same factors. Finally, the whole conversation is a word-game. After he reaches a point where he has nothing to lose, the African wins the “English” verbal dual by describing his buttocks, a knock out blow to the priggishness of the English Lady.

Nissim Ezekiel is generally regarded as the most important poet of the post-independence India writing in English. He consciously steers clear of colonial models both in terms of form and content. Rather than singing paeans to India’s heritage, he focuses on contemporary issues in his poems. His significant achievement lies in portraying the nation and its people, the society and its culture not just earnestly but often with biting irony that is the trademark of modern poetry. That he strove to find his poetic voice and succeeded can be found easily if one were to consider the oeuvre of his work. Surjit Dulai argues that Ezekiel is a towering figure in the contemporary Indian English Poetry: “Nissim Ezekiel may be justifiably called the father of post-independence and modern poetry of India...he guided the evolution of contemporary Indian

poetry in English...But for him Indian English poetry would not have developed to the extent it has during the last fifty years or so" (123-4). Writing about the Indian writer in English whose first language is invariably not English, Shaila Mahan opines, "When a writer in Indian English faces difficulty in conveying certain concepts in an alien medium and also when he wishes to convey the peculiar Indian flavor he feels impelled to borrow words and expressions from his mother tongue. Various writers employ various devices to capture Indianness in their works (35). Interestingly, Ezekiel wrote some of his poems under the title "Very Indian Poems in Indian English" and in an interview, he spoke of the scope of these poems: "My poems in Indian English are rightly described as very Indian poems. So they should not be considered as "mere lampoons". The characters and the situations projected are intended to be genuinely Indian, and the humor is in the English language as it is widely spoken by Indians, to whom it is not funny at all" (70). "Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher" is unique in this regard as the poet aims to take it above the terrain of distinctly Indian subject or typical Indian English. For all these reasons the poem is revealing when we approach it as a poem written by a multilingual Indian writer.

A twenty-line poem, Ezekiel's "Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher" is most striking for its imaginative parallels. The triplet of poet, lover and birdwatcher recalls William Shakespeare's lunatics, lovers and poets from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; however, there is a difference. Whereas the lunatics, lovers and poets are crazy in the Bard's comedy, poet, lover and birdwatcher are patient in Ezekiel's poem. Nevertheless, it is possible that Ezekiel has taken the Bard's idea to begin with and swerved from it to make it his own. The poem exhibits his attitude towards life, poetry and nature.

Birds, women and figures of speech are recurrent images in Ezekiel's poems. Bird watching for Ezekiel is an act of self-discovery. In the poignant poem "Paradise Flycatcher" the sight of the bird brings to poet's mind the bird that was killed in the past, thus presenting the ironic cycle of life and death "The live one flashes at the watcher / Chestnut wings; the dead is buried in his mind." Women are the heart of the matter of Ezekiel's poems that speak of passion and love as in "To a Certain Lady" or "Commitment" or "Tonight" which declares "The true business of living is seeing, touching, kissing, / The epic of walking in the street and kissing in the bed." As Edgington notes in his article on Ezekiel, "Women are not merely symbols of life, they represent the mother, the lover, the anima and also the source of the poet's inspiration – the muse. Ezekiel celebrates all of these aspects of women in his poems, not neglecting the physical for the symbolic or vice versa" (145). Further, Metapoetic nature of Ezekiel's poems is difficult to miss; the poem "Poetry" signals, "A poem is an episode, completed / In an hour or two, but poetry / Is something more." And there are overt references to figures of speech: "...on a lucky day a metaphor / Leaping from the sod" from "A Time to Change" and "Whatever the enigma, / The passion of blood, / Grant me the metaphor / To make it human good" from "Morning Prayer."

The way the lines are structured, spaced and punctuated in "Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher" tell us how the poet has tried to synthesize his ideas in words and how aesthetics of English language form a subtext here. The space between the two stanzas which induces a pause in "Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher" is curiously followed by the line "The slow movement seem, somehow, to say much more," as the word "somehow" between commas further slows down the movement, and it is an instance of word and idea in synchronization, aim of Ezekiel in many of

his poems. The unhurried nature and idea of the poem is indeed the self assuredness of the poet. Absence of the conjunction “and” between the penultimate word “lover” and the last word “birdwatcher” in the title clearly suggests that all three individuals/roles are one and interchangeable. A similar merging of roles/individuals can be seen in Ezekiel’s “Enterprise” where writers turn pilgrims turn writers.

The three poems of this study employ the subtexts of English at different levels: it is very much the visible component of the text in “A Far Cray from Africa”; partially hidden in “Telephone Conversation”; and neatly masked in “Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher”. The subtexts of English, once they are visible, become so overpowering in postcolonial writing that they nearly undermine the text’s main intention and potential meaning, which, indeed, is the nature and role of subtexts. While personal and metaphoric allusions enrich the texture of the three poems, their English subtexts generate new debates.

English writing from postcolonial societies, a cultural and hence an elusive phenomenon, is regarded variously, at times paradoxically, as identification with the dominant culture / colonial power, colonial hangover, conscious decolonizing, postcolonial voice, imperial-colonial dialectic, cross-cultural enterprise, etc.. What cannot be contested, however, is that English writing from postcolonial societies has brought new words and new methods and generated new texts. In the daunting historical situation, the postcolonial writers at times steer clear of the obvious themes or subvert them in order to sustain the autonomy of their art and expression. And there lies the importance of subtexts.

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