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## Exploration of English as the 'Power' Language in Mulk Raj Anand's Early Novels

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Historically, there has always been a powerful connection between a country's military expansion and the spread of its language. Infact, English has no intrinsic linguistic quality which other languages lack. All human languages have the same basic intrinsic linguistic competence to generate grammatically acceptable utterances. Therefore, if English is considered as the power language then linguistic imperialism is surely at work. Robert Phillipson (1992) has clarified that 'the dominance of English is asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages

Mulk Raj Anand(1905-2004) pays close attention to linguistic imperialism in his first three novels which were published between 1935-37. Marked as 'Epic of Misery' by the noted literary critic Saros Cowasjee(1977), these three novels are *Untouchable*(1935), *Coolie*(1937) and *Two leaves and a Bud*(1937) which deal with both sides of linguistic imperialism-the linguistic hegemony as it is planned by the colonial rulers and also the 'linguistic suicide' committed by the colonized through their slavish admiration for the *angrezi* tongue. This two-way traffic consolidated and reaffirmed the pre-eminence of English in the colonized country.

Human beings are given due credit for their ingenious creation and development of various languages. Languages have been used for communication between people and they are also potent tools of direct control over the dominated people. English as the colonizer's language does not merely facilitate communication between its speakers. As an instrument of power, English language has a glorified history in the chronology of human languages.

English language does not possess any superior intrinsic linguistic quality but its superiority over other languages is due to its stronger socio-cultural base. All human beings have the same basic intrinsic linguistic competence to generate grammatically acceptable utterances which implies that all languages should be essentially similar at some deep level. Thus, the power and the ever-increasing importance of English language lie elsewhere. Braj B. Kachru(1989) has this to say behind the emergence of English as the global language in these terms:

"...competence in English and the use of this language signify a transmutation: an added potential for material and social gain and advantage...knowing English is like possessing the fabled Aladdin's lamp which permits one to open, as it were, the linguistic gates to international business, technology, science, and travel. In short, English provides linguistic power."<sup>1</sup>

How English language comes to be the sole medium of 'useful' and 'profitable' instruction is an interesting episode in the infamous history of linguistic imperialism. The history of colonialism and the imposition of English language are necessarily connected and complementary to each other. Historically, there has been a powerful connection between a country's military expansions and the spread of its language. In all the important institutions

of the incumbent government like schools, offices, or in administration the language of the colonizers takes its privileged position. Here, begins the transformation of just another language like English into a language of power which in its journey to supreme status and remarkable prestige sweeps aside the native tongues unceremoniously.

Under British rule, English language enjoyed great status and wide acceptance. It was, after all, the language of the colonial masters. Kachru *The Alchemy of English* (1989) again becomes handy in the exploration of this theme:

“The political power of the British ...gave to them as colonists a lot of political stature, requiring them to adopt a pose fitting their status. The white man’s language becomes a marker of his power.”<sup>2</sup>

However, native reverence for the foreign tongue was also necessary for the completion of linguistic hegemony. This is not possible until English comes to enjoy, in important domains, a position of superiority over native languages. Consequently, the native population became desperate for English education without which they thought, there would be no hope of intellectual progress or even competing successfully with the foreign domination. In India, the introduction and spread of the foreign tongue was planned and executed at the behest of British colonial rulers. They carefully established English as the language of command for which the natives and their tongues paid a heavy price.

In this article, the three novels of Anand that come under discussion are *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1937) and *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937). *Untouchable* is a sincere depiction of the incidents of a single day in the life of its young protagonist, Bakha while *Coolie* traces the fate of a boy, Munoo, from a village to the mountains. On the other hand, the last novel of this ‘epic of misery’ trilogy, *Two Leaves and a Bud*, concentrates on the forced migration of Gangu to distant Assam where he takes up a job with Macpherson Tea Estate. The novelist’s depiction of the marginalized people has received wider critical attention but, here, the emphasis is on how these three novels are also important in exploring the varied aspects of linguistic imperialism. Significantly, Anand deals with both sides of it: the linguistic hegemony as it is planned by the colonial rulers and also the ‘linguistic suicide’ as committed by the colonized, through their high regard and adoration for the *angrezi* tongue. This two-way traffic consolidates and reaffirms the pre-eminence of English which continued unabated even after India became independent.

As has already been pointed out, English language is an instrument in the hands of the British rulers which boosts their confidence and surrounds them with an aura of glamour. As the language of the master it carries invariably their arrogance and self-righteousness. Reggie Hunt, assistant planter of the Macpherson Tea Estate, is one character in *Two Leaves and a Bud* whose words speak volumes about his character:

“The white man is tolerated here because of his superior clothes, respected because of his knowledge and admired for his personal qualities.”<sup>3</sup>

Undoubtedly, English language adds and reaffirms this sense of superiority in an Englishman’s life. Great care, therefore, has been taken to maintain the prestige of the language especially among the natives. The importance of English, in the history of colonialism is aptly summed up by Ngugi Wa Thiong’o:

“... if it was the gun which made possible the mining of this gold, and which effected the political captivity of their owners, it was language which held captive their cultures, their values, and hence their minds.”<sup>4</sup>

Through clever use of English language, the portrait of Englishmen as ‘civilized’, ‘knowledgeable’, ‘creative’ is being built up to, at first, captivate the native brain and then persuade them to give in to colonial rule. Colonial rule, by its distinct nature, always establishes a master-slave relationship in the colonies. In order to keep up the prestige level, the master needs to have a potent tool like English language to distinguish himself. There could never be a master without a slave. Therefore, distinction between human beings becomes absolutely necessary. Amidst the ‘swarming millions’, the British colonizers distinguished themselves through their language.

The superiority of English, however, can’t be achieved without the suppression of the colonized people. The indigenous languages fell into disrepute and in their place English got promoted. In the colonial era, English is adopted as the sole medium of instruction, facilitating class prestige and minimum economic security under the British government. In *Coolie*, a village school master advises his students to adopt the *angrezi* tongue if they are serious about their future. In order to become *sarkari babu* it is vital for the students to break away from their mother-tongue education. Proficiency in English language is what is needed. Some young men succeed but at great cost:

“... the fundamentals of a sound education being utterly lacking, the *babu* remained unconditioned, uneducated, and therefore, incapable of writing adequately in English or in his language.”<sup>5</sup>

This is obviously the result of replacing the mother-tongue with a foreign tongue as D.P. Pattanayak(1981) highlights in his book *Multilingualism and Mother-tongue Education*:

“It is generally accepted that precision of thought and clarity of ideas are considerably hampered without the ability to speak effectively and to read and write correctly and lucidly in one’s mother tongue”.<sup>6</sup>

According to Pattanayak, mother-tongue education “helps in the search for the self-affirmation establishes group identity, satisfies the national urge for cultural rootedness”. However, with the use of English as the medium of instruction, an attempt is made to create a group of native elite who will uphold the beliefs and virtues of the colonizers in every walks of life. This model of indirect rule ‘through the creation of a class of *babus*’ gets full support from Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859), initiating the official introduction of English into the education system:

“We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions we govern –a class of persons Indians in blood and colour but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population.”<sup>7</sup>

*Babus* in Anand’s novels, fulfill Macaulay’s vision with remarkable finesse and sincerity. In a master-slave relationship, they willingly take up the career of a slave and even find glory in it. As the subordinates under the mighty British raj, *babus* are confident that some kind of emperor’s glamour will be rubbed on their native skins. If their black skins trouble their

lonely hearts, they try to assimilate themselves with whatever little understanding they have of their master's language-English. Assimilation is necessary if the colonial rule is intent on getting legitimacy:

"In order for the colonizer to be the complete master, it is not enough for him to be so in actual fact, but he must also believe in its legitimacy to be complete, it is not enough for the colonized to be a slave, he must also accept his role."<sup>8</sup>

Through their slavish disposition, these *babus* provide the colonial overlords with that 'legitimacy' which the masters so desperately crave for. If the rulers are god-sent angels for the *babus*, English language, then, is the divine tongue which needs to be worshipped. Anand's novels depict these *babus* in a similar vein who voluntarily 'bow to the language of his masters'.

Babu Nathoo Ram, sub-accountant of The Imperial bank in *Coolie*, has perfected himself as a drudge of the British Empire. One single dream that he nurtures is to get a promotion in the bank through the recommendation of Mr. W.P. England, the chief cashier in the same bank. As the *babu* hardly knows the *sahib* he decides to use his English to break the ice to start a formal conversation. His broken, fragmented English, inadequate conversational skill and limited vocabulary do not speak favourably about his mastery in the language. What seems to save the situation for him is his lackeyism towards his English master. Even the *sahib* finds it too much to bear. Nathoo Ram is incapable in starting a conversation. All he knows is some readymade information to please his superiors. Weather is conventionally regarded as one of the topics that engage an Englishman quite easily. Nathoo Ram, therefore, begins with the subject of weather but unfortunately tells a hot humid day 'fine morning, beautiful day'. This is just one of many situations where the *babu* shows his desperation to jump at anything to attract his master's attention. His incapability to go beyond 'good morning' and 'yes sir' renders him incompetent of ever establishing a relationship at par with his master. But, then, the colonizers do not expect this to happen. W.P. England therefore finds the *babu* amusing and his reverence out of place, but does not care to correct the *babu*. As a fresh arrival from 'Home', he is disturbed with his lackeyism but soon like a seasoned administrator the *babu*'s exaltation will be claimed as his birthright.

In his profession of a clerk, Nathoo Ram feels immense pride and worships his masters who have placed him in such a prestigious position. His sense of superiority gets bolstered with the prospect of being seen conversing in English with a *sahib*. In the tea party at his house this is precisely what happens as the *babu* explains a thing or two about the 'elephant god, Ganesha' to Mr. W.P. England:

"The God of wisdom, worldliness and wealth, sir,' said babu Nathoo Ram, defining his words rather pompously as he knew his illiterate wife was overhearing him talk English to a *sahib* on an equal footing for once in his life."<sup>9</sup>

This, however, is quite normal in a society where English language alone allows the native into that restricted zone where the *sahibs* reside. In a power relationship, it is always the master who dictates the terms and *babus* like Sashi Bhusan Das have little option but 'to cringe all the time'. In *Two Leaves and A Bud*, De La Havre attributes *babu*'s sterility on the inequality between the colonizers and the colonized:

"If only the British had begun by accepting these people from the very start on terms of equality, as human beings...but... the British had exaggerated the worst instinct in their own character and called out the worst in the Indian".<sup>10</sup>



De la Havre may condemn servility but it certainly pays to be servile for the natives. Even the marginal characters in Anand's novels seem to have taken a leaf out of the *babu's* book of toadyism. In *Untouchable*, Bakha's profession of a sweeper does not in any way require competence in English. But he is determined to learn the language with a *babu's* son as his teacher. In his own ways, Bakha knows 'the possession of something European was better than the possession of nothing European'. English, as the language of the superior human race, therefore, gains immense prestige in Bakha's eyes. Amidst all the pains and humiliations in a sweeper's life Bakha tries to become someday a 'true sahib' with the "king-emperor's' English" at his command. If he tries to learn English to talk 'tish-mish, tish-mish' which the Englishmen spoke'. Afzal, a servant of Reggie Hunt, decides to use the *angrezi* language for his own material gain. Afzal's language is the same 'broken, fragmented' type of 'Babu English': 'Please to change, *Huzoor*, and have a peg'.

Afzal's language is clearly imperfect but at least, he tries to speak the language of his master. Reggie has no problem with it and, in fact, they share an excellent relationship between themselves. Anand confirms as much in his own words:

"Between him [Reggie Hunt] and Afzal, there was an excellent relationship, based on a plain acceptance of the fact that he was the master and Afzal the servant".<sup>11</sup>

English as a language has a wide currency in the colonized world. Even a *sahukar* knows it and uses this knowledge to his advantage. In *Two Leaves and a Bud*, a *seth* of the market feels jealous of his own brother whose proficiency in English boosts his business prospects. A little bit of English is all that matters if one is eager to strike an instant relationship with the *sahibs*. *Seth* Dhanu Mal's brother is an expert player in this game and consequently his business prospect brightens up in the areas surrounding the Macpherson Tea Estate. This is not an isolated incident in the whole novel. Even an impoverished coolie like Gangu thinks he will be entitled to a grant of a few rupees only if *babu* Shashi Bhusan pleads on his behalf in English language. Gangu even promises a percentage of the grant to *babu* Shashi Bhusan:

"*Babuji* I promise to give you some of the money which the *sahib* may give me if you talk to him in *angrezi* and get me the loan I want...".<sup>12</sup>

The colonial masters avoid any direct communication with the native population. The only channel of communication open to them is through 'the brown *sahibs*' like *Babu* Shashi Bhusan who speaks on their behalf in English language but only at a price. These *babus* gain materially but their voluntary adoption of English cause psychic and emotional violence in their hearts. Their long association with the *angrezi* tongue alienates them from their indigenous culture as a foreign language also carries with it a new culture and new ways of life. This cultural dislocation occurs when colonized people are persuaded to take up the white man's tongue but fail to relate to the culture and values of the colonizers. They are stranded between these two ways of life and modes of behavior. If the *babus* are willing victims of cultural alienation the actual culprits are almost always the colonizers who stigmatize or simply ignore local traditions in every walk of life. Ngugi wa Thiong'o narrates the disastrous impact of such policies in his essay *Imperialism of Language*:

"...our languages were suppressed so that we the captives would not have our own mirror in which to observe ourselves and our enemies...henceforth Europe and its language would be the centre of the universe.. The mastery of the English language was the measure of one's readiness for election into the band of the elect."<sup>13</sup>

As Ngugi wa Thiong'o says, the suppression of the native tongue and the elevations of an alien tongue both have their source in the colonial history of that region. Needless to say, in an unequal relationship it is always the language of the ruler which vanquishes or marginalizes the indigenous languages. Linguistic imperialism in India tells the same story.

In Anand's novels, the colonizers show their total disregard for the native culture and their languages. A sahib does not even try to acquaint himself with the native languages.

Colonel Hutchinson, in *Untouchable*, is concerned with the upliftment of the poor souls but even then his hatred for the native tongue is exposed. Christian missionaries during their long stay in the country never quite tried to learn the indigenous languages. And whenever they make an attempt it was in most cases for the conversion of the wretched outcastes who are flattered to get a sahib's attention. Colonel Hutchinson therefore manages, at best, a little bit of broken Hindustani to communicate with the potential converts. However, on his part, Bakha is happy with whatever attention he receives from a *sahib*:

"Bakha felt honoured that the sahib had deigned to talk Hindustani to him, even though it was broken Hindustani".<sup>14</sup>

Bakha is no different from those scores of colonized men and women whose sense of inferiority gets lessened when a white sahib decides to speak in their inferior tongue. Though a sweeper, Bakha knows how powerful and prestigious English language is. Anand's protagonist even tries his hand in learning English and thereby, acquiring this instrument of power. *Coolie* presents another marginal who does the same thing with his broken English. Munoo's 'Gut noon' and 'gut morning' are applied arbitrarily to impress Mr. Edward Marjoriebanks. This servility is only matched by the colonizers' indifference towards their dominated subjects. On the other hand, a man like Reggie Hunt comes to distaste everything that India represents. If he learns anything of the native tongue, it is only the swear words and those few selected words to curse or to order the natives at his will. *Two Leaves and a Bud* abounds with 'broken Hindustani' of Mr. Croft-Cooke and Reggie Hunt. On the other hand, Reggie Thomas in *Coolie*, uses choicest words of abuse culled from the Indian languages: *ooloo*, *surka bacha*, *bahinchod* among others and also a few words of command like *jao*, *jaldi chalo* and *Hosh Karo*.

The colonized natives strive hard to talk and behave like the true sahibs. But as they try to belong to the secluded land of the colonizers they are refused admission. Total assimilation, therefore, does not quite materialize for the *babus*. The sahibs at first teach them inadequate and, then, faulty English then they make fun out of the *babu*'s third rate English. Anand catches the *babus* in their precarious position under the British raj:

"Our rulers were moved to supercilious laughter by the bad grammar and faulty syntax of the *babu* English of the Indian clerk whom they had trained through a barren and vicious system of education".<sup>15</sup>

Reggie hunt finds much to laugh in an anthology like *Honoured Sir from Babuji* (1931) edited by Cecil Hunt which is full of mistakes committed by the *babus* in their use of the masters' tongue. The distinguishing characteristics of 'Babu English' are its florid, excessively polite, and indirect manner of expression, which have been widely reported for its amusement value. However, it is De la Havre who, appropriately, puts the blame on the British mode of education and the indifference shown by the rulers towards their miserable subjects:

“It is their rotten education,...Actually Indians are good at languages,...[and] how many words of Hindustani can we speak apart from the swear words and the Hindustani epithets?”<sup>16</sup>

Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, categorically, point to this colonial ‘indoctrination’ in these lines:

“Language is a fundamental site of struggle for postcolonial discourse because the colonial process itself begins in language...A systematic education and indoctrination installed the language and thus the reality on which it was predicated as preeminent.”<sup>17</sup>

### Notes:

1. Kachru B. Braj, *The Alchemy of English*, OUP, New Delhi, 1989, p.1.
2. *ibid*, p.5.
3. Anand Raj Mulk, *Two Leaves and a Bud*, , Arnold Associates, New Delhi, 1937,p.55.
4. Thiong’o Wa Ngugi, *Imperialism of language*, quoted in *Switching Languages:Translingual Writers Reflect on their Craft*, edited by Steven G. Kellman,University of Nebraska,USA,2003,p.170.
5. Anand Raj Mulk, *King Emperor’s English*, Hind Kitabs, Bombay.1948, p.10.
6. Pattanayak D.P., *Multilingualism and Mother Tongue Education*, , OUP, New Delhi, 1981 p.53.
7. Macaulay T.B. ‘Minute’ quoted in *Literature and Nation: Britain and India (1800-1900)*, , (ed.) by Richard Allen and Harish Trivedi, Routledge, New York,2001p.205-206.
8. Memmi Albert,*The Colonizer and the Colonized*, Beacon Press,USA,,1967,p.89.
9. Anand Raj Mulk, *Coolie*, Arnold Associates, New Delhi, 1937, p.53.
10. Anand Raj Mulk, *Two Leaves and a Bud*, , Arnold Associates, New Delhi, 1937 .p.154.
11. *ibid*, p.61.
12. *ibid*, .p.61.
13. Thiong’o Wa Ngugi, *Imperialism of language*, quoted in *Switching Languages:Translingual Writers Reflect on their Craft*, edited by Steven G. Kellman,University of Nebraska,USA,2003,p.172.
14. Anand Raj Mulk, *Untouchable*, Arnold Associates, New Delhi, 1935, p137.
15. Anand Raj Mulk,*King Emperor’s English*, Hind Kitabs, Bombay.1948,p.3.
16. Anand Raj Mulk, *Two Leaves and a Bud*, Arnold Associates, New Delhi, 1937,p.23.
17. Ashcroft Bill, Griffiths Gareth and Tiffin Helen, *The postcolonial Studies Reader*, London, 1995, Routledge, p.283.

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