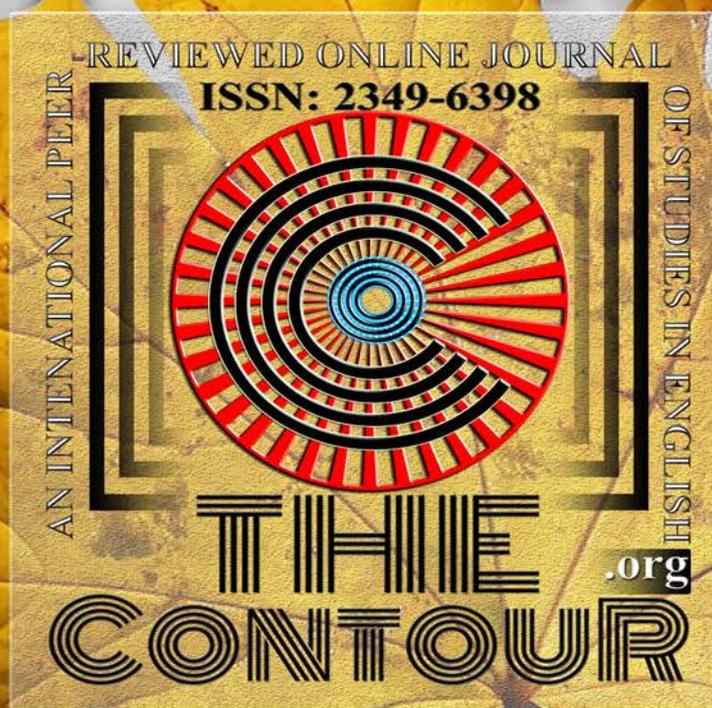


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# Use of English Language in the Postcolonial Era: A Theoretical Application of the “Third Space of Enunciation”

**Swati Nayek**

**Assistant Professor of English  
Rampurhat College  
Rampurhat, Birbhum  
West Bengal**

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## Abstract

*The paper attempts to deal with the use of English language in the postcolonial era applying Homi Bhabha's theory of “the third space of enunciation” that he develops in *The Location of Culture* (1994). Writing, teaching and learning the English language has radically changed with postcolonialism, which generally refers to the period following independence, implying a process of decolonizing its aura as the ‘Queen’s English’ within a hybrid framework which gestures towards fluidity and creation of new transcultural forms within that ‘third space’ where cultures of colonizer and colonized meet. This makes the process of writing teaching, and learning the English language a hydrodynamic act, signifying fluidity and flexibility and also a subjective effort leading to the creation of one’s own identity in the postcolonial world which is fluid and hybrid in nature. This paper mainly focuses on rewriting the English language in the colonial aftermath with special reference to Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997)*

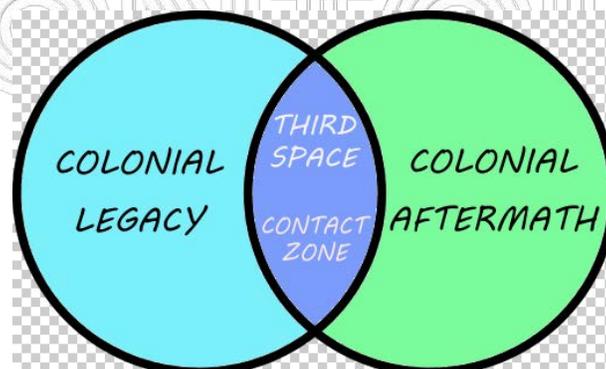
**Keywords:** Bhabha, English language, Hybridity, Postcolonial, Third space

The language question is the central aspect of the postcolonial discourse. The process of writing, teaching and learning the English language in the colonial aftermath evolves within a liminal space, that is, an in-between space or a threshold area. Homi Bhabha develops the idea of liminality or liminal space in *The Location of Culture* (1994) where he quotes art historian Renee Green’s characterization of a stairwell as a “liminal space, a pathway between upper and lower areas, each of which was annotated with plaques referring to blackness and whiteness”. The term ‘liminality’ derives from the word ‘limen’, meaning the threshold, generally used in psychology to indicate the threshold between the sensate and the subliminal. The idea of liminality is what constructs the discourse of postcolonialism signifying an in-between space, a threshold between retaining the colonial legacy and formation of a new non-colonial identity, recognizing both the historical continuity and change. The meaning of the term ‘postcolonial’ is not there in the prefix ‘post’ to indicate sequentiality. According to Bhabha these jargons like postmodern or postcolonial “that insistently gesture to the beyond, only embody its restless and revisionary energy if they transform into an expanded and ex-centric site of experience and empowerment” (Bhabha, “Location of Culture” 6). The concept of liminality as an in between space or threshold area may be compared with what Freud describes as the ‘uncanny’, a perception of a space where the perceiver finds himself in a state of duality that is simultaneously ‘at home’ and ‘not at home’,



familiar and strange, safe and threatening. The act of writing, teaching and learning the English language in the postcolonial era can be recognized as an ‘uncanny’ experience where the writer, teacher and the learner find themselves in state of flux simultaneously retaining the essence of the ‘Queen’s English’ and also recognizing the flavour of the native dialect resulting in formulation of a hybrid and fluid postcolonial subject.

Bhabha claims that in the postcolonial era all cultural systems and identity are constructed in a space that he calls the ‘third space of enunciation’ and he defines it as a space "in-between the designations of identity" and that "this interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy"(Bhabha, “Location of Culture” 4). He calls memory as the bridge between colonialism and the question of cultural identity in postcolonial world. The act of remembering, according to him, “is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful remembering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present”( Bhabha, “Location of Culture” 63).He identifies the colonial aftermath as an ambivalent state marked by an act of unwillingness to remember the painful memories of the colonial past and also an attempt to make that past a familiar one in order to formulate a new present identity. The ‘third space of enunciation’ is what Pratt calls the ‘contact zone’ that she describes as a social space where “disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of dominance and subordination like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today” (Pratt, “Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation” 4). ‘Contact zone’ or the ‘third space’ is the construction of that space where cultures of the colonizer and colonized meet, clash and create new transcultural forms, in which the concept of hybridity is couched. Now the word ‘hybridity’ etymologically meaning the offspring of a tame sow and a wild boar ‘hybrida’, refers to the cross-breeding of two species to form a third ‘hybrid’ species. In the postcolonial discourse the idea of ‘hybridity’ is used to mean cross-cultural exchange and creation of a new third form that may be of various kinds: linguistic, cultural or political. Linguistic hybridity is what makes the writing, teaching and learning the English language in the postcolonial era a challenging task requiring new perspectives and skills. The concept of the linguistic hybridity is there in Mikhail Bakhtin’s idea of ‘polyphony’ , who uses it to discriminate texts with a ‘single voice’ from those with a ‘double voice’ where the narrator makes characters speak in their own voice leading to the formation of hybridity within the text.



The Model of the Third Space or the Contact Zone



Literature plays an important role in the teaching and learning of a language. The teaching learning process of the English language in the postcolonial era is closely related with rewriting the English language in postcolonial literature, that is, ‘literatures in English’, a hybrid discourse or a third space accompanied by simultaneous projection and decline of the colonialism. Although Thiongo, a Kenyan writer announces his ‘farewell to English’ in *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) where he contends that English in Africa is a ‘cultural bomb’ which erases memories of pre-colonial cultures and history and produces new forms of colonialism. The first generation of postcolonial writers in India find the textual encounter of the postcolonial dilemma through an English idiom a challenging task. As Raja Rao brilliantly points out this dichotomy in the foreword to his novel *Kanthapura* (1938):

The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word ‘alien’, yet English is not an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make up like Sanskrit or Persian was before- but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians .We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will someday prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American. Time alone will justify it. (Rao, “Kantapura” v-vi)

This postulation regarding the use of language in postcolonial literature that Rao brings forth in *Kantapura* may remind us of Harold Bloom’s account of the poetic influence in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) where he contends all literary activity to be a struggle between a ‘beginning poet’ and the influence of the powerful literary ‘forefathers’. The act of writing, teaching and learning the English language in the postcolonial era resembles that struggle between the native language and the powerful influence of the language of the empire. This debate about the use of language in the postcolonial era has been addressed by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffith and Helen Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) where they explore the ways in which the post-colonial writers displace the language of the colonisers that is named as ‘standard language’ and replace it with a local variant having its own distinctive regional characteristics. The two terms that they use to describe this postcolonial experience is ‘abrogation’ and ‘appropriation’. ‘Abrogation’ is the refusal of the imperial culture whereas ‘appropriation’ describes a strategy in which the colonised culture can use the tools of the dominant discourse to resist its political and cultural control.

The use of English language in postcolonial literature in India can be described an act of ‘appropriation’ as in Arundhati Roy’s novel *The God of Small Things*(1997) where she has successfully created a new Indian English idiom by breaking the conventional rules of grammar and syntax and coining new words reflecting cultural hybridity .This novel is about breaking the laws, the myths and the discourse of the grand narrative and most importantly breaking the codes of what Bill Aschroft calls ‘standard language’ in *The Empire Writes Back* :



They all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tampered with the laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much. The laws that make grandmothers grandmothers, uncles uncles, mothers mothers, cousins cousins, jam jam and jelly jelly. It was a time when uncles became fathers, mothers lovers and cousins died and had funerals. It was a time when the unthinkable became thinkable and the impossible really happened. (Roy, “The God of Small Things” 31)

She has used various mechanisms to mark this text an edifice of the cultural hybridity. One such is the use of untranslated words in her descriptions of the local dress and food of Kerala as she describes “ Even in those days most Syrian Christian women had started wearing saris, Kochu Maria still wore her spotless half-sleeved white chatta with a V-neck and her white mundu which folded into a crisp cloth fan on her behind” ( 137) or various reference to South Indian foods like ‘kappa’, ‘meen navachatu’, ‘idi appam’, ‘kanji and mean’ signify a colonial encounter with the opposed cultural identity. Sometimes she creates a hybrid poetic language:

Rubadub dub  
 Three women in a tub,  
 Tarry a while said Slow. (96)  
 or  
 O, young Lochin varhas scum out of the vest,  
 Through wall the vide Border his teed was the bes;  
 Tand savissgood broadsod heweapon sadnun,  
 Nhe rod all unarmed,and he rod all alone.(271)

Many folk songs have been introduced in the text in their original language like the song of the fisherman that Ammu and the twins sing or the one that Velutha’s crippled brother sings:

Pandoru mukkkuvan muthinu poyi  
 (Once a fisherman went to sea)  
 Padinjaran kattathu mungi poyi,  
 (The west wind blew and swallowed his boat). (219)

or  
 Pa pera –pera-pera-perakka  
 (Mr. gugga-gug-gug-guava)  
 Ende parambil thooralley.  
 (Don’t shit here in my compound.)  
 Chetende parambil thoorikko,  
 (You can shit next door in my brother’s compound,)  
 Pa pera-pera-pera-perakka.  
 (Mr.gugga-gug-gug-guava). (206)

This text makes the readers conscious of its status as a hybrid entity in the construction of images like “dhoby’s finger”, a description of the wrinkled skin of a drowned child or “mango-hair



between the molars” which is a description of Estha’s pain for betraying Velutha. Along with these regional overtones this text also contains flavour of the language of the empire and that is visible in her construction of the images like “birds like unclaimed baggage at an airport”, “teeth like yellow piano-keys”, “finger gaurds like condoms” etc., gesturing towards the construction of the ‘liminal space’ that Bhabha calls the ‘third space’, a threshold between continuation of cultural colonization and creation of new non-colonial identity. Another writer of this period Salman Rushdie comments on how writing in this new English idiom can be a form of therapeutic act of resistance, remaking a colonial language to reflect the postcolonial experience.

Rewriting the English language as in *The God of Small Things* is a process of remaking a language. The use of English language in the colonial aftermath has turned into a hydrodynamic act signifying fluidity and flexibility, dismantling the myth of ‘Queen’s English’ and the grand narrative of the ‘English Literature’ and opening up a field of possibilities where one can create his/her own version of the English language implying Bakhtin’s idea of ‘polyphony’. The use of English language in the postcolonial era is a process of ‘appropriation’, that is, unfolding the ‘third space’ which is there between the colonial discourse and the colonial aftermath resulting in formulation of a new non-colonial identity.

Notes: The model of the “Third Space” or the “Contact Zone” is the writer’s own invention.

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**Bio-note:** Swati Nayek is an Assistant Professor of English at Rampurhat College, Birbhum.