

“The Aphasia Syndrome”: The Language of Colonialism in Postcolonial English Writings

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Abstract: This paper is an examination of how colonial language and its (after) effects are represented in postcolonial English literature. Two literary works are examined: the Indian diplomat and novelist Vikas Swarup’s *Slumdog Millionaire* and the Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat’s short story “Children of the Sea”. Through close reading and comparative analysis, the paper concludes that there are three main symptoms of language abuse in the colonial context, which it labels as “The Aphasia Syndrome” (TAS). Briefly, the TAS includes (1) the imitation (parrot-talk) of the colonizer’s language as a means of accessing its power and resources; (2) the silencing or suppression of all colonized speech; and (3) the colony’s “nonsensical” ravings, which include the use of indigenous words and expressions without providing translations, as well as the reorganization and reappropriation of signifiers in the privileged language to create indecipherable expressions. By diagnosing TAS and its historical affections on colonized peoples, the paper hopes to excavate the anti-colonial potential inherent in indigenous languages and speech, while advocating a more promising prospect for reconciliation, communication, and healing.

Keywords: postcolonialism, world literature in English, *Slumdog Millionaire*, *Krik? Krak!*, national consciousness

1. Introduction

Toni Morrison, the 1993 Nobel Prize laureate in Literature, talked in her Nobel Lecture about how language can hurt people. She mentioned a folklore about a wise but blind old woman. One day, some young people came to visit her to disprove her wisdom. Their leader held a small bird in his hands and asked the blind woman if it was alive. Whether she answered yes or no, the bird was doomed to die. Her answer alone would lead to the coming violence. After a long silence, the woman spoke. “I don’t know. It is in your hands,” she said. The young man, holding life in his hands, claimed the power to harm and kill in his question. The wise woman chose not to affirm this assertion because she was aware of the power of language and “thinks of language as susceptible to death, erasure; certainly imperiled and salvageable only by an effort of the will” [1].

Language has power beyond the realm of meaning. The misuse of language causes harm beyond the realm of the mind. This essay will focus on the consequences of such misuse from a postcolonial perspective. We will examine two literary works: Vikas Swarup’s novel *Slumdog Millionaire*, and Edwidge Danticat’s “Children of the Sea” from *Krik? Krak!*, her collection of short stories. We must

curb and find a way to heal the violence of colonial language because it afflicts the colonized people with “the Aphasia Syndrome.” As we shall see, this socio-cultural syndrome includes three main symptoms: parrot-talk, the silence, and ravings of insanity.

2. Summarizing Two (Post-)Colonial Narratives

2.1. Vikas Swarup and *Slumdog Millionaire*

Vikas Swarup has a “double identity” as an Indian diplomat and writer. *Slumdog Millionaire* is Swarup’s debut novel, written while he was posted in London. It was originally published as *Q&A* in 2005. The book consists of fourteen chapters (including the prologue and the epilogue) narrated by the protagonist Ram Mohammad Thomas. The story begins with Thomas being arrested for cheating in a television quiz show called *Who Will Win a Billion?*. As a slum boy, Thomas was not well educated. After growing up, he worked as a bartender in a local restaurant in Mumbai. Yet, he somehow managed to answer a series of tough questions. The company running the quiz show would have to award Thomas a one-billion-rupee jackpot. People had good reason to suspect that Thomas was a fraud.

Despite being tortured, Thomas insisted that he knew all the answers without cheating. After his lawyer Smita rescued him from the police station, they watched the quiz show video. From that moment on, the story developed into two narrative levels. One is Thomas remembering his past, from which he learned most of the answers to the questions. The other is Thomas participating in the show and discussing his performance with Smita afterwards. Each chapter of the book corresponds to a question. As the story unfolds, readers discover that Thomas did not cheat to win the final jackpot. Yet behind each of his correct answers lay an unforgettably painful experience of life and growth in his homeland.

The United Kingdom colonized the Indian subcontinent for centuries before India gained its independence in 1950. Today, the vestiges of colonialism are still present in Indian culture and society. The teaching of English language and literature is one of the most striking. The contrast between English and Hindi (and many other indigenous languages) has developed beyond linguistic differences. According to Gupta, “[India] became divided into an English-speaking elite and the non-English-speaking masses, with hardly a bridge between them” [2]. The ability to communicate in English derives from the upper class in society and reinforces that status. Those who cannot speak English are highly susceptible to Aphasia Syndrome, which we will explore in the following sections.

2.2. Edwidge Danticat and “Children of the Sea”

Krik? Krak! happened on the other side of the globe. Like Swarup, Edwidge Danticat has a “double identity” as well: a Haitian-American writer. Today, Haiti occupies the western part of the island of Hispaniola in the Caribbean. This mountainous country has also suffered from the prolonged turmoil of colonialism. During Spanish and French colonial rule, many enslaved blacks were transported from Africa to the island’s plantations. At the end of the 18th century, after centuries of colonial oppression, the enslaved people began a revolution. The Republic of Haiti was founded in 1804 when the rebel army captured the capital, Port-au-Prince. Unfortunately, “[though] the Haitian revolution sounded the death knell of the system of chattel slavery [... it] replaced slavery with feudalism inside Haiti” [3]. The postcolonial democracy in Haiti was fragile and unstable, with dictators and warlords coming and going.

Danticat’s “Children of the Sea” is historically set during President François Duvalier’s rule over Haiti (1957-1971). Duvalier built his empire on Haiti’s postcolonial heritage. However, his rule turned out to be a continuation of the unequal social hierarchies imposed during the colonial period. Duvalier was also notorious for recruiting “the Macoutes” as his secret militia to impose dictatorial

control over the country. Many intellectuals and rebellious students were executed, silenced, or forced to flee the country. The male letter writer in the story was one of the exiles. He was a member of the Youth Federation – a fictitious underground resistance community – and the Radio Six, which broadcast programs against the Duvalier government. When the radio station was raided, the male letter writer escaped on a refugee boat that sailed north to America.

All the passengers on the boat were suffering from seasickness, the blazing sun, and the freezing temperatures at night. One of them was a fifteen-year-old pregnant girl named Célianne. The Macoutes broke into her house one night and ordered her brother to sleep with their mother. When the family refused, they raped Célianne and then arrested her brother for moral crimes. At sea, Célianne gave birth to a baby girl named Swiss. The baby never cried – she had died at birth. They soon ran out of food, but no one ever saw land on the other side of the sea. The cracks in the boat widened as the water kept coming in. Desperate passengers threw their belongings overboard one by one. Célianne refused to give up her baby. She jumped into the sea as soon as she let go of Swiss. Finally, the male letter writer left his notebook with the letters to his lover in Haiti. He knew he would be buried at the bottom of the ocean with Célianne, Swiss, and others.

The female letter writer was also taking notes of the tragic condition around her all the time. Her family was trapped in Port-au-Prince because there was no gasoline at the market. Her school was closed after a military coup against the government. Her lover was now missing, and every tape of Radio Six that contained his voice had to be destroyed. The letter writer was angry about the suffocating situation. The night before her family fled to Ville Rose, the soldiers visited her neighbor, Madan Roger. Roger had lost her only son in the attack on Radio Six. She went to collect her son's remains and was given only his head. That night, the Macoutes singled her out for interrogation and torture. The family hid in the dark, listening to Roger's screams, which faded into the silence of death.

The next day, the family left Port-au-Prince. In the courtyard of her new shelter in Ville Rose, the correspondent found a banyan tree. She spent a lot of time under the tree reading, writing, and talking with her mother. Under the tree, she realized her ill-tempered father's unspoken love for the family. The father spent most of his savings to bribe the police not to pursue and persecute his daughter. At the end of the story, the girl went up to her father and thanked him. But then she saw her father's hands waving quickly in the air like black butterflies—a warning of death. She heard the news of her lover's fate on the radio that night: "Another boat sank off the coast of the Bahamas" [4].

3. Diagnosing The Aphasia Syndrome

The Aphasia Syndrome (hereafter abbreviated as TAS for brevity) does not mean the irreversible physical inability to speak. Rather, it refers to the long-term, psychogenic deprivation of the vitality of a language and its users. Three significant symptoms of TAS will be analyzed below, including parrot-talk, the silence, and ravings of insanity.

3.1. Parrot-talk

The first symptom of TAS is parrot-talk, which means the colonized people are repeating the colonizer's language and discourse. The perfect example of this is learning to speak the *lingua franca*, namely English. Indigenous culture is usually demeaned in the face of English – the linguistic representation of the colonizer's European origin. In Spivak's words, for both the colonizer and the colonized people, speaking English is "the persistent constitution of the Other as the Self's shadow" [5]. An iron curtain of language is drawn between the Eurocentric "self" and the indigenous "other" on the margins. In *Slumdog Millionaire*, the hostess Swapna Devi was suspicious when Thomas begged her for shelter under a Brahmin-caste alias. But "her severe features" immediately softened

when Thomas began to speak in English (“X Gkrz Opknu (or A Love Story)”) [6]. Ironically, the advantages of English are greater than the Brahmin identity.

Meanwhile, inequality of civil rights often accompanies the separation of English and indigenous languages. Being able to speak English is essentially a ticket to the privileges of the colonizer. When little Thomas was sent to the Juvenile Home after Father Timothy’s death, he became the other children’s leader:

Not because I was bigger, not because I was more aggressive, but because I spoke English. I was the orphan boy who could speak and read the magic language, and its effect on the officials was electric. (“The Burden of a Priest”) [6]

Speaking English could give a poor orphan boy immense, invisible power. Later, when Thomas worked as a domestic servant for Colonel Taylor, he kept his job in two ways. One is to never take any advantage from his host, even the smallest, beyond his salary. The other is crucial: “[e]very evening I sit in my room and practice speaking like an Australian” (“Learning to Speak Australian”) [6]. Speaking the Queen’s English is good, but it is not enough. It is only by imitating the master’s accent that the servant’s interests can be secured. Though Thomas did the parrot talk, he only confirmed his submissive identity. He never spoke Hindi to the Taylors, who never bothered to understand his mother tongue. In other words, the subordination of social status corresponds to the subordination of language in the colonial context. One way to make up for the difference is through parrot-talk, which few colonized people would find possible.

3.2. The Silence

We now turn to the second symptom of TAS: sheer silence. As the power difference expands, even parrot-talk is considered a challenge to the existing order. For example, when Thomas was detained at the police station, he remained silent to the representative of the American television company. “I remain quiet. Monkeys do not speak. Especially not in English” (“Prologue”) [6]. Of course, Thomas could understand what the American representative was saying to him. He did not respond because prejudiced stereotypes cannot be challenged in a police interrogation room. Rather than speak in English, it is wiser to keep one’s mouth shut.

“Children of the Sea” provides more shocking examples of this silence. When Radio Six was raided, the Duvalier government successfully silenced the voice of dissent and freedom. The male letter writer escaped to the sea, but he could not escape the fate of silence. On his first night at sea, the boy dreamed of his end: “[w]e go under and no one hears from us again” [4]. Later, after the boat began to crack, he had another vision of a heaven at the bottom of the sea:

There were starfishes and mermaids all around me. The mermaids were dancing and singing in Latin like the priests do at the cathedral during Mass. You were there with me too, at the bottom of the sea. ...I tried to talk to you, but every time I opened my mouth, water bubbles came out. No sounds. [4]

The reader may perceive the letters of the two lovers simultaneously, but each character sees only his own writing in the reality of the story. Thus, the impossibility of communication and the vanity of language fell upon them from the very beginning. The boy could not speak to his beloved even in his dreams because of the underwater environment. He knew that their love was doomed to tragedy, for only mermaids could speak in the sea. For both lovers, there was little difference between breathing on earth and drowning in the sea. The unimaginable pressure of the deep sea was everywhere. At the end of the story, readers witness the boy sacrifice his pages of love to the Spirit of Water. By forever giving up the ability to speak, he, too, was to become a child of the sea “who [has] escaped the chains of slavery to form a world beneath the heavens and the blood-drenched earth” [4].

The pregnant girl Célianne was another victim of the silence. Like the male letter writer, she was driven to the refugee boat under inhumane persecution of the government. When she gave birth on the boat, her baby was a genuine “child of the sea.” But for Célianne, this child of the sea was more like a child of oppression, violence, and humiliation. It was because the baby’s father was one of the Macoutes. Célianne’s baby was also a child of silence. According to the male letter writer, the baby never cried or made a sound after she came into the world [4]. If a newborn does not cry after birth, it has not yet begun to breathe. The baby had been “infected” with the deadly TAS in the mother’s body. The same silence buried Célianne as well at the bottom of the sea.

And we must not forget what happened to Madan Roger, according to the letters of the woman who wrote them. The Macoutes broke into her house and shouted unfounded accusations at her and her dead son. Madan Roger fought back, but to no avail:

they kept at it, asking her questions at the top of their voices: was your son a traitor? ... madan roger finally shouts, yes, he was one! ... they started to pound at her. you can hear it. you can hear the guns coming down on her head. it sounds like they are cracking all the bones in her body. [4]

To the Macoutes, Madan Roger’s rebuttal and curses were weaker than silence. Like deadly hunters smelling the scent of blood, they surrounded and teased the prey before their feast of violence. Like the wistful young people in Morrison’s story, they waited patiently for their victim to say the fatal “yes.” Therefore, the colonized people usually remained silent in the face of power and violence. To speak up means answering questions to which there cannot be answers in the first place. You cannot talk sense with the deaf.

3.3. Ravings of Insanity

The third and final symptom of TAS is crazy-like raving. But what is meant by “ravings” here is not pure crazy talk. The ravings of the colonized sound incoherent and extraordinary only to the ears of the colonizers. But for those who rave, their words contain an inner, intelligible meaning. Thus, we can compare these ravings in the colonial context to the screams of the madwoman in the attic in the feminist context. There are two forms of ravings of insanity: (1) semantic reclamation and (2) semiotic appropriation. The first refers to the use of indigenous words and expressions without providing equivalent translations. The second refers to the reorganization of signifiers in the colonizer’s language to create an almost indecipherable expression.

The key common feature of the two forms of ravings is untranslatability. According to Bhabha, “[At the site of the translation] the word of divine authority is deeply flawed by the assertion of the indigenous sign, and in the very practice of domination the language of the master becomes hybrid” [7]. The concept of translatability usually involves a presumption of the authority of the colonizer’s language. This implicit presupposition is so common that it almost becomes part of the collective unconscious of the colonized. In “Children of the Sea,” the first two lines of the female letter writer’s notes went: “**haiti est comme tu l’as laissé. yes, just the way you left it**” [4]. We see that French – the language of the former colonizer – was still placed in front of its translation in English (which represents Haitian Créole here). Metaphorically and literally, the shadow of colonialism still hangs over the Haitian people. Indigenous expressions are often quoted, eclipsed, and trailed by parentheses containing English translations. The voice of the colony is made into a specimen for interpretation and evaluation by the colonizer.

Nevertheless, we also see Danticat’s efforts to produce a semantic reclamation in the one-line example above. The female letter writer wrote only bold, lower-case letters – an apparent violation of the writing norms of European languages. Danticat is writing consciously to make “[her] language incorporates the style and structure of Kreyol so that the rhythms of the sentences become more Kreyol than English” [8]. Besides this, she is also adding untranslated Créole words to her texts, such

as “manman”, “wanga”, “Krik/Krak”, and “Agwé.” Most of these words cannot be understood without the indigenous cultural context of Haiti. It is through these words that the indelible and untranslatable local voices are precipitated into the text as subtle and subversive structures against the colonial reality.

The second form of ravings, namely, the semiotic appropriation, can be found in the longest chapter of *Slumdog Millionaire*: “X Gkrz Opknu (or A Love Story).” Swarup fleshes out the character of Shankar, a young boy who speaks a language no one understands. Thomas described Shankar as having “the kindest eyes I have ever seen” [6]. Yet, Shankar could only pronounce perplexing syllables like “akc,” “ykhz,” “ckka,” and “Odxifxn.” Everyone, including the police officers and his friends, took these syllables as insignificant ravings. But in Thomas’s ears, “[a]lthough the words sounded nonsensical to us, for [Shankar] they held a peculiar internal coherence” [6].

Thomas was right, because the author deliberately designed what Shankar should say and how he should say it. Shankar was in fact the only child of the wealthy hostess Swapna Devi. She denied that Shankar was her son after he accidentally saw her secret lover the other night. From that moment on, Shankar lost the ability to speak normally. However, we can still decipher Shankar’s speech with a misplaced version of the English alphabet. In Table 1 below, the first column represents the English letters, while the second column represents the equivalents for Shankar:

Table 1: Swarup’s alphabetic encryption table.

Translation in English	Shankar’s ravings
A	x
B	w
C	y
D	a
E	z
F	b
G	c
H	d
I	q
J	e
K	f
L	g
M	h
N	i
O	k
P	l
Q	m
R	n
S	o
T	p
U	j
V	r
W	s
X	t
Y	u
Z	v

Thus, we know that when Thomas first met Shankar and asked where he could stay overnight, Shankar was saying: “Uzo, Q fiks x ckka lgxyz (translation: Yes, I know a good place).” When the police inspector inquired his name, Shankar replied: “Hu ixhz qo Odxifxn (translation: My name is Shankar).” When Shankar was bit on the knee by a dog with rabies, he told Thomas: “Yxi ukj ozz pdxp akc? Dz wqp hz dznz (translation: Can you see that dog? He bit me here).” When Shankar’s rabies infection was irreversible, he had only his friend Thomas by his side. Shankar cried and begged Thomas, who was under the pseudonym of Raju: “Q ak ikp sxip pk aqe, Nxej (I do not want to die, Raju).” There was a time when Shankar could speak normally, and “his life, and his words, had a meaning.” But the childhood trauma robbed him of both the ability to speak meaning and the basic right to be understood. Despite Shankar’s efforts to show kindness to others, he received no sympathy in return. He was considered a poor madman who raved all day without uttering a single “meaningful” sentence.

Shankar is the ultimate appearance of the colony in the eyes of the colonizers: childish, irrational, and difficult to understand. The colonized speak, but no one cares about the meaning of these non-Latin speeches beyond mere anthropological curiosity. Even when someone does care about the actual meanings of these ravings, the perspective is usually skewed from the start. Language plays a critical role in simultaneously silencing the oppressed and raising the voice of colonial hegemony. Infected with TAS, the colonized people and their language are put on the lighter side of the scales of power. Thus, they should be cultivated by “more civilized” people. Their speech is supposed to be gibberish that deserves to be ignored, if not outright forbidden. In the title of this chapter, Shankar’s word “GRKZ” is essentially an empty signifier. Its process of signification must depend on the oppressive signified in English: “LOVE.” Meanwhile, the Hindi signification for love “PYAR” is forgotten and buried under the layers of English and the empty signifier.

However, sometimes the empty signifiers can also be a means of buffering and counterattack. The ravings have the potential to perform a semiotic appropriation that re-centers and subjectivizes the colonized on the margins. After Shankar’s death, Thomas was wandering the streets one day when a police inspector picked him up. The inspector suspected Thomas of being involved in a domestic burglary and wanted to take Thomas back for further questioning. At that moment Thomas found himself speaking automatically in the manner of Shankar:

“Ztyjoz hz?” [translation: Excuse me?] I reply, my lips twisting in a deformed way.

“What did you just say? I didn’t get it,” says the inspector, a little baffled.

“Q oxqa ukj xnz xi qaqp.” [translation: I said you are an idiot.]

[...] “Please don’t hit him, Inspector Sahib. Raju [i.e., Thomas] has become mentally unbalanced since his friend Shankar’s death. Shankar also used to speak like this.”

[...] Then why did you even think of him as a suspect? We won’t get anything out of a lunatic.” [6]

Here, Shankar’s ravings were almost a blessing rather than a curse for Thomas. By exploiting the perpetrator’s preconceptions about these ravings of “insanity,” Thomas protected himself and even counterattacked. Such fact reveals the potential within indigenous languages in challenging the long-lasting cognitive structures and assumptions that are tinged with colonial prejudices.

4. Conclusion

So far, this essay has discussed three major symptoms of TAS using two postcolonial texts. It should be clear at this point that TAS is essentially a form of colonial violence of and against languages. The last stand of the colonized against colonialism is the untranslatability of their languages. Meanwhile, it is also the frontline of protest and a possible way to heal colonial wounds. However, activating the consciousness of indigenous voices does not mean advocating linguistic purism or radical nationalism. Both perpetuate a xenophobic perspective full of fear and hatred of the historical colonizers. However,

this perspective assumes a static, unbreakable dichotomy between the former colonizer and the present colony. It also ignores the fundamental feature of hybridity in contemporary postcolonial languages and cultures. For linguistic purists and radical nationalists, their people were and always will be the humiliated in the colonial master-slave dialectic. Absorbed in the pain of the past, they choose to deny the possibility of communicating and marching into the future.

According to Fanon, “National consciousness, which is not nationalism, is the only thing that will give us an international dimension” [9]. We should respect the uniqueness of the indigenous languages and cultures of the historical colonies. A good starting point is to clarify the causes and damages of TAS. But we must not stop here and weep forever over the irrevocable loss of the colony. A more promising vision would be to seek an international horizon in and through indigenous resources. In other words, we should seek to empower the once-colonized with the proactivity of speaking up and speaking out, which is a promising precursor to a horizon of communication, translation and reconciliation. As postcolonial writers, both Swarup and Danticat find their own ways of awakening national consciousness in world literature. In their works, we observe people trying to speak and make languages, rather than being spoken and made by them. This spirit of resistance is a true postcolonial legacy and universal value of literature.

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