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LANGUAGE, CULTURE, AND IDENTITY: DECONSTRUCTING THE HEGEMONY OVER THE NATIVE LANGUAGES IN INDIA

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Abstract:

While exploring the intricate relationship between language and culture, the article looks into the 'peripheral' condition of the native Indian languages in the colonial period. In 1835, Macaulay, a British visionary educationist, imagined "a class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" by superimposing the superiority of the English language and culture over the rich cultural heritage of India and its languages. As language has been intricately related to culture, Macaulay's plan, on the one hand, proved to help disseminate the British Empire, on the other hand, it laid a devastating effect on India's native culture. Macaulay's plan was also successful in bringing forth a situation of endless cultural conflicts which continue to grow even today. Drawing upon Raja Rao's often-quoted statement, "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", the article attempts to deconstruct the loss of cultural identity and its consequences on various linguistic groups in the country.

Keywords : Language, Culture, Identity, peripheral, Native culture, Cultural conflicts.

Language is a concrete reality of every culture. It works as an interface and provides access to cultural practices and a set of ideologies to bring in the common shared consciousness in public dominion (Kramsch 1998). It plays a significant role in the interconnectedness of the people of certain localities who share the same cultural and ethical values. Their abstract reality (cultural practices and moral values) is duly united by the concrete reality (language) through which they communicate to cherish a sense of singular identity. Prevailing upon this intricate relationship between language and culture, many social scientists assert that without language a culture can't

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be formed. While depicting the intricate nature of culture and language, H. D. Brown(1994) goes on to put forward: “A language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture.” It can, thus, be observed that both language and culture, as inseparable they are, are an integral part of making a uniform identity of a certain geographical locality.

The linguistic history of India is replete with the diverse use of native languages throughout the centuries. Sanskrit holds a central stage in the linguistic development of India. The diversity seems to be unifying with the dominant use of Sanskrit diction in most of the Indian native languages. Prof. Kapil Kapoor(2017), a renowned linguist, emphasizes that Sanskrit is the source and mainstream river in which the other tributaries carry their weight age. He even goes on to assert that no Indian language carries less than 70% vocabulary (*Tatsama* and *Tadbhava* forms of the words) from Sanskrit. The major Indian languages like Hindi, Tamil (71%), Malayalam (84%), Telugu (82%), Punjabi (95%), and Bengali and Assamese (86%) deeply and comprehensively use Sanskrit vocabulary.

It can be argued that a language is some of the prominent means which form one’s cultural identity. Reflecting on this notion, Woodward(1997) suggests that “identities are given meaning through language and symbolic systems through which they are represented.”In the Indian context, the mythological texts like the *Ramayan*, the *Mahabharat*, and the Vedas are a unique representation of the rich intellectual heritage which Sanskrit has produced. The central figures from these texts like Ram, Sita, Lakshman, Karna, Yudhishtir, Bhim, Arjun, and Draupadi among others still incessantly form the social and cultural fabric of the Indian civilization(Jhanjhnodia and Mishra). Despite the diverse cultural and linguistic characteristics, Indian people are culturally connected, and it is just because Sanskrit makes a bond that can never be tattered. The festivals celebrated across the nation are incorporated from holy Indian texts and these bring a sense of integrity to common people. As Carl Jung (2014) prefers to put forward in his *The Structure and Dynamics of Psyche*, the unconscious minds of people carry these cultural and mythological symbols along with them, without their cautious awareness, making their identity singular despite various geographical diversions.

The attempts to break into this singular identity of Indian people begin with the emergence of British authority in India. It is well established a fact that India was one of the best economically developed and culturally advanced nations before European states started colonizing the Asian and the African countries. It was the richness of the culture and economy of India that drew the attention of the European nations. As soon as they set their feet in India, they started introducing oriental theories to claim their superiority over the native people, adjudging them

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rustic and uncivilized(Said, 1979). The imperial notions were justified by many Western thinkers, such as Rudyard Kipling who, in his poem, *The White Man's Burden: the United States and the Philippine Islands*, proposes that the white man has a moral obligation to rule the non-white people of the earth for their betterment. He goes on to propose:

“Take up the White Man's burden –
Send forth the best ye breed –
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives need;
To wait in a heavy harness
On fluttered folk and wild –
Your new-caught sullen peoples,
Half devil and half child” (Kipling, 1899).

The European thinkers proposed more theories to introduce western language and culture to widely spreading their culture all around the globe. Taking them as their ‘other’, the colonizers started denigrating the native language system and made Indians think inferior to European people(Said, 1979). Now if the 'Eurocentric' notion is reflected upon, the question which arises is—how can a language be ruined if it is already assimilated into one's culture? The answer is quite simple. With the advent of the hegemonic clout (Gramsci 1971) of the British, English too went on to become an imperial language. Wherever British people went, they seized the economic resources of the native people and imposed their authority. English was introduced as an official language, superseding the influence of the native languages. They introduced it into the education system and linked it with employment, thus making it more prominent and significant than native people's languages.

The same happened with the rich linguistic heritage of India. Macaulay played a key role in bringing English and popularizing western culture. When it came to education in India, he went on to publish his monolithic perspective in the “Macaulay Minute”. In his Minute on Indian Education which got published in 1835, he emphasized, “It is, I believe, no exaggeration to say that all the historical information which has been collected from all the books written in the Sanskrit language is less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgment used at preparatory schools in England.”

To establish the superiority of English, Macaulay questions the accessibility of Sanskrit and Persian on purpose and renders them valueless in the learning process. On the contrary, now it is established that Macaulay was completely mistaken in his notions, as Sanskrit has been proved as one of the most scientific languages across the globe. English, being an imperialistic language,

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draws attention; while Sanskrit, on the other hand for its being intellectual and scientific language, fascinates people all around the globe. With his prejudiced mind, as the Western thinkers often thought of the oriental people, Macaulay claims in his Minute:

“I do not know either Sanscrit or Arabic. But I have done what I could to form a correct estimate of their value. I have read translations of the most celebrated Arabic and Sanscrit works. I have conversed both here and at home with men distinguished by their proficiency in the Eastern tongues. I am quite ready to take the Oriental learning at the valuation of the Orient lists themselves. I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia” (Macaulay, 1835).

After going through Macaulay’s procrustean notions, one is bothered to think that—who will decide the parameters to judge the greatness of the texts? Will it be the one who is solely dependent on the translated works which might be thoroughly prejudiced, inefficient, and incompetent? It is preposterous that the judgment is pronounced by the one who wears colored glasses which show him only the things he wants to see.

As Macaulay was instrumental in anglicizing Indian culture, he introduced the theory that from the sixth year of schooling onwards, the medium of learning should be based on the western learning theories. In his Minute, he goes on to propose:

“I feel...that it is impossible for us, with our limited means, to attempt to educate the body of the people. We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, – a class of persons Indian in blood and color, but English in tastes, opinions, morals, and intellect. To that class, we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population” (Macaulay, 1835).

Thus an alien language was enforced on the native people who hailed from different cultural roots. The age-old ethical values, the traditional practices, and other cultural and spiritual values of Hinduism had been challenged by the so-called modern materialistic norms brought in by modern English education. The Indian society long cherished the figures like Ram, Sita, and Krishna came into direct scrutiny. How could Milton's Christ, Satan, Adam, and Eve replace the rich cultural and literary heritage propagated by charismatic artists like Maharishi Valmiki and Maharishi Ved Vyas in their artifacts like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharat* and the figures like Ram, Ravan,

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Krishna, Arjun, and Duryodhan among others? The idea itself appears ludicrous as both cultures have shared different moral codes in dissimilar temporal and spatial contexts.

Due to the divisive policies of the British, a cultural conflict began in India when both these cultures collided. When it came to the Indians in the newly doctored cultural milieu, they could neither embrace the British culture and identity warmly nor could they easily forsake the age-old Indian ideals. In Bhabha's postcolonial terms, it rendered them into ambivalent circumstances, fetching an undesirable state of hybridity, therefore making them always rummage the third space (Bhabha, 1985). Raja Rao, a renowned Indian novelist, always laments the loss of his singular identity. In *The Preface to Kanthapura*, he goes on to emphasize:

“The feeling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is not 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 used 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 makeup. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our language and English. We cannot write like English. We should not. We can only write as Indians” (Rao, 2014).

It is, thus, obvious that the emotions which come quite naturally in one's language seem to be faked when spattered in another language. One's identity seems to be tricked and duped in such alien circumstances. The sense of the loss of the identity, which has been deliberated upon in the article, can be summed up in the words of much-celebrated writer Salman Rushdie, who in his *Imaginary Homelands*, goes on to assert: “Sometimes we feel we straddle between two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools” (Rushdie, 2010).

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