

Whose English Is It Anyway?

by Firdous Azim

Me not no Oxford don
me a simple immigrant
from Clapham Common
I didn't graduate
I immigrate

But listen Mr Oxford don
I'm a man on de run
and a man on de run
is a dangerous one

I ent have no gun
I ent have no knife
but mugging de Queen's English
is the story of my life
I don't need no axe
to split/up yu syntax
I don't need no hammer
to mash/up yu grammar
I warning you Mr Oxford don
I'm a wanted man
and a wanted man
is a dangerous one

Dem accuse me of assault
on de Oxford dictionary/
imagine a concise peaceful man like
me/
dem want me serve time
for inciting rhyme to riot
but I tekking it quiet
done here in Clapham Common

I'm not a violent man Mr Oxford don
I only armed with mihi human breath
but human breath
is a dangerous weapon

So mek dem send one big word after me
I ent serving no jail sentence
I slashing suffix in self-devence
I bashing future with present tense
and if necessary

I making de Queen's English accessory/to my offence.

John Agard's poem, confidently, even defiantly, transforms the English language, changes its norms, its patterns, its prosody, its syntax, and lays claim to the language. The poem counterposes two personae: one, that of the black poet, the immigrant to England, and the other that of the Oxford don, the repository of Western learning, the intellectual centre of England, the English tongue. The black man, wanted, hunted down, on the run, sly, slinking, turns round and defiantly faces this authority, challenging it, forcing it to recognise his presence, making it succumb and yield to his "slashing" and "bashing" figure. The last line of the poem — "I making

de Queen's English accessory/to my offence" — is assertive and triumphant, and makes the Queen, the ultimate figure of authority, accept the belligerent demands of the Other, the Black, the native, the colonised. While the poem asserts the triumph of the Black poet, the poet is, nevertheless, always seen to be awaiting inclusion into a field of authority, that is already in existence, and from which he has, hitherto, been effectively excluded. His act is seen as an offence and an assault on to the body of a sovereign power. He seeks to be included into its purview as a speaking subject, and, though not a humble supplicant, is dependent on an acceptance and a collusion, by, and of that power, to be so included. His entry into the language in which he writes is finally dependent on the acceptance by the Queen, by that imperial power. In this case, the violent imagery in which the take-over of the language is envisaged, gestures to the force that the Other exerts over the seats and symbols of power, and forces it to acknowledge its presence.

John Agard's assertive claim over the English language may be contrasted to the rejection, by another Commonwealth writer, of that language. I'm referring to the Kenyan writer, Ngugi wa Thiongo, who, after writing his highly successful novel *Petals of Blood* in 1977, 2 eschewed this medium of writing to turn to his native Gikuyu, in which language he continues to write. The shift marks not merely a change in language, but in the very forms of writing, as the narrative modes of the Western novel, in which he had hitherto written, is abandoned, to explore and experiment with indigenous Kenyan forms of expression. Ngugi's change to his native language and forms was heralded by a return to roots, with the establishment, in Kamiruthu, of an experiment, a commune, designed to bring academics, writers and intellectuals in contact with ordinary, rural Kenyans. The Kamiruthu project was designed to enable the Kenyan writer to discover or rather, re-discover, indigenous modes of expression (drama, poetry and so on), and in close community with the people (the real people of the village), to forge a new form of writing, in which the writer draws from his own native culture. Ngugi's journey back to rural Kenya, described in *Decolonising the Mind*, is also a search for his childhood, for pre-school days, which, he re-

calls as a complete and harmonious period of his life, unfragmented and whole, where experiences and expressions, words and feelings, had an immediate, unmediated and direct contact. The schooling he was made to undergo (right from the kindergarten to the university level), was a part of his colonial heritage, and this colonised pedagogical system, he feels, had cut him off, severed him, from this ideal community, based on linguistic harmony, and by exposing him to a language, to stories and poems, which are not his own, (or of the village of his origin), divest him of that wonderful harmony of community he had known as a child. While he learns to "master" the other tongue and to live through the narratives of the white man's stories and poems, he feels exiled from the home of his childhood, from the stories of his childhood, and seems to be locked inside this eternal feeling of homesickness.

However, this sojourn is not merely a journey back to childhood and to roots, or to a prelapsarian ideal world, but resonates with, and is expressed in, terms of commitment and a responsibility. It would be unfair to dismiss Ngugi's dream of an African community as merely a nostalgia and homesickness. Crucially, the sense of community that Ngugi desires and hopes to recreate calls on the notion of nation and nationhood, and the responsibility, in fact, the duty, of the writer/intellectual towards the forging and consolidation of that notion. *Decolonising the Mind* examines the responsibility of the writer in the task of nation-building. The African writer, writing in English, is constantly faced with the task of using, of wielding and bending, the English language (as Agard does), to convey and hold African realities and experiences. This process, exciting enough as it is, helps to broaden and develop the English language. Ngugi looks on this function of development from a political and nationalistic angle. Should he, as a writer, as a Kenyan African writer, contribute to adding to the glories of the English language? He chooses, instead, to divert his attention and efforts to his native Gikuyu. The notion of nationalism and patriotism that motivates the writer's shift to his mother-tongue is of crucial significance.

The differences between Agard and Ngugi are immense and many, but the writings of both are based on the idea of

the relationship between the identity of the writer and the language in which he writes. The relationship between identity and language rests on a notion of possession — do I possess the language? Is it mine? Can I make it mine? And should I make it mine? This possession of language, in turn, refers to a notion of nationality and national identity — whose language I use determines who I am. In the case of English — if English is always the language of the colonial, the ex- or the neo-colonial overlord, then our usage of English always, and of necessity, places us in a position of inferiority and subordination. The matter, however, cannot be allowed to, and in fact does not, rest there.

Theories that concern themselves with the formation of the subject under colonialism have found a notion of simple binary division or opposition inadequate for the delineation of the positions of the coloniser and the colonised. The formation of the identities within the colonial terrain does not refer to the position of the colonised alone, but includes, significantly, the coloniser within its aegis and address. As Homi Bhabha shows, the image in the colonial mirror is reflected and thrown back onto the coloniser. In the colonial situation the image of the post-Enlightenment man is tethered to, not confronted by, his dark reflection, the shadow of the colonised that splits his presence, disturbs his outline, breaches his boundaries, repeats his action at a distance, disturbs and divides the very time of his being.

The act of mimicry, the imitation, the reflection, by the colonised, forms the locus of the formation of colonial desire, in which both subjects, the colonised and the coloniser, are bound — the desire "tethers" them. It is within this inextricable bind that the subject-positions of both are determined, and the power of the one (of the coloniser) subverted and subsumed into the desire of the Other. This desire is, on the one hand, the desire of the colonised for the position and power of the master. However, the desire is ambiguous, and is best represented in the image of that inextricable, tight and complex knot which binds both the coloniser and the colonised.

Bhabha's position is completely different to that of Ngugi's. Bhabha does not believe in the existence of spaces and sites outside, beyond or behind the

colonial realm, in the way that Ngugi does in his conjuration of the image of the pre-school arcadia. Bhabha sees the third-world writer/intellectual as belonging to the diaspora, embodying a hybridity which post-colonial theories of the subject can only celebrate. He has defined himself as "an anglicised post-colonial migrant who happens to be a slightly Frenchified literary critic." Post-colonial identities — nationalities — do not and cannot refer to one site or source of origin. The multiplicity of origins and the contradictions that create this hybrid subject, give us the figure of the post-colonial writer/intellectual juggling between mother and official tongue, placing himself within an arena which, while referring to national identity, constantly surpasses national boundaries.

However, the theoretical positions outlined by Bhabha do not solve the problem that Ngugi's shift from colonial to mother tongue had highlighted. This shift refers, crucially, to the responsibility of the writer, to the nation and the national identity to which he subscribes, and of his contribution to the construction of that identity.

The various examples and illustrations through which this paper proceeds are meant to focus on these two aspects of the use of the coloniser's tongue by the colonised: the formation of the identity of the colonised (the writer writing in the master's tongue) and of the vexed question of responsibility and commitment that surfaces every time that the relationship between the writer and the language in which he writes is brought into focus. The place of language in the formulation of national identity cannot be over-emphasised. The case of Bangladesh is perhaps one of the most cogent examples of a nation-state that owes its existence to a notion of linguistic harmony and nationalism. But, given the split domain in which post-colonial identities are formed, a simple equation between mother tongue and mother-nation, though easily made, cannot be so easily maintained. The modern European nation-state, because on a notion of democracy and equality, also refers to the "language of the people" in demarcating national boundaries. However, the establishment of a standard language, while it helped to unify the emerging nation-state, concealed social schism and hierarchies which were also marked by differences in language and

language usage. The concept of the language of the people sees both language and the people as homogeneous categories, and in the process, obscures and conceals social divisions and rifts.

In the case of the birth of the post-colonial nation-state, emerging as independent nation-states during the middle decades of the present century, the issues become more complicated. As Benedict Anderson points out, these nationalist movements based themselves on notions of nation, nation-ness and nationalism forged in the Europe of a century earlier. The modern post-colonial nation has "learnt" its nation-ness from its colonial experience, and adopts from the period of Western Enlightenment the notion of independent sovereign subjects as citizens of independent sovereign nation-states. National identity, formulated and forged within colonial systems, cannot extricate itself from the moment of its formation.

Let us take the case of Bengal. Macaulay's famous minute of 1833 stresses the importance of an education in English for the native Bengal, so that they could serve as "conduits" through which colonial authority could be flushed downwards deep into the Bengal soil. He also recommended that British administrators in India be educated in a manner that would impress the natives, and would convey the superiority of the British nation to the subject race. To this end, English literature was devised as an examination subject, and, from 1855, was a compulsory 1000-mark paper in the qualifying examination for the Indian Civil Service. The efficacy of Macaulay's system is illustrated by that strange phenomenon of mid-nineteenth century Bengal, usually dubbed as the Bengali renaissance. The problematic nature of that nomenclature is well-established today. However, while a revaluation of that period of Bengali history is necessary, there is no way that the centrality of that moment can be denied (regardless of the manner of its classification) to the construction of the modern Bengali state. Without going into a debate about the significance (and signification) of the word renaissance, the period that is so denoted had witnessed a "flowering" of Bengali writing, combined with a spate of reform movements, which together, form the historical basis of the identity of the modern Bengali and the Bangali nation.

To be continued

poems

Two poems by Aminur Rahman

A Solitary Dependence

even a little nothing pains me now
it's a lodging at the address of pains and sorrows.

a solitary dependence wakes up
at the dead of night

a bare-footed coldness
an open-eyed abysmal

at the backyard of my being
your shadow grows longer

who are you? who you are.

at times you look familiar
at times not
at times a dance of light
at times wrapped in dawn-fog
at times not so simple
at times suspicious
at times of this world
at times of other planet
at times quite childlike
at times a ceaseless silence.

who are you? who you are.

the night's heart quivers
foliage are in conversation
with the breeze

gentle waves shiver in a stunned river
the fish keep their mum
dreams are woven by stars

who are you? who you are

I'm sitting alone in

a speechless-drowning universe
gory night passes by

another dreadful night sets in
moves, turns around, converses
pampering a suicidal urge

who are you? who you are.

even a little nothing pains me now
it's a lodging at the address of pains and sorrows.

whirling around me all day you
resound at
the core of my being

moonlight trickles
from your dew-drenched
eyes onto your wind-
wrapped achal.

quite restless tonight
are the fire-flies
are you in those flicker
of lights
or have you written off your corporeal
existence into darkness?

night stands still
so does the water
i inhale your scent
from the earth a
life wrapped in ease.

far away the stars fall
asleep

riding on my loneliness



i chop the light into slices
distribute them in
a glass of beauty

what luminosity!
what a ceaseless silence!
what a disinterested ending!

all the colours of the nature
becoming one
merges into your
figure or deep down inside

you stand out
in my personal
existence
absorbing
everything into the
curves of your body.

crickets sing
you touch me
in ephemeral chipping
i wish i could touch you.
glowing once
in the worn-out canvas
of my life
you fizzles out
leaving
memories of gentle
touch.

whispers the wind
"hi poet how come
you fall asleep while
your beloved waits
leaning against the night sky.

with a gentle
tickle on the eye-lid
the wind murmurs, "a pair of
enchanting pupils



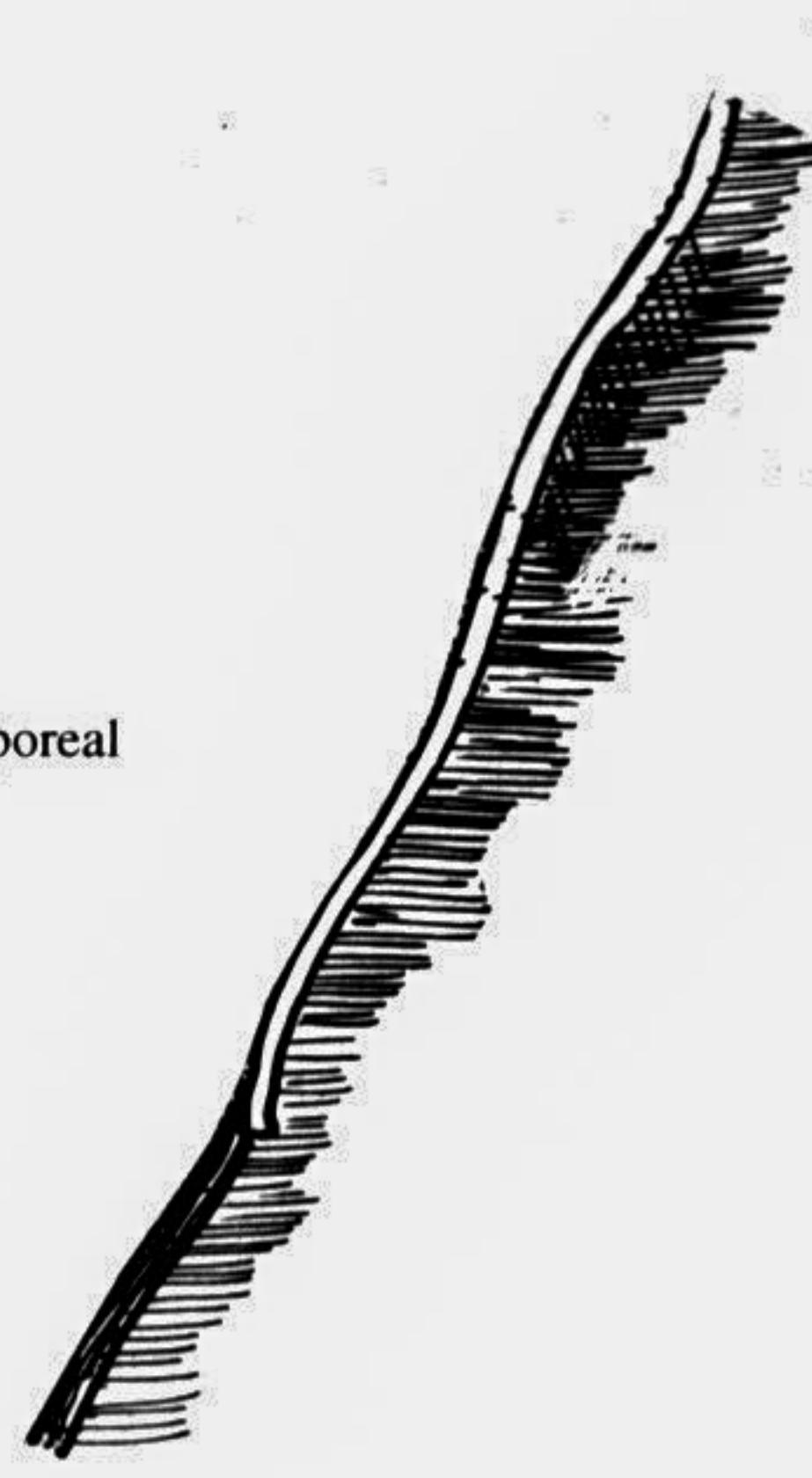
make eye at you"

the heart's harp plays on
"poet, why you are here when
your mind wonders off
to far off hills and
mountains"

taken aback
i set sail for a distant
horizon
rolling up my mind into a ball

translated by Ziaul Karim

A Life Wrapped in Ease

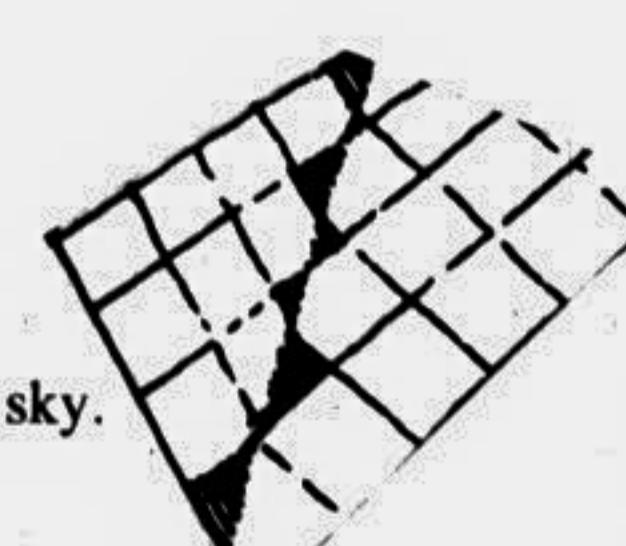


you stand out
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Early winter morning.
A far away village station.
The nearby trees looked like
covered with spider's web
in that smoggy atmosphere.

They came slowly out of the fog.
Hand in hand.
The train was yet to come.
They sat on the platform bench.
None else was in sight.

He was really old.
The heavy winter clothes
gave him yet older look.
She was also no less.
His spectacles had thick glasses.
Hers was a little less.

After a while she stood up,
helped him re-fix his monkey-cap
and said, "keep sitting tight,
don't move from here."
Let me go and check up the train's timing."
He nodded like a good boy
and then asked, "When're you returning?"
"Don't you worry, I'll be right back, dear!"—
She assured him patting.
He gave a happy smile.

I'm ready to stand
all the rigours of life
for a glimpse of such a sight!

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