

## **Mulligatawny Dreams: Encountering the No-Man's Land Between the Mother Tongue and Post-Colonial Language**

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**Abstract:** Decolonization does not end with the colonizing power being physically removed from the colonized nation. Centuries of cultural hegemony wreaks havoc on the fabric of a state to the point of being unrecognizable from its previous state of existence. The battle to reclaim a national identity post colonization is not an easy one, especially when it concerns a multicultural, multilingual, state like India. One of the most obvious manifestations of deliberate anti-colonial actions is the rejection of colonial rules of language. This becomes especially interesting when the said language is now the global lingua franca, inevitable to functioning in an increasingly globalized world.

Post-colonial writers offer much in the activism against colonial dictates of language. This paper looks at how a colonial language, one that is dominant in a post-colonial society, is encountered by writers. The paper focuses on the poetry of Meena Kandasamy in general as an anti-colonial, language-specific, dynamic narrative tool and specifically on the poem "Mulligatawny Dreams". Her language deliberately subverts English language rules; often foregoing punctuation, using words from her native Tamil without a footnote or an appendix, culturally specific references etc. All of these deliberate actions making a statement inviting the reader to research and make the effort to learn and understand the poetry and its references, much like the rest of the world and especially Indians have been taught through the centuries to understand British cultural references and history forsaking our own.

**Keywords:** Post-colonial, language, cultural hegemony, decolonizing, appropriation, mother-tongue, narrative, activism, Tamil, English, ambiguity

The English language has been the linear tongue of the colonial discoveries, racial cruelties, invented names, the simulation of tribal cultures, manifest manners, and the unheard literature of dominance in tribal communities; at the same time, this mother tongue of para-colonialism has been a language of invincible imagination and liberation for many people of the post-indian worlds. English ... has carried some of the best stories of endurance, the shadows of tribal creative literature, and now that same language of dominance bears the creative literature of distinguished post-indian authors in cities ... The shadows and language of tribal poets and novelists could be the new ghost dance literature, the shadow literature of liberation that enlivens tribal survivance. (Manifest Manners 105-6)

Seventy years down the line from independence of the nation, Decolonization is still a dynamic process. One that writers, activists and most people still actively, albeit sometimes unconsciously perform everyday. Remnants of colonial cultural superiority is a stain that refuses to completely vanish. It emerges in fashion, food, language, and everything else under the broader perspective of culture. One cannot talk about overcoming colonial cultural influences without primarily considering language. As a sociological phenomenon, language is something that permeates all of human community, what distinguishes societies and groups and even gives expression and definition to the features and functions of each group. The most predominant colonial reminder that the British left in India must also arguably be that of the English language. The dichotomy of the English language is also that even when it is a constant reminder of colonial history, rooted in supremacy and oppression, it is also inevitable in today's world. So as most of the population unconsciously struggles with this ambiguous play, linguists, sociologists and writers do recognize the deeper connotations of using the language of your historical oppressor. It becomes even more evident with this realization that this act is a conscious, performative action whereby the subaltern claims the use of the language that was often forcibly thrust on them, to now use it in their own way. Kenyan post-colonial writer, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o elucidates in detail on this ambiguity faced by post-colonial peoples while using English. In his 1986 work *Decolonising the Mind* Ngũgĩ writes that language not only helps to describe the world, but that it is fundamentally how people understand themselves in relation to their socio-historical context. He believes that therefore adapting the colonial foreign language completely will result in erasing of histories.

Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we perceive ourselves and our place in the world ... Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a

specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world.(Thiong'o ,15)

Writers, activists, philosophers and theorists who have taken upon the anti-colonial examination lens have been performing a careful deconstruction of language and its colonial signifiers. Post-colonial theory has language adaptation and colonial linguistics as one of its main areas of discussion. This literary exercise of scrutinizing the capacities of language and utilizing its potential to rewrite histories, reveal conveniently glossed over truths, to reshape words and create new expressions to fit the anti-colonial narrative, is employed by many modern Indian poets and writers. It includes everything from clarifying wrongly assumed cultural practices to using words from native languages that have no corresponding signifier in the English language. Salman Rushdie, in his 1992 work *Imaginary Homelands* asserts that post-colonial writers writing in English is a conscious act of resistance, confronting post-colonial realities and renovating ideals instead of completely disposing and neglecting centuries of lived experiences and consequences.

I hope all of us share the opinion that we can't simply use the language the way the British did; that it needs remaking for our own purposes. Those of us who do use English do so in spite of our ambiguity towards it, or perhaps because of that, perhaps because we can find in that linguistic struggle a reflection of other struggles taking place in the real world, struggles between the cultures within ourselves and the influences at work upon our societies. To conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free".(Rushdie,17)

### Mulligatawny Dreams – Using the Colonial Language as an Anti-colonial Tool

Meena Kandasamy is one such author and poet whose works contain a powerfully strong examination of all things colonial, linguistic, feminist and most predominantly, caste-related. Rather than a spiritual, intangible journey, her poetry is very much rooted in concrete sociological realities around her. Even though the main focus of this paper will be on exploring the linguistic aspect of anti-colonial ideas in Kandasamy's poetry, one cannot discuss her poetry without acknowledging into the prominent and often the focal matter of most of her works, voicing the overarching presence of caste and gender in the social fabric of the country. In an interview with John Rufo in 2015, the author talks about how language serves dual functions of reinforcement as well as revolution.

I do believe that languages are biased, fucked-up structures, clearly reflecting a lot of the status quo, reflecting the inequalities and very often reinforcing them. This does not mean that language does not contain the potential for revolution, or to serve as a call to arms. I think language can be used to mask grave crimes (the language of United Nations reports, for instance), or to send across stereotypes, or even sometimes to denude us of all feeling, all outrage. Capitalism does this successfully—using happiness and beauty to sell—and to extend its interests without worrying about the imbalance and inequality. I think this one reason why the role of a poet becomes important—you are not only saying things but you are also digging out the weapons in the arsenal of language, you are reclaiming love, you are celebrating beauty.

In this country, proficient use of English will give you access to better socio-economic advancement. As part of a colonial hangover, English has obviously been accorded superior status and thus a language of power. For a person to change the power dynamics of existing structures, and to access the public systems, at least a basic fluency in the language is almost inevitable. This is also where the caste element is very valid. Dr B. R. Ambedkar stressed on the need for Dalits to get English education and strongly felt that this was one of the main ways along with affirmative action for social advancement of Dalits, the subaltern speaking in English is thus considered a breaking away from the constraints of caste and class. In her poetry Meena Kandasamy uses the language to move away and assert dominance over the astonishingly outdated practices of caste that is till very prevalent in India. In fact, her first volume of poetry is titled *Touch* (2006), a reference to the practice of untouchability and social and physical distancing in the hegemonical caste structure.

But, you will never have known

that touch—the taboo

to your transcendence,

when crystallized in caste

was a paraphernalia of

undeserving hate.

Poetry is the medium that Meena Kandasamy found best suited to express herself as she started out. She says that the reason was that “poetry is not caught up within larger structures that pressure you to adopt a certain set of practices while you present your ideas in the way that academic language is. Despite being an academic myself, I dread academia’s ultra-intellectualizing”. The reason for her dislike of academic discourse is mainly because it is not “the language to speak of the oppressed [...] the language in which any victim would speak”.

Often levelled as an allegation of exclusivity is the highbrow nature of discussions of anti-caste struggle and other subaltern, anti-power struggles, one that speaks in a language of academic elite, not working closely with the ground realities. Kandasamy is an activist as well as a poet, a strong voice of resistance against existing power structures and social inequalities, making them a subject of her poetry as well. Thus, bending activism and poetry, her literary profile speaks of inclusivity and equity, unsurprisingly shaped by the influential social movements led by activists like Periyar in her home state of Tamil Nadu.

As universally understood and accepted, much is lost in translation, even when the existing power dynamics between the languages is not taken into consideration. So when a historically dominating language becomes the primary means of expression for a historically dominated people, contradictions in sentiments and performance arise. As expressed by poets like Kamala Das, who confesses her feelings about being made to feel guilty about preferring to write in English over her native Malayalam, even though she is a celebrated writer in Malayalam. So when it comes to English and any other Indian language, there exists a power structure inequity that forces an inferiority complex in the larger population. Writers and poets who pose ideas against the imagined superiority of English however describe it in terms of the lacking of English language rather than the mother tongue. They often describe English as incapable of holding the fullness of the other languages and English having no corresponding words for a lot of essential ideas and connotations of the Indian cultural context.

Meena Kandasamy’s celebrated poem “Mulligatawny Dreams” speak brilliantly about this inability of English to truly contain the multitudes of Tamil lives. Since languages are very much influenced by geographical and obviously, socio-cultural contexts, it is understandable that a traditional English would be imperfect in communicating a truly Indian or Tamil experience. However, centuries of insistence of the cultural superiority of the English language would have us believe that it could transcend all those lackings. Kandasamy proves that assumption wrong. she wishes for an improved English, one that

does not have to cater to European standards of beauty, one that would accommodate the sounds of her language and not alter the sounds to easily fit their palate.

“anenglish where small children practice with smooth round

pebbles in their mouth to the spell the right zha”

Kandasamy talks about how English feels severely lacking; in words that existed in her Tamil language but didn't have a corresponding one in the apparently superior English. Words that carry the sentimentality, an attachment to the material things of her culture: the food, the scents, the landscapes. She also brings in the problematic celebration of Eurocentric ideals of beauty. The very features that have been and still are taught to children from kindergarten; of blonde eyes and blue hair and the unfairness associated with putting fair skinned people on a pedestal. She wants her idealized improved version of English to celebrate beauty from her part of the world; brown skin and dark eyes.

“an english where the magic of black eyes and brown bodies

replaces the glamour of eyes in dishwater blue shades

and the airbrush romance of pink white cherry blossom skins”

Even as an Indian audience who are increasingly aware of the ramifications of this toxic glorification of one kind of beauty standard over all others, we still have not moved away from this portrayal and play small and large parts in the continuation of these beauty myths

The poem occupies the gap between Tamil and English that the poet wants to bridge by somehow modifying the foreign language to fit perfectly into the recesses of her linguistic map. She places the languages next to each other and wills English to be more like Tamil, to grow itself to accommodate more of her sensibilities. She does not want capitalized letters, she wants a more emotionally charged language that will blend with the land and culture around her. She finds English to be too dull and lacking in feeling. The fact that English has the same words to describe the liking a man has for his car and the feelings he has towards his beloved is not something that sits well with the author.

The nuances of Tamil (and by extension, post-colonial) culture is quite often lost when using English language. English, the poet feels, does not take into account terms of endearment and respect that are important for the Tamil culture. The eccentricities and whims of the mother tongue is somehow misplaced, its people neglected.

“ an english with more than thirty six words to call the sea

an english that doesn't belittle brown or black men and women

an english of tasting with five fingers

an english of talking love with eyes alone”

The poem ends with a wish for an altered English language, because the original one feels harsh and cold- “ that spiky, crunchy tongue”. She wishes that the men of this language would indulge in something sensual, beautiful and whimsical as buying jasmine garlands for their beloved before a night of whispered wordless passion. The language of loving too does not escape the poet's scrutiny because emotions and feelings are invariably expressed best and most effectively in one's native tongue, rendering the foreign language cold and materialistic.

Meena Kandasamy in this particular poem not only wishes to rewrite the rules and cemented structures of the English language by urging it to develop and be inclusive of the cultural subtleties of the Other, but actually does so. The poem does employ capitalization even when referring to proper nouns – the names of the two languages. It poem begins by the speaker listing off words that seem random but on closer inspection all have a common etymological root- Tamil words that made their way into English. It is well known that English is a language that has built itself by loaning words from all over the globe, and extensively so because of the colonial ambitions of the empire. English has adopted hundreds of words from various Indian languages over the course of more than two centuries. Most of them have been so completely assimilated into the language that their origins are unknown even to a vast majority of Indians.

In the seminal work on Post-colonial literature, *The Empire Writes Back*(1989) Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin explores the different ways in which writers deal with and react to the “superior”, dominant, colonial language in a post-colonial setting. Very often a conscious, anti-colonial struggle than a passive decolonizing one, the

usage of the colonial language is laden with deeper connotations. The above authors describe different processes by which writers deal with these issues. The writers replace a the prescribed version of the colonial language with a local variation that is not diminished in any way but does not ascribe to the superiority complex of the original colonial language. The writers abrogate the colonial language and reject its imperial undertones. Its strict rules of “correct usage” and its aesthetics. The elucidate, “Appropriation is the process by which the language is made to “bear the burden” of one’s own cultural experience ... Language is adopted as a tool and utilized to express widely differing cultural experiences.”(38-39)

Which perfectly underlines what Meena Kandasamy brilliantly evokes in her poem ‘Mulligatawny Dreams’. Rejection of aesthetics, blasé about correctness of usage, a deliberate disregard for rules and a disappointment in the many shortcomings of the language, while offering suggestions of how to replace and amend the language to better suit her purposes, claiming superiority over it. Her poetry thus exists as a quintessential testament for a post-colonial treatment of a colonial language.

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