

Introduction

At its peak in the 1930s the British Empire covered almost a quarter of the world's land surface and embraced nearly a quarter of its population. It spanned every continent except Europe. If the United States had been long lost – and had already replaced Britain as the world's most powerful economic and political force – it still retained Canada and its Caribbean territories, Iraq and Egypt as its main colonies in the Middle East, large possessions in West, East and Southern Africa, a string of Asian colonies the jewel of which was India, and Australia and New Zealand. The nature and status of these constituents of empire were extremely varied. Canada, South Africa and Australasia, like the United States before them, had been settled by whites who had either decimated the indigenous peoples in their push for territorial expansion and their desire to reproduce European society, or ruthlessly exploited and controlled them: these white 'dominions' had already been granted 'responsible' government under the Crown. Britain's main Arab colonies were acquired as part of the colonial redivision after the First World War, and were soon to be granted their political if not entirely their economic independence (Iraq in 1932, Egypt in 1936). The tropical colonies of the Caribbean, Africa and Asia, except for the very special case of India, were ruled by governors and colonial officials without any prospect of the natives participating in government, at least within the foreseeable future. India was different for several reasons, not least the sheer size of the country and its population and the fact that it was already a highly developed military empire before the British arrived. The overwhelming pressures of Indian nationalism, combined with the Second World War, were to ensure the granting of independence in 1947.

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The non-European peoples contained within this vast empire had little or nothing in common except their subjection. But even the forms of subjection varied widely, reflecting the variety of motives behind particular acts of colonization and the nature of the indigenous cultures colonized. If, in Australia, the invasion of white settlers often entailed the genocide of the Aboriginal population, or, as in South Africa, the ruthless economic exploitation and social control of the native peoples (culminating in the Nationalist government's official policy of apartheid from 1948), in India or Nigeria the everyday lives of most peasants remained more or less untouched by colonial subjection. And it was a different story again for those descendants of the vast number of Africans who were enslaved and shipped off to the Caribbean, or – outside the British Empire – to Brazil and the plantations of the southern United States. Nominally free men and women in the world's largest democratic republic, black Americans had to confront widespread racial discrimination, severe economic disadvantage, and the traumatic social and cultural disruptions of forced migration (a double migration in the case of those who sought a better life in the North).

Subordinated people experienced their domination differently even within the same society. The pain of humiliated subjugation might have been of more or less equal intensity for, say, the educated young black American schoolteacher or small-scale businessman, with aspirations to live like the white lower middle class, and the illiterate emigrant sharecropper from the South struggling to survive at the bottom of the heap in a Northern ghetto, but the context and psychological impact of that humiliation were likely to be very different. If, in colonial West Africa or India, close proximity to white authority figures, and the desire to 'improve oneself' could lead to outward – and sometimes internalized – deference on the part of 'white-collar' natives, the same was unlikely to be the case for the majority, whose contact with the white instruments of their colonial subjection was in any case often minimal. Apart from the humiliations enforced by the colour bar or petty apartheid the experience of colonial oppression was, for the masses, more likely to be blatantly economic and social, involving exploitation of their labour and

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disregard for what they might regard as their basic human rights, than subtly psychological.

A paradox, then, of the native experience of colonial (or, in the case of the black American, a sort of quasi-colonial) domination and oppression is that it was often not the poorest and most exploited but the more educated and relatively more privileged, those having closer contact with the agents of colonial domination, who felt most keenly the psychological and cultural impact of their subjugation. The classic studies of this syndrome are those by the Antillean psychiatrist Frantz Fanon, who identified what he calls 'a massive psycho-existential complex' in the relations between the coloured colonized and white colonialists, involving 'an existential deviation' forced on its victims by white civilization and European culture.

Central to Fanon's thinking is Hegel's perception of *recognition* as the basis of self-consciousness and of human relationship: 'Self-consciousness exists *in itself* and *for itself*, in that and by the fact that it exists for another self-consciousness; that is to say, it is only by being acknowledged or recognized.'¹ In this world of 'reciprocal recognitions' every individual requires the recognition of the other so as to win what Fanon calls 'the certainty of oneself'. We all, in other words, experience our being through others. What has happened, in the historical relations between whites and blacks, is that because of its belief in its racial superiority, associated with the economic and military dominance of colonialism, the white race has disrupted the reciprocity of this fundamental process of recognition. The black person looks for the human recognition accorded him by the other; but when the other is white, that acknowledgement is withheld, and the black is deprived of his 'certainty of himself'. So the black man 'makes himself abnormal'; and the white 'is at once the perpetrator and the victim of a delusion'.²

In this process of mutual recognition and cultural relationship language is crucial. In chapter one of *Black Skin, White Masks*,

¹ Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, quoted in Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, London: Pluto Press, 1986, p. 216.

² *Ibid.*, p. 225.

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entitled 'The Negro And Language', Fanon declares that 'to speak is to exist absolutely for the other'.³ The act of communication through speech implies the agreement, by the speaker, to be at least for that moment a subject who voluntarily functions as an object for the other. At the same time, to 'speak a language is to take on a world, a culture' (p.38). The problem, in Fanon's view, is that given the relations between black and white, the white other only recognizes the humanity of his black interlocutor to the extent that the latter has mastery of the 'white' language: 'The Negro of the Antilles will be proportionately whiter – that is, he will come closer to being a real human being – in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language'⁴ – which is also the mastery of French culture. A European foreigner trying to communicate with a French person but ignorant of his or her language may cause frustration but will not be despised, since it is understood that that person has a language, a history, a culture of his or her own. Not so the black, who is credited with none of these attributes: he can only aspire to the status of an honorary Frenchman, to the extent that education gives him a language that endows him with at least the appearance of 'civilization'. Fanon notes that such attitudes have been accepted even by many blacks: the black immigrant to France changes his language and self-presentation, and is a different person when he returns home; the African black may pretend to be an Antillean, and the Antillean is annoyed when he is taken for an African, since it is thought that the latter is less 'civilized', less 'French', than the person from the Caribbean.

There were important cultural differences between British and French colonialism, with its 'assimilationist' policy of creating 'black Frenchmen', and Fanon is in any case careful to insist that his observations and conclusions are valid only for the francophone West Indies, his personal experience of which – along with his work for the Algerian national liberation movement – so deeply influenced his theories. Moreover, he recognizes that the form of cultural and racial alienation experienced by those educated persons like himself is 'of an almost intellectual character', and quite different from the experi-

³ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

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ences of, say, a labourer, or a peasant in francophone West Africa or Indo-China. Nevertheless, Fanon asserts that ‘the same behaviour patterns obtain in every race that has been subjected to colonization’.⁵

Fanon spoke with the authority both of personal experience and of his knowledge as a psychiatrist. Much that he wrote is echoed by other black writers and intellectuals, with quite different kinds of colonial or oppressed histories, when they comment on the psychological and cultural phenomena of subjugation. For example the Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka, whose work we shall consider later, has written of ‘the fragmented and even distorted consciousness of the black people in the midst of a domineering culture’.⁶ And the black American writer James Baldwin, in *The Fire Next Time*, writes eloquently of what he believes has been the characteristic experience of generations of black Americans:

This past, the Negro’s past, of rope, fire, torture, castration, infanticide, rape; death and humiliation, fear by day and night, fear as deep as the marrow of the bone; doubt that he was worthy of life, since everyone around him denied it; sorrow for his women, for his kinfolk, for his children, who needed his protection, and whom he could not protect; rage, hatred, and murder, hatred for white men so deep that it often turned against him, and his own, and made all love, all trust, all joy impossible – this past, this endless struggle to achieve and reveal and confirm a human identity, human authority, yet contains for all its horror, something very beautiful.⁷

Baldwin’s evocation of the desire to confirm a vital sense of identity and self-worth is a need described by many writers whose cultural legacy is one of subjugation and oppression. It is the inevitable reaction to a social context in which an alien, white power calls the shots, has the power to define, to judge. It is evidently not a single, unitary experience, the same in all contexts. The desire for self-

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁶ Wole Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture*, London: Methuen, 1993, p. 52.

⁷ James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, London: Penguin, 1964, p. 84.

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validation, for a secure sense of identity, might involve a psychological internalization of a white 'ideal', and be expressed, like the conduct of Fanon's Antillean in France, as mimicry of white language, behaviour and attitudes. But this is an extreme type of reaction to subjugation, and as Baldwin points out, 'I do not know many Negroes who are eager to be "accepted" by white people, still less to be loved by them.'⁸ A quite different kind of response to the need for a recognition of one's human worth may be resistance and self-assertion, and what Soyinka calls the 'quest for racial self-retrieval', the recovery of 'an authentic cultural existence'.⁹ It is just such a sustained and strong resistance, the oppressed person's achievement of his or her own 'authority', which Baldwin identifies as the 'something very beautiful' contained in the struggle to achieve identity.

We must be cautious, even so, about assuming that all colonized or oppressed peoples have somehow 'lost' their 'identity'. Soyinka, for example, is scathing about the kind of modern African writer who 'even tried to give society something that the society had never lost – its identity'.¹⁰ The exercise of oppressive power may have sought to impair – or at least had the effect of doing so – the sense of a unique cultural identity by eradicating it altogether, or by bastardizing it, or by marginalizing it to the point of impotence. Some subjugated peoples, the Australian Aborigines for example, have been so culturally devastated by white invasion that many of its members have virtually lost all connection with, and sustenance from, their cultural heritage. But in colonized societies with rich indigenous cultures (for example West Africa or India) that remained largely intact – whatever the colonialists may have wished or done – not only was cultural identity not lost, it has served as a potent weapon in the struggle for independence and liberation.

Similar caution is necessary about the issue of language in subordinated cultures, which as Fanon and others have shown is crucially related to the need for a secure cultural identity, and to the achievement of self-worth and self-determination. It is rather fashionable, in discussions of post-colonial literature and drama, to assert

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁹ Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue and Outrage*, pp. 86, 87.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

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that colonial subjugation robbed indigenous writers of their own 'voices', reducing them to mimicry or silence. Only gradually, according to this line of thought, did post-colonial writers throw off their linguistic and cultural chains, re-appropriating the language of subjection and reforming it to become an authentic expression of their own experience. Though there are enough elements of truth in this account to make it persuasive, there are also serious omissions and distortions. It tends to ignore – perhaps because of linguistic ignorance – the remarkable range of literature and performance in indigenous languages that articulated criticism of and resistance to colonial rule and its characteristics. It also seems hard to square with a passage such as the following, from the Australian Aboriginal dramatist and poet Jack Davis's autobiography:

I had always been interested in language, and found the English language and its history exciting to study. The hidden roots of English, in particular Latin and Greek, made the dictionary a constant source of fascination to me. Now that I was living among the Nyoongahs, that interest embraced the Nyoongah language.¹¹

What Davis expresses here is his fascination both with English, in the case of the Aborigines the language of a particularly barbaric oppression, and with his own tribal language – with apparently no great distinction made between them, or sense of resentment against the 'alien' tongue.

Something equally surprising – at least if one thinks of post-colonial writers as 'silenced' by the language of colonial subjection – is expressed by the Indian playwright Badal Sircar, whose work will also be discussed later:

To us, it [i.e. English] is not a neutral language. It is associated with the British imperialist rule over our country. By rights and by nature I should feel aversion to it. Yet this language has been more of a medium of my education than my own language –

¹¹ Jack Davis with Keith Chesson, *Jack Davis: a Life-Story*, Melbourne: Dent, 1988, p. 55.

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and for me this language has been a window to the wide world. Hence, logically, I should be thankful to it. Another contradiction.¹²

And yet another is that in spite of Sircar's personally positive feelings about the 'imperialist' language (which still, paradoxically, provides the common language for educated Indians) his view is that it would be an entirely inappropriate language for his own theatre, and that his Bengali compositions resist completely successful translation into English.

These examples are not intended to demonstrate that post-colonial writers, whatever the (mainly Western) theorists may say, have been really quite comfortable with the inherited colonial language, but to suggest the real complexity of the language issue. If some, like Badal Sircar and of late the Kenyan playwright and novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o, have renounced English as an artistic language and prefer to compose in their native tongues, others – such as Wole Soyinka and Derek Walcott – have preferred, whatever their sense of ambivalence about it, to write in the 'imperialist' language, forging distinctive and often strikingly powerful styles of English. Such choices have implications, of course, for the nature and extent of their audience: as Ngugi points out, 'the choice of a language already predetermines the answer to the most important question for producers of imaginative literature: For whom do I write? Who is my audience?'¹³ And this in turn, as he insists, has implications for what they write about and what attitudes they take to their material. In any case, though the post-colonial dramatist can hardly avoid issues of language and the ambivalent and often contradictory feelings attached to them, what needs to be stressed is the richness with which they have created the linguistic means to render their and their people's experiences. Whether in their own indigenous languages, or in some inflection of the perhaps both loved and hated colonial tongue, it seems to be latter-day metropolitan arrogance – however well-meaning – to suppose that the native has ever been rendered

¹² Badal Sircar, unpublished manuscript, 1988.

¹³ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Writers in Politics*, London: Heinemann, 1981, pp. 53–4.

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mute. Post-colonial writers and artists, like ordinary people, seem always to have been able to communicate what they wished to their chosen audiences.

If there have been linguistic traps that the post-colonial dramatist has been forced to negotiate, there have also been issues of class, ethnicity and nationality that could not be avoided. The general context informing these debates concerning identity and language is the desire for cultural self-determination and an integrated identity, what Soyinka has called 'cultural certitude', and the attempt to achieve it through a kind of cultural 'return to roots'. This is expressed in different ways by different writers, but they seem to have something like the same thing in mind. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, for instance, speaks of the fundamental aim of 'restoring the African personality to its true human creative potentialities in history', involving 'a return to the roots of our being', which seems to have much in common with Soyinka's call for the 'evocation of an authentic tradition in the cause of society's transformation process', which he also sees as a 'self-retrieval' or 'cultural recollection'. For Derek Walcott this process seems to involve the artist, and specifically the actor, in a 'return through a darkness whose terminus is amnesia' if West Indian theatre is ever to express the authentic cultural being of its people: 'For imagination and body to move with original instinct, we must begin again from the bush. That return journey, with all its horror of rediscovery, means the annihilation of what is known.'¹⁴ And the idea is evidently as important in contemporary Indian theatre as it is amongst writers of Africa and the black diaspora: during the 1988 national drama festival in New Delhi a 'Theatre of Roots' round-table was convened to discuss the progress of a scheme first implemented some four years earlier.

The common impulse to a 'return to roots' has forced many writers to confront other dilemmas relating to race, class and nationhood. K. S. Kothari, one of the moving spirits behind the 'theatre of roots' movement in India, has spoken of 'both the need and search for that indefinable quality called 'Indianness' in Indian

¹⁴ Derek Walcott, 'What the Twilight Says: An Overture' in *Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1986, pp. 25–6.

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theatre'.¹⁵ But what can such 'Indianness' be, in a nation made up of several major religions, so many different classes and social groups, so many different peoples and languages, so many and diverse regional interests? Again, Soyinka and Ngugi, themselves writing from apparently differing political positions, have articulated the need to restore the African cultural personality as a major element of social development, but what is it that must be restored? Nigeria and Kenya, as national entities, are the creations of British imperialism, the forcible amalgamations of different peoples with different languages and often widely diverse cultures. In their histories since independence intense class and factional conflicts, involving widely differing economic interests, standards of living and ideologies, have developed within the fragile arena of the nation-state. Can there really be a 'Nigerianness' or a 'Kenyanness', or simply an 'African-ness', which somehow transcends all these factors?

The belief that there are indeed such essences has sometimes led to what Edward Said calls 'nativism' – phenomena, such as the negritude movement, which conjure up potent images of what a people or community was supposed to be before colonialism. As Said points out, such imagery is ahistorical, concerned more with 'the metaphysics of essences' than with any ascertainable historical realities. This kind of 'return', in cultural terms, is often associated with some mood or other of nostalgia, and the exaltation of what Soyinka scornfully calls 'the resuscitated splendours of the past' and Derek Walcott 'a schizophrenic daydream of an Eden' that existed before exile. Politically, it may be the ideological banner waved by reactionary nationalism, or the tattered cloak that conceals the nakedness of corrupt, incompetent and exploitative politicians.

But there is evidently another altogether more positive side to the idea of a cultural 'return'. This has to do with the urgent need of subjugated peoples, as an essential part of the process of decolonization, to recuperate their own histories, their own social and cultural traditions, their own narratives and discourses – all in the service, not of a myth of racial essence, but of what Said describes, citing Fanon,

¹⁵ K. S. Kothari, "'Theatre of Roots'", *Encounter with Tradition*, *TDR*, 33:4 (T124).