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A Mouth with Which to Begin – The Language of Power and the
Power of Language in Postcolonial Literature

Human beings are unique among living things by their ability to communicate through language. The most immediate form of communication is carried out with the help of the spoken word. The need to record events in order to remember them more accurately bore out a less transient and more sophisticated form of communication – the written language. Because man is a social being and a “political animal”, he has used and abused written language over the centuries for advancing desirable versions of history. Written language can be used as a tool of deception and also as a tool of rebellion and liberation. Three post-colonial novels: “Book of Secrets”, “Under the Tongue”, and “In the Skin of a Lion”, deal extensively with the question of written language and the notion of official history as a palimpsest.

The three novels refer to three different facets of the language-power relationship. “Book of Secrets” is mainly concerned with exploring the features of the language of power in colonial discourse. It is set in East Africa and tells the story of the diary of a pre-World War I English colonial administrator in Africa and the convoluted ways in

which the lives of all the characters are entangled with this “book of secrets”. The first part of the book, which offers many direct citations from the original text of Alfred Corbin’s diary, provides the bulk of reflection on colonial discourse and the ways language in the British Empire was used to “administer justice” over the colonized peoples.

Unlike “Book of Secrets”, “Under the Tongue” reverses the language-power pattern and explores exclusively the power of language and the importance of speaking out. It presents the highly sensual, loaded with images, emotional and fragmented narrative of a young Zimbabwean girl, Zhizha, who has been raped by her father. It deals with issues of female oppression in an African society where male violence against women is the uncontested rule. The narrative structure is characterized by a deliberately vague “looseness”, which aims at creating an immediate impression and evoking the images of male violence in their crudest reality.

The same looseness of structure, albeit to a lesser extent, also characterizes Michael Ondaatje’s “In the Skin of a Lion”. It is set in Canada and tells the story of Patrick, the immigrant to the big city, as it intertwines with the story of the communities of exploited immigrant workers. The novel deals with the question of social injustice, aggravated by an unequally distributed economic power, and perpetuated through the use of language. Patrick’s personal journey throughout the novel also contemplates on the futility of violence as a solution. In terms of the relationship between language and power it explores, the novel is a fusion between “Book of Secrets” and “Under the Tongue” – by presenting the struggles of immigrant communities it dethrones the language of power

and its willingness to exclude uncomfortable histories from official History; by tracing Patrick's personal struggle it triumphantly asserts the power of language and speaking out.

The three novels employ three different means of exposing the injustices inflicted by the unscrupulous use of language by the powerful of the day. In "Book of Secrets", the historian-narrator Fernandes provides us with a seemingly impartial rendition of colonial rule by inserting numerous passages from Corbin's diary into the narrative, leaving him to speak for himself and expose his own mistakes and colonial prejudices. Fernandes, however, has no initial intention to preserve a historical objectivity, as he states in the Prologue: "I would [...] recreate the world of that book. [...] I would construct a history" (BS 8). Thus, all entries from Corbin's diary are accompanied by Fernandes' extensive re-construction up to a point at which it is impossible to discern what exactly the Englishman thought, or what Fernandes thought the Englishman thought. As we learn from the following passage (30):

He administered with a quiet, forceful diligence, a monastic rigor, in the unquestioned belief that what he did in his small way was part of a bigger enterprise in which he had some stake. [...] He was there to administer in the name of his king and nation [...] in the belief that the British empire with its experience of ruling other lands and with its humane system was the best nurturing ground for an emerging nation, for backward Africans and Orientals to enter the society of civilized peoples.

Eager to expose the "savagery" of colonial rule, which was no less "savage" than the African "savages" (as the term is used on numerous occasions by Maynard and Mrs. Bailey) themselves, Fernandes sometimes goes too far in attributing to Corbin views and

conclusions his own diary entries don't seem to support. In Corbin, he focuses all of the generalizations known about the British colonial administrator.

The Governor's native policy directives, inserted at three places in the text, also provide a valuable look at the way language was employed to instill into imperial administrators the prejudices about native peoples and the sense of white man's superiority over them (31):

The Fundamental principle and the only humane policy to be followed in dealing with peoples who have not reached a high stage of civilization is to develop them on their own lines and in accordance with their own ideas and customs, purified in so far as is necessary. [...] It must certainly be [our] endeavour to lift the natives to a higher plane of civilization.

Being an official document, this testimony has a bigger objective value for uncovering the truth about British colonialism than Fernandes' free interpretations of the personal diary of a representative of the colonial system administration. It is important to focus on individuals in order to prove a certain conclusion by induction, but very often such cases turn against the generalizations of a larger theory. Alfred Corbin was an ordinary administrator in an African colony and probably exhibited many of the features of the epitome of a British colonizer, who deceives himself about his own administering qualities. At the same time, he was a thoughtful official who took into account the interests of the communities he ruled over while struggling to preserve the sense of law and justice Britain had given him, and finding it increasingly difficult to sustain both (as in the case when he interfered to stop Mariamu's community beating her in an attempt to

exorcise the evil spirits out of her). Thus, Corbin does not fit the stereotype Fernandes is trying to create for him.

“Under the Tongue” resolves the different issue it discusses in a different way. The novel, however, seems to start from a similar fundamental premise, refracted through the prism of feminist writing, that female oppression is embedded in the spirit of the language used in a male-dominated society and is instilled in every human being with their very birth. Thus, an entirely new vision of language must be created, if women were to be liberated and to nudge out the signifiers of patriarchal discourse.

This new vision of language permeates Zhizha’s narrative and is seen in the way Vera employs various images and connects them to the female or male principle in search of a breach in the conventional logic of male imagery. Thus, women are equated to river and water, voice(s) and tongue(s), rain and sky, day and night (UT 125) and moon at the same time, birth and dawn, memory (124), harvest, sound and silence, morning, dew and tears, milk and sunlight. Men are portrayed at various places as rock and stone, darkness, sleep and forgetfulness, night and root, death, silence and shadow, insects (168) and lizards, lizard with a rotting stomach (152), drowning and death, decay (152), snail (226) and nothing (142). The connections between images do not run straightforwardly from one direction to another; on the contrary – they flow and return, cross each other’s paths and then diverge again. Often two mutually exclusive images are used to describe one and the same thing, or one and the same image is used to denote both the male and the female principle. The images are repeated over and over again until they are firmly imprinted in our brains.

The quest for a breach in conventional notions of story-telling and straight-flowing lines of causality is also evident in the controversies present in the narrative. The desirability of speaking out in circumstances similar to these surrounding Zhizha is far from clear: “It is sometimes good to forget, to bury the heavy things of now” (131) and at the same time “[a] woman must not forget, she must not bury her sorrow and her dreams” (131); “Under the tongue are hidden voices” (163) and at the same time “Under the tongue is a healing silence” (163); “I am a river and rock. I am sky and earth” (218) and at the same time “I am the opposite of life. I am the distortion of birth. I am silence” (226). Words are asserted throughout the whole narrative as the sole means of personal extrication – “We live with words” (203) – but at the same time it is recognized that they vanish and that a deeper level of understanding among people exists. Zhizha’s communication with her grandmother, after she loses her ability to speak, is based entirely on a silent exchange of looks and this is also a vital way of speaking.

By bringing into existence the unofficial history of immigrant workers in Canada and giving them the voice, “In the Skin of a Lion” exposes the arrogance of the power of money and the refusal of the rich to include the destiny of the poor in the official records of history. Ondaatje revives a world that has existed in oblivion – of underground dynamiters, tannery dyers, and bridge builders – nameless, faceless people, who weren’t present on any photographs, and whose death toll was less important than the amounts of concrete, iron and steel, used to build a bridge. As Simmons discusses (In the Skin of a Lion as a Cubist Novel), Ondaatje employs a number of techniques, such as the introduction of multiple points of view, the fragmentation of the narrative by the insertion of page gaps, and the collection of various pieces of testimony, such as photographs,

newspaper articles, lines from popular songs, and stitches them together as if in a collage, in order to create an unofficial history. These techniques evoke a very poetic feeling and validate the significance of experience as opposed to the desirability of factual accuracy.

Unlike the native communities in “Book of Secrets”, which see themselves as voiceless pawns in the hands of big colonial empires (“Like chickens. [...] That’s exactly what we are”, 114), and unlike the ambiguous thoughts of Zhizha on speaking out in “Under the Tongue”, the protagonists in “In the Skin of a Lion” set out resolutely to reclaim their place in history. This personal liberation, however, comes through hardship, doubt, and skepticism. The immigrants not only fail to realize they are being exploited, but, having no “mouth with which to begin” (UT 143), their lack of knowledge of English only serves to deepen their isolation. It is a converted nun, an outsider in their community, who becomes the voice of the whole community and leads their struggle. Having been rescued by the Macedonian bridge-builder Temelcoff, Alice enters the world of immigrant workers and becomes one of them. In such a world where the lives of some are much less valuable than the lives of others, she realizes, the consolation a nun can offer is useless. In perhaps the most important episode in the book, she asserts that one must “name the enemy” in order to “destroy their power” (SL 124). Thus, she provides the intellectual and ideological heritage for Patrick’s personal transformation from the passive into the active, from the “abashed” man that “had reduced himself almost to nothing” (113) to the man who “break[s] through [his] chrysalis into language” (157) and shows other people how they have been “sewn into history” (149). Patrick’s victory occurs twice on the level of language: first, during his encounter with Harris, he realizes that the only way to destroy the enemy is by using their own weapons – the

subtle but powerful words; second, during his trip to Marmora with Hana, he finally speaks out and starts telling the stories that will liberate him.

The three novels, discussed above, feature three different types of relationship between language and power – colonial power, male power, and the power of money. They all represent a different accent of the problem – the language of power in colonial discourse, the power of language in dealing with psychological trauma, and the significance of both language of power and power of language for building a sense of history and precluding patterns of economic exploitation from occurring again. The novels diverge in the ways they portray and condemn these types of power. In the end, however, all three lead up to a triumphant re-assertion of language as the only possible victory against various types of oppression, the most dangerous of which is self-imposed silence.

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