

# A Question of Entanglement

## The Transplanting of Colonial Languages

Amal Chatterjee

The spread of former colonial languages – English in particular, but also others like French, Spanish, and Portuguese – has advantages but also makes us uneasy. By using them, are we being held back from the rest of the world? People claim those languages are now of the formerly colonised regions themselves, but can they be? Aren't they fundamentally an imposition, a drawing away, an alienation? There's another way to see it.

فَامَاجِيْنِي اِنَّكَ حَمِيْدٌ مَّجِيْدٌ قَارِبُكَ  
 اَوْ اَوْ اِسْحَابِ رَيْسِ اِنَّ اِسْحَابَ رَوْطِ  
 اَللّٰهُمَّ بَارِكْ يَا اَللّٰهُ فِرْمِيْرِيْ مَا اَوْ  
 بِرَ مَتَّحِيْتِ عَلٰى مُحَمَّدٍ اَوْ بِرَ مُحَمَّدٍ  
 وَعَلٰى اٰلِ مُحَمَّدٍ اِنْ اَوْ بِرَ سَمِيْنٍ فَا مَلِيْ  
 كَمَا بَارَكْتَ نِيْتِ صَوَالِمَسِ اَوْ خِيْدَانِ  
 هِتْ عَلٰى اِبْرَهِصِيْرِ اَوْ بِرَ نَبِيِّ اِبْرَهِصِيْرِ

15 waarliek ouai ies gha pierais ien ies ghoeroet .....  
 Ja Allah viermeerdie ouai barmataghait ..... op  
 Moegammad ien op sain faamielghie ..... niet soewals  
 ouai ghiedaan hiet op Nabee Iebraheem (..... truly  
 thou art praised and elevated ..... O God increase  
 your generosity ..... on Muhammad and on his family  
 .... just as yyou had done for Prophet Abraham).

The idea that language and culture are closely linked is a familiar one. Languages are often referred to in terms of the cultures associated with them, and, unsurprisingly, with their famous writers: English becomes the language of Shakespeare, Spanish of Cervantes, French of Hugo, Portuguese of Pessoa, German of Goethe, and so on. Yes, those are all European languages. That's what this is about: languages that began as European becoming... what? Of where? If anywhere? The reality is that writers and researchers today express all manner of cultures in languages that are – or were – not of or from the cultures they write about. Does this mean that what they write is intrinsically “external,” potentially (and terrifyingly) Orientalist, or similarly flawed due to the origins of the languages? We know that that

often isn't the case; we know that there are writers who write with empathy about places, people, and cultures in languages that were once alien or imposed. And we also know that there are now many who write from within those other places, peoples, and cultures. I am one of those, as I write here in English, a language with origins distant from my own in South Asia. While I see and describe myself as mainly Indian, or South Asian, I do so mainly, often, in English. That once-non-Asian language arises for me, not from England but from a range of places: Calcutta, where I grew up; Colombo, thanks to family; Amsterdam and Glasgow, with traces of Darjeeling, and also of other spaces, languages, and traditions I've encountered, from Spain to Brazil. All those are in me and my writing, yet none is intrinsically “English,” not even Glasgow. Instead, it's a web of strands, connections, and coincidences, all entangled together, not woven but overlapping, winding through and around, knotting too. As I said, entangled.

Fig. 1 (above): Student notebook, 1860, with Afrikaans in Arabic script (Public domain, retrieved from Wikimedia Commons).

### Colonial hangover?

Where I grew up, English was, of course, a colonial injection, an “injection” because it was introduced actively, pushed like a drug, to isolate and addict. It did not settle in any way naturally, not at first. But by the time it came to me, it was, for me and those around, ours. In fact, it was entirely ours, for though we knew and read of other cultures and places, our references and connections were wholly immediate: Calcuttan, Bengali, Eastern Indian, Indian – at most South Asian. Thus, my English arose, like my other languages, and was formed, again like my other languages, from the context, from the entanglements that I and it existed within. And that is the case for the languages of others, and for other languages. Consider Afrikaans, a language with origins wrapped up in colonialism. The first, or certainly one of the first, texts in Afrikaans was, as it happens, in the Arabic script, by and for Muslims of Malay origin: Sheikh Ahmad al-Ishmunī's 1856 *Kitab Al-Qawl al-Matin Fi Bayan Umur al-Din* (The Book of the Firm Declaration Regarding the Explanation of the Matters of Religion). That is, of course, a very different set of entanglements than those structuring the Afrikaans of a contemporary white writer. For white writers, Afrikaans is entangled with their very culture, traditions, community, religions. And those two aren't the only cultures of Afrikaans; they aren't the only two entanglings. In fact, they are minor ones, the larger is the reality of the majority of users of Afrikaans, a complex community of people with a multitude of origins, religions, practices, cultures.

To imagine how languages entangle with diverse cultures, consider the analogy of something else familiar that entangles



Fig. 2 (left): Book cover for *Paradise* by Abdulrazak Gurnah (Bloomsbury Press).

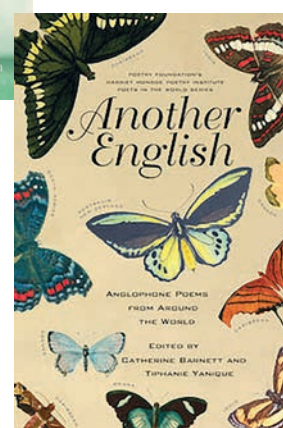


Fig. 3 (below): Book cover for *Another English: Anglophone Poems from Around the World* (Tupelo Press).

and is transformed: food. Corn or maize, chillies, potatoes, and tomatoes, for instance, are now everyday ingredients in lands and dishes far from their origins. Tea and coffee and chocolate are proudly – and incorrectly – labelled as being from former coloniser nations that do not even grow them. But those foodstuffs aren't as they originally were. Chocolate, for instance, is mostly sweet now, stripped, or relieved, perhaps, of its original connotations and entangled with sugar, itself an import. That is what has happened with language, too. English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and others have become entangled in regions where they were once impositions. They have been adapted, co-opted, and re-imagined into new versions, from more distinct instances like Haitian French, Brazilian Portuguese, Caribbean Englishes, to less distinct ones like Sri Lankan English and Moroccan French.

### Entangling with others

For writers and those communicating in entangled languages, there's another layer: the relationship with the audience. Because the writers don't always, or only, communicate with those in the same context and similar entanglements, their writing often reaches out to places they are not of. And as it does, the shared physical and contextual connections strain. Even relatively locally: in India, for instance, a writer in Bengal may have readers in Delhi, with different references, because Durga Puja isn't Dussehra, and Kali Puja isn't Diwali. Farther afield, across the Arabian Sea in Sudan or Kenya, the threads can snap, and different strands of entanglement can arise between the writer and the reader. The writer can thus choose to assume their readers are familiar with their own entanglements, or to refer to the entanglements of particular groups of readers, or to explain or interpret. Whatever the choice, conscious or not, how the writer acts – makes allowances, challenges, demands, or assumes familiarity – their writing is affected by the entanglements beyond their own context, entanglements with culturally distinct or separate readers. Of course, distance, physical or cultural, can be a barrier, but it can also be an opportunity to look back, to consider, and to portray with intent and understanding. A writer does that anyway, or should, so awareness of entanglement, whatever they may call it or however they may think of it, is another prompt to do so.

Accepting that, understanding and working with the reality of entanglements means that language can be used as language should: to communicate, to tell. After all, today English is as much Fijian and Jamaican as French is Moroccan or Guadeloupean, as Portuguese is Angolan and Mozambican, and as Spanish is Peruvian and laced into Tagalog. Whether they are minority or majority languages, these languages are now entangled, familiar, interior, to those places – each in their own way, in their own entanglement. So it is that the 2021 Nobel Prize laureate Abdulrazak Gurnah writes of Tanzania and Zanzibar in English. He is doing what writers do: using the language, an entangled one like all others, for his own ends, to say what he wants and what he sees, to say it as he wants, with knowledge of the past and the present. Such writers recognize that that is how things are, and that what we need to do is use language with conscious intent – considering the entanglements, working with those that work, working against those that don't. This applies to all of us, whatever we write, in whatever language. After all, in the end, it is awareness and active involvement that counts. Write then, as writers do, in the language of your choice, entangled as it is with you and your surroundings, and entangling, as it does, you with your readers.

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