

Identity Recovery After Collision: Recovering Identity Through Language in Postcolonial Drama

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Abstract

Language is more than words. Within language is embedded a multitude of social and cultural values. According to Lacan, language is the way we determine who we are and the way we create our identity. When the privilege of language is abused, as it has been in colonized countries, the “native” suddenly finds not only herself or himself unable to communicate, but also that her or his language becomes a barrier to survival. In *Dream on Monkey Mountain* by Derek Walcott, *The Lion and the Jewel* by Wole Soyinka, and *Stones in His Pockets* by Marie Jones, the protagonist, a representative for her or his people, must challenge the language of the colonial centre to redefine her or his marginalized group. Although very different in form, all three plays present the reestablishment of indigenous language as a strategy to re-appropriate cultural identity. In fact, all three authors use the characters’ indigenous verbal and non-verbal “words” to return to a time before colonization, when their language was the language of the centre and when they had a clearer understanding of who they were.

Key Words: post-colonial drama, Walcott, Soyinka, Jones, language, indigenous communication

Introduction

Colonization implies a collision of cultures. As the colonizer moves in, it imposes its language, ways, and values on the natives of the land. Its power places it at the centre and its language gives its voice authority. From this position, the colonizer marginalizes and silences the native inhabitants, making them the “Other.” Colonization brings a shift in cultural power that is tied directly to a shift in linguistic power. According to Fisher (1999), in any country or community, “language is the ultimate measure of human society. More than any other of life’s faculties, it is language that tells us who we are, what we mean and where we are going” (as cited in Mac Giolla Chríost, 2004, p. 203). Embedded within language are so many social and cultural values and beliefs, both verbal and non-verbal, that when the language of a place changes, the “native” can no longer express her or his deepest thoughts. Moreover,

she or he can no longer understand herself or himself as the subject she or he used to be. In colonized and postcolonial countries, it is difficult for the indigenous person or group to change the way both the individual and the group are understood by the centre. It is equally difficult for them to change the way they see themselves. In order for their voices to be heard, they must learn to manipulate the language of the centre. This issue is the central concern in three postcolonial plays: *Dream on Monkey Mountain* by Derek Walcott, *The Lion and the Jewel* by Wole Soyinka, and *Stones in His Pockets* by Marie Jones. In all three works, the protagonist, a representative for her or his people, must challenge the language of the centre to redefine her or his group. Although very different in form, all three plays present the reestablishment of indigenous language as a strategy to re-appropriate cultural identity. In fact, all three authors use the characters' indigenous verbal and non-verbal "words" to return to a time before colonization, when their language was the language of the centre and when they had a clearer understanding of who they were.

Before the three works are analyzed, one must understand how language is central to the determination of identity. According to Lacan, language "precedes consciousness; as speaking subjects we are born into [it]" (Homer, 2004, p. 40). Thus, "[w]hen we use language we do so against a background of vocabulary, syntax, grammar and conventions; we are not conscious of all those elements when we speak or write but they are there and they determine what we can and cannot say. If we transgress the rules, our speech becomes meaningless" (Homer, 2004, p. 37). Lacan explains that each person creates her or his identity through a relationship with the Other, and "[i]t is through the Other that the subject secures its position in the symbolic, social, order" (Homer, 2004, p. 72). While this system should work in a reciprocal and mutually beneficial way, "in post-colonial societies, the participants are frozen into a hierarchical relationship in which the oppressed are locked into position by the assumed moral superiority of the dominant group.... Such accounts, too, are grounded in an awareness of the struggle between discourses as the fundamental constitutive mode of such relations" (Ashcroft, 2002, p. 170). Thus, from the top of the social hierarchy, language is used to perpetuate negative stereotypes of the "native," which eventually are accepted by all. Although the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2009) indicates that "identity" Oxford English means "[t]he sameness of a person or thing at all times or in all circumstances," the "native" in a colonized country slowly changes her or his identity to match the ideas of the colonial authority—a change that is evident in the language she or he uses to describe herself or himself. Personal identity is consequently a product of social identity because "each of us begins his/her self-constitution on the basis of a series of social categories which are the result of attribution, not experience, and which locate us in one or more social hierarchies" (Hogan, 1994, p. 106). In order to rectify this problem,

Irish, Indian, African, [and] Caribbean writers tried to think of their cultural identity in terms of distinctness and continuity; they sought a causal sequence extending back through history to a time before colonialism, a tradition whose origins are separate from those of the colonizer, and a tradition which still pervades the self-conception and ordinary activity of the colonized group. (Hogan, 1996, p. 164)

Walcott, Soyinka, and Jones use language to achieve this cultural redefinition. For all three, “[t]he use of an indigenous language on stage... ‘localises’ and attracts value away from ‘British ‘norm’ eventually displacing the hegemonic centrality of the idea of ‘norm’ itself” (Ashcroft et al., 1987, p. 37, as quoted in Gilbert, 1996, p. 170).

Dream on Monkey Mountain

In *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, language is linked to racial identity. Walcott uses Makak, an older black man, to show the devastating influence colonial language has had on the native, black St. Lucian. For the inhabitants of the island, “[t]he correlation between skin shade and social class has become a truism.... White... equals upper-class; mulatto or brown is middle-class; while the black and East Indian majority occupies the base of the social pyramid” (Sunshine, 1985, p. 20). Racial hierarchy is linked to power, an act that does not come from “creating something from nothing but in reducing something to nothing” (Grossberg, 1996, p. 96). In the play, this hierarchy is expressed and accepted by the mulatto officer Corporal Lestrade, who explains that “there was one tribe unfortunately that lingered behind [when apes were starting to walk straight], and that was the nigger” (Walcott, 1970, p. 217). He refers to the black prisoners in his charge as “[a]nimals, beasts, savages, cannibals, [and] niggers,” tells them to “stop turning this place into a stinking zoo” (p. 216), and calls Makak “a being without a mind, a will, a name, [or] a tribe of its own” (p. 222).

Lestrade’s words are reflected in Makak’s definition of himself. The name he gives himself, Makak, or monkey, demonstrates that he considers himself a beast. He explains that “I have lived all my life [l]ike a wild beast in hiding. Without child, without wife.... Is thirty years now I have look in no mirror.... [W]hen I must drink, I stir my hands first, to break up my image” (p. 226). Makak’s self-loathing at being black is so intense that he cannot bear to look at himself. His decision to live alone can also be understood in linguistic terms because it shows that he acknowledges his voice has neither value nor power in his community, and he denies cultural continuity through words. His actions and words tell the reader that he honestly believes he is nothing. When he does speak, Makak uses Creole rather than Standard English. Of note is that “Creoles have been ranked with baby talk, child language, foreigner talk and with other instances of nonnatural language that do not serve normal societal communicative needs nor the full cognitive needs of the human species” (Alleyne, as quoted in Mühleisen, 1985). Thus, Makak transgresses the rules of speech and Lestrade is quick to tell him that he must conform to be heard, “[f]or we are observing the principles and precepts of Roman law, and Roman law is English law” (Walcott, 1970, pp. 218-219).

The racial distinction in this community is deeply affected by language. Specifically, Walcott shows that identity is based on an understanding of white as power and black as its absence. Makak’s business partner and friend, Moustique, for example, says: “You is nothing. You black, ugly, poor, so you worse than nothing” (p. 237). Corporal Lestrade says the native is “paralyse [sic] with darkness” (p. 261). Basil, the figure of death, wears a black hat. White is the colour of hope and power. It is the desire to be white, a desire to be part of the centre, that drives the marginalized black person in this community. Souris explains that

he has been taught to long for milk, and Moustique, when accused by the mob, says “you all want me, as if this hand hold magic, to stretch it and like a flash of lightning to make you all white?... Die in your ignorance! Live in your darkness still! You don’t know what you want” (p. 271). Makak’s dream is a verbalization of this desire, and the fact that his vision is of a white woman makes it even more powerful and persuasive. He explains that “[s]he say I should not live so any more, here in the forest, frighten of people because I think I ugly. She say that I come from the family of lions and kings” (p. 236). Only a white person could have the power to make the ugly pretty and the weak mighty.

Walcott uses Makak’s journey to show the extent to which colonial discourse has imbedded itself in the native psyche. Makak leaves the mountain, inspired by the white woman to proudly return to his pre-colonial roots. As he makes his way toward Africa, he heals using traditional methods, he spreads a message of cultural revival, he dances and does magic that empowers him and his people. However, Walcott shows through Makak that this pre-colonial identity is difficult to maintain in the postcolonial world. When they do not listen to him, Makak claims that his people “must be taught, even tortured, killed” (p. 301). Thus he quickly becomes a black version of a white dictator. It is from his position as king of his people that Makak realizes that the “natives” are “[l]ocked in a dream, and treading their own darkness. Snarling at their shadows, snapping at their own tails, devouring their own entrails like the hyena, eaten with self-hatred” (p. 305). The language of the unconscious reveals that the white, man-inspired identity is disastrous for the culture. The only way to create a new identity is to silence the colonial voice—to silence the control the colonizer has had on identity. Corporal Lestrade explains:

What you beheld, my prince, was but an image of your longing. As inaccessible as snow, as fatal as leprosy. Nun, virgin, Venus, you must violate, humiliate, destroy her; otherwise, humility will infect you. You will come out in blotches, you be what I was, neither one thing nor the other. (pp. 318-319)

There is no in-between in this world and so Makak kills the vision, the (un)conscious desire to be white in order to find inner peace.

At the end of the play, when Makak reveals that he is “going back home, back to the beginning, to the green beginning of the world” (p. 326), the reader understands that he is going back to his St. Lucian roots. The facts that Lestrade does not correct Makak’s Creole and that he distinguishes between Makak’s moment of madness and the behaviour of the other two prisoners, Tigre and Souris, also show that it is possible for the centre to change its understanding of the margins. Although Marak does withdraw from society, the reader knows that his message will not be forgotten. He has been a “prophet” (p. 326) who can still be visited. Having used dialect, dance, and symbols that his target audience will understand, Walcott has begun to redefine this group’s identity, inspiring it to look within itself and go back to its roots.

The Lion and the Jewel

Unlike *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, in which language is used by the white colonizer to make the “native” a racially inferior object, language in *The Lion and the Jewel* is a means to distinguish between the progress made available by the colonizing forces and the colonizer’s belief that the tribal system is backwards. In this play, the distinction between centre and margin is made through the ideas of the city, Lagos, where major cultural change is happening, and the country, where traditional systems are still valued. Thus, in this play, language is either the progressive and modern vocabulary of the colonized city or the imagistic and baser language of the country. From the moment he is introduced, it is clear that Lakunle, a young schoolteacher, channels the colonial voice. He is “dressed in an old-style English suit.... His tie is done in a very small knot, disappearing beneath a shiny black waistcoat. He wears twenty-three-inch bottom trousers, and blanco-white tennis shoes” (p. 3). Even if the clothing is “ragged... [and] a size or two too small” (p. 3), he obviously strives for the image of a British gentleman. He stands in stark contrast to the other characters. The village leader, Baroka, for example, is first seen “in bed, naked except for baggy trousers, calf-length” (p. 25) and Sidi, a young woman, enters “[balancing] the pail on her head with accustomed ease. Around her is wrapped the familiar broad cloth which is folded just above her breasts, leaving her shoulders bare” (p. 3). Soyinka makes it clear in these clothing choices that cultural and social allegiances are linked to clothing and thoughts on clothing. That Lakunle is desperate to cover Sidi’s bare chest is an indication that he is trying to suppress his and his tribe’s Otherness.

This initial physical distinction and attention to nonverbal language is made clearer through the play’s verbal language. Although the entire play is in English, Lakunle clearly uses language to set himself above the villagers. He calls them “pigs” and “savages” (p. 5). He tells Sidi that their marriage customs are “barbaric, out-dated, / Rejected, denounced, accursed, / Excommunicated, archaic, degrading, / Humiliating, unspeakable, redundant” (p. 8). And, as this quotation demonstrates, Lakunle believes he is more intelligent than the villagers. In fact, he employs his education in an attempt to silence his audience while they listen to his rhetoric. He quotes, for example, the Bible: “And the man shall take the woman/ And the two shall be together/ As one flesh” (p. 9)—and scientists—“The scientists have proved it. It’s in my books” (p. 6). Yet his words reveal him to be sexist and condescending to women. He tells Sidi that “[w]omen have a smaller brain than men / That’s why they are called the weaker sex” (p. 6), and he longs for her to be like the women of Lagos in high-heeled shoes and lipstick (p. 9). Lakunle’s condescending use of language is missionary in vocabulary and purpose. With English comes the possibility of machines and refinement never before seen in villages like this one. His mission is to bring English ways to the village: “Charity, they say, begins at home. For now, it is this village I shall turn [i]nside out” (p. 6). English, therefore, will bring not only progress but also a civilizing of the savage. Lakunle’s syntax and vocabulary, which is central to the issue of how language can be used to develop identity. It is true that the villagers consider Lakunle mad and that they do not understand what he says; however, as the schoolteacher, Lakunle plays a vital role in shaping the future

members of this society. The students of his school are not learning traditional, cultural jobs. They are not helping their fathers or learning the skills needed to contribute to the village. Instead, they are reciting multiplication tables and sitting inside a building. If the teacher is allowed to spread his big city ideas, it will not be long before the traditional roles and jobs become a thing of the past. Moreover, the students will begin to think of their ways as outdated. If one returns to Lacan's theory that one creates identity through a relationship with the Other, then it is clear that Lakunle's goal is to teach the younger generation that it is superior to their parents. Even though Lakunle presently has little real influence on the villagers, with time, his teachings will change the nature of the village and the relationships that exist within it.

Soyinka is careful not to let Lakunle have the last word. Even though Lakunle does not accept her argument, Sidi speaks directly to the audience when she defends herself and her ways. "I wonder that they let you run the school. You and your talk. You'll ruin your pupils too / And then they'll utter madness just like you" (p. 10), she tells him. When Lakunle condescendingly calls women "the weaker sex," she counters with a discourse that is more gender inclusive and that values traditional roles: "The weaker sex, is it? Is it a weaker breed who pound the yam / Or bend all day to plant the millet / With a child on her back?" (p. 6). Furthermore, the villagers use very different allusions and images in their conversations. Theirs is a much more simple and imagistic vocabulary, which the audience understands as more genuine than Lakunle's self-promotion. They do not know the word for camera, for example, and so they call it a "one-eyed box" (p. 11), and a motorcycle becomes "the devil's own horse" (p. 11). It is this simple language that Soyinka shows to be most powerful.

When the magazine arrives and Sidi sees she is beautiful and that, according to the size and placement of their pictures, she is more important than the Bale, she begins to think of herself outside her traditional role. She has read and interpreted the non-verbal language of the images as a signal of her place in the village. Yet the image in the magazine roots her firmly within her village. She is not the made-up female of the magazines Lakunle has read. She is rather an affirmation that tribal culture is the Other. The non-verbal image signals to the reader that she is an object of the subject's gaze: the half-naked female from the country at whom men like Lakunle stare. She is exotic but uncivilized. Sidi's inability to properly read the non-verbal language of the magazine causes her much pain in the end. By succumbing to the ideas of the colonizer, she confronts, and is defeated by, Baroka, who is able to use indigenous language to trick her into marrying him.

Another way that Lakunle's words are defeated is through the use of dance on stage. Like Walcott's use of dialect and magic, Soyinka uses dance to silence the subject and speak directly to his target audience. Even though he does not want to, Lakunle is forced to participate in the dances. In these moments, he is unable to oppose the "native" voice. The dancers act as the villagers' storytellers, providing "a privileged place central to the maintenance and sustenance of the group's culture. The story-teller [relays] the community's history... as an entertainment and an educative device" (Gilbert, 1996, p. 126). The dances in this play not only inform the audience of their collective past but are also used

as powerful vehicles to teach the audience about the way this world works. This is not the business world of Lagos, and so the dance challenges Lakunle's language, his morals, and his arrogance:

As a culturally coded activity, dance... renegotiates dramatic action and dramatic activity, reinforcing the actor's corporeality, particularly when it is culturally laden.... In this way, dance recuperates postcolonial subjectivity by centralizing traditional, non-verbal forms of self-representation. (Gilbert, 1996, p. 239)

Furthermore, dance is a powerful medium because it also incorporates music. "A song's coding can be a discrete communicative system.... [It] contributes to the *mise-en-scène* to, for instance, enhance a mood, or effect an atmosphere.... [S]ong can intensify the reactions of both the actors and the audience" (Gilbert, 1996, p. 193-194).

In the end, by choosing traditional, tribal ways over the promised progress of the city, Sidi rejects Lakunle. In doing so, she completely silences him. Although the magazine threatened the community's understanding of hierarchy and values, the threat has been neutralized by putting the power back into Baroka's hands. He is now able to use her image to communicate his power in both the village, as her husband, and in the country, by employing her image in his self-promotion. Baroka, and Sidi through her decision, ultimately express an allegiance to precolonial ways and values, a message that is echoed in the use of indigenous methods of communicating identity.

Stones in His Pockets

In *Stones in His Pockets*, language is what differentiates "authentic" Irish people and experiences from the "fake" ideas and stereotypes of the American film crew. As in *Dream on Monkey Mountain* and *The Lion and the Jewel*, the audience of *Stones in His Pockets* realizes that language plays an important role in defining the marginalized as the Other and establishing the centre as subject. In the play, the Irish are marginalized by Hollywood. Although they claim to want to capture an "authentic" Irish experience, the crew is focused solely on using the Irish to make money. The language of Hollywood is a language of business, corporations, and executives. It is not at all concerned with any sort of a commitment to the individual or the community. This is made clear by the way that globalization has infiltrated and taken over the lives of the "native" Irish. Charlie, a local man in his thirties, for example, is out of a job because of a big video chain that has ruined his small business. In addition, the crew of Irish extras are subjected to the whims of their American bosses. Not even a funeral is enough to stop production. The Irish realize that if they do not comply with the film crew's rules, they will be out of a job. Thus the Irish are indeed "frozen into a hierarchical relationship in which [they] are locked into position by the assumed moral superiority of the dominant group" (Ashcroft, 2002, p. 170).

Jones shows that Hollywood is not only silencing the Irish in their own country, but that it has also done this globally. In fact, she shows that Hollywood has taken on the role of storyteller for the Irish. It has become the voice through which the Irish story is told. It quickly becomes clear that Hollywood is not a good choice for this role. Hollywood movies,

considered “authentic” by viewers, have projected the Irish as one of two things: romantics or drunks. Yet there is more to Irish life than these two extremes, and neither version corresponds to the unglamorous and difficult reality the rural Irish have faced. By watching these films, Irish children have grown up with a false sense of what they should be. The characters reveal that there are few opportunities in the country. When Jake goes off to America to find fame and fortune, he soon realizes that there are no more opportunities there than there are in Ireland, and so he returns to his mother and welfare. Others, like Sean, a young local lad, escape the hardship through a “virtual reality [of] drugs and movies” (p. 74).

To counterbalance the myth, Jones uses the Irish extras to tell the audience the real story. Through Jake, a local man in his mid-thirties, and Charlie, the audience realizes the extent to which American ways have influenced the Irish: people are willing to sleep in trailers to make money, cocaine is available at the bar, and they are willing to sell out their friends to make it big. While the characters agree that it is normal to “fantasise about being the cock of the walk, the boy in the big picture” (p. 68), the trouble with these dreams is that failure to achieve the glamour promised by Hollywood is a threat to person and country. As in *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, conforming to the definition the centre imposes leads to self-hatred and loathing. When Caroline, the American star, crushes Sean’s dream of being in the film, he is not only ridiculed in front of his peers but loses his ability to speak at all. From outside the bar, he is alone and voiceless. Unlike Makak, he does not know how to appropriate the language of the centre. His drug-induced state has taken him so far from being authentic that he can no longer speak the language needed to get back to his roots. Having had the very thing he idealized reject him, Sean silences his mangled inner voice by drowning himself.

Like Sean, others try to speak the lingo of Hollywood. Jake, for example, tries to fit the role of the romantic Irish poet by seducing Caroline with poetry. When she corrects him, however, he is humiliated. Jones addresses the issue of authentic Irish language through the use of dialect. As a true test of identity, the Irish extras all use either local expressions or English that is different from that of the Americans. The fact that the main actor of the film is unable to master the local sound allows the characters to reaffirm their indigenous Irish identity.

Although Jones shows that Hollywood ideas are dangerous in this country, she makes it clear that the Irish have not completely lost their voice. Through dialectic language and local storytellers, the play presents a way to fight the stereotypical and dehumanizing language of Hollywood. Through their own film, Jake and Charlie will be able to reappropriate language and reconstruct Irish identity. Their film will show the true effect Hollywood has had on the Irish. It will be

a story about a film being made and a young lad commits suicide.... [I]n other words the stars become the extras and the extras become the stars... so it becomes Sean’s story, and Mickey and all of the people in this town.... [D]on’t we have the right to tell our story the way we want it [?] (pp. 86-87)

Conclusion

Through Walcott's *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*, and Jones's *Stones in His Pockets*, one can see the powerful effect language has on creating identity. Traditionally, "the colonised subject has... been figured as silent, in opposition to the linguistically adept colonizer in whose language is situated the key to authority and knowledge" (Gilbert, 1996, p. 189). Thus the voices from the margins have been minimal. However, "[p]ost-colonial theatre attempts to rebut this paradigm and therefore to give voice to many different narratives which circulate under the sign of a broadly common language" (Gilbert, 1996, p. 177). Each of these three authors combats the linguistic power of the centre by using indigenous methods of communication to speak to the target audience and inspire change. Through dialect, dance, song, and silence, these "post-colonial plays reinforce language's heavy inflection with, and investment in, cultural specificity" (Gilbert, 1996, p. 200). By engaging with and proposing an alternative to the language of the centre, these postcolonial writers help the marginalized not only take back their voice but ultimately to reconstruct their identity by returning to their pre-colonial roots. Essentially, this reappropriation of voice allows the natives to recreate their identity as that of the centre and repositions the natives as the subjects. In this reappropriated role, the native language is once again the means through which the natives can express themselves and achieve the status they deserve; it enables them to take back the culture and the power that was initially theirs. All three authors show an unfreezing of the hierarchical relationship between the colonizer and the colonized by appealing to a healthier pre-colonial reality in order to create a new non-British/American norm.

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