

Transformation of English Language in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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ABSTRACT

With millions of non-native English language users, English has gained the position of 'global language' in the last century. English literature also has a significant number of non-native writers from around the world. While grasping their own cultures in English, these non-native writers have been transforming English language to a remarkable extent. On many occasions, these transformed varieties are recognised as versions of English language. This essay explores the notion of translingual writers and their use of English language, taking *The Hungry Tide*, a novel of the Indian translingual writer Amitav Ghosh, as an example. The novel is studied, along with the works of other researchers, with the sole focus on the transformation of English language in it. This study looks for the answers of two questions. They are: 1. How do the translingual writers justify their transformation of English language?; and 2. How is Amitav Ghosh transforming English language in *The Hungry Tide* and why is he doing it?

Key words:

Transformation of English Language, translingual writers, 'Words' as Migrants

INTRODUCTION

Globalization of English language resulted in deviation from or transformation of the standard form of the language among users of different localities. This essay takes the use of transformed forms of English language in literature as its research problem and aims to find out the writers' justification for using these transformed forms. Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* fulfills the goal of the essay by providing examples of the findings of this research showing how local languages migrate to the global English canon.

English -- the Global Language

'In comparison with other languages of wider communication, knowing English is like possessing the fabled Aladdin's lamp, which permits one to open, as it were, the linguistic gates to international business, technology, science, and travel. In short, English provides power' (1). The famous Indian linguist Braj Bihari Kachru thus compares the knowledge of English with Aladdin's lamp that can fulfill any wish in the introduction of his *The Alchemy of English*.

The strong position of English language, that it earned by colonialism at the beginning of twentieth century, was carried forward by the strong political, economic, scientific, industrial, and socio-cultural power of the USA after The World Wars. The development of computer and internet technology was also dominated by the USA. Movies and music gave English language the international exposure and made

it familiar to the far and remote areas around the world. With the emergence of this new English speaking superpower, English language continued and flourished in its glorious reign.

British linguist David Crystal in his *English as a Global Language* summarizes the rise of English language thus:

British political imperialism had sent English around the globe, during the nineteenth century, so that it was a language 'on which the sun never sets'. During the twentieth century, this world presence was maintained and promoted, almost single-handedly, through the economic supremacy of the new American superpower. (8)

Multiple Ownerships of English

The sure outcome of the globalization of English language is the different versions of English in different localities. North America, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, India -- all the former colonies developed their own versions of the language. According to Kachru, 'The legacy of colonial Englishes has resulted in the existence of several transplanted varieties of English having distinct linguistic ecologies -- their own contexts of function and usage. These non-native varieties have, in turn, brought about changes in the native varieties of English...' (1). He considers these varieties as the results of 'unEnglish' uses: 'The more localized "unEnglish" uses English acquires, the more varieties of new (non-native) English come into existence' (20).

The changes in the standard form of English language are according to the culture and heritage of the local people who adopt the language. Mother tongue interference is one of the strongly responsible factors behind this change. At times new words are also coined to describe lifestyles, food, cultural events, or landscapes which do not have their English equivalents. Consequently American English, English in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Caribbean Islands and India – all are distinct from each other and also from the English of The British Isles. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin distinguish between the standard form of English and the altered forms of the language that have returned to the centre from the colonies in their *The Empire Writes Back*:

... we distinguish [...] between the ‘standard’ British English inherited from the empire and the english which the language has become in post-colonial countries. Though British imperialism resulted in the spread of a language, English, across the globe, the english of Jamaicans is not the english of the Canadians, Maoris, or Kenyans. We need to distinguish between what is proposed as a standard code, English (the language of the erstwhile imperial centre), and the linguistic code, english, which has been transformed and subverted into several distinctive varieties throughout the world. (8)

To talk about these ‘New Englishes’ Salman Rushdie in his essay ‘Commonwealth literature does not exist’ comments that ‘the English language ceased to be the sole possession of the English some time ago’ (70). According to Crystal, ‘when even the largest English speaking nation, the USA, turns out to have only about 20 percent of the world’s English speakers, it is plain that no one can claim sole ownership.’ In Kachru’s words: ‘English is acquiring various international identities and thus acquiring multiple ownerships’ (31).

Translingual Writers

American critic and academic Steven G. Kellman defines ‘translingual writers’ as ‘those who write in more than one language or in a language other than their primary one’ (ix). Considering translingual writers as the ‘prodigies of world literature’, Kellman goes further to praise the power of them in the preface of *Switching Languages: Translingual Writers Reflect on their Craft* as he says, ‘By expressing themselves in multiple verbal systems, they flaunt their freedom from the constraints of the culture into which they happen to have been born’ (ix). Switching languages and writing in a different language other than the mother tongue is not any new tradition in literary history. Previously, writers preferred the dominant languages of practical value for literary career rather than their native ones. Different reasons, like migration or personal choice, also motivated some writers to become translingual. But in recent years, with the emergence of English language in different corners of the world in a changed socio-economic world condition, the number of translingual writers increased remarkably. Kellman considers present day world situations as important factors working behind the increased number of translingual writers. He writes – ‘War, disease, famine, political oppression, and economic hardship

have contributed to an unprecedented movement of populations across the globe in recent decades; [...] And migration is a powerful motive for translingualism, for assimilating to and through the language of a new environment’ (xii).

The prominence of many translingual writers, including J. M. Coetzee, Arundhati Roy, Salman Rushdie, Wole Soyinka, Samuel Beckett and many others, on literary prize lists, like the Noble Prize or the Booker Prize, demonstrates their pre-eminence in contemporary world literature.

Transformation of English by Translingual Writers

Deciding to write in a different language other than the native language is a courageous one. Because, expressing the feelings in a second language is not as natural as in the native one. But, translingual writers decide and do this tough job at ease. The dilemma of using a non-native language in writing is evident in V. S. Naipaul’s words: ‘It is an odd, suspicious situation: an Indian writer writing in English for an English audience about non-English characters who talk their own sort of English.’ (Kachru 11)

Raja Rao, the Indian translingual writer, believes that while writing in English, the writers change the originality of the language in order to express the native emotions properly. Rao supports this change by the non-native writers and is hopeful about the changes to be accepted along with the standardised form in future. Rao’s words in the ‘foreword’ of his *Kanthapura* are poignant with the standpoint of a non-native writer:

The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word “alien”, yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual makeup [...] but not of our emotional makeup. [...] We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. [...] Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will someday prove to be as distinctive and colorful as the Irish or the American. (v)

The Commonwealth Poetry prize 1979 winner Nigerian poet and novelist Gabriel Okara’s novel *The Voice* is noteworthy for its linguistic endeavour. Okara imposes his native language, Ijo’s syntax onto English. African culture, heritage, religion, folklore, imagery – all are incorporated in this amazing novel of Okara. In support of his writing in this ‘different’ English, Okara writes in his essay ‘African Speech...English Words’: ‘...a writer can use the idioms of his own language in a way that is understandable in English. If he uses their English equivalents, he would not be expressing African ideas and thoughts, but English ones’ (187).

Although his most remarkable novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is written in English, the Nigerian author Chinua Achebe incorporates proverbs from Igbo oral culture into his writing. He concludes his essay ‘The African Writer and the English Language’ by saying that – ‘I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full

communication with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings' (103).

Achebe's view is, in a sense, the final words in support of the changes brought by the translingual writers to English language. In the same essay he writes:

The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to the many different kinds of use. The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its view as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience. (100)

Amitav Ghosh

During the last two decades, Amitav Ghosh is a prominent name among the post-colonial Indian writers in English. His inclusion in many of the prominent literary lists in recent years is the acknowledgement of his recognition as the ambassador of the powerful existence of the Indian translingual writers in English literature.

Borderless World of Amitav Ghosh

Of a number of significant issues addressed in Ghosh novels, the meaninglessness of international borders between countries holds a strong position. Amitav Ghosh is a distinguished spokesperson of the borderless dream world. With his incredible intermingling of fact and fiction, he brings to light the futility of the shadow lines existing between countries that separate the geographical locations and give them different names. Ghosh shows how these lines actually fail to divide the memories and experiences of friends and families that they share for centuries. The theme of borderless society in Ghosh is of much importance as this is what he wants to establish in the linguistic world of his novels as well. In the last four of his novels, Ghosh seems to break the borders of standard languages and explore more liberty at the expense of the standard linguistic rules.

Language of *The Hungry Tide*

The Hungry Tide (2004) is the fifth of Amitav Ghosh's novels. Set in the mysterious tidal archipelago of the Bay of Bengal, Sundarban, the novel is rich with the assembly of diverse elements like history, politics, poetry, religion, myth etc. Language plays the silent yet powerful tool to weave the fact and fiction of all these varied elements into this magnificent novel. While focusing on the language of *The Hungry Tide*, Gareth Griffiths in his essay 'Silenced worlds: Language and experience in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*' writes that 'Throughout Ghosh's novel language, speech, writing, translation and interpretation are confronted by forms of experience that resist the mediation of language.' In this novel Amitav Ghosh puts much emphasis on the power of language in the lives of his characters. For example, it has the power to summon the animal only if its name is uttered: "Do you mean," Kanai interrupted, "that you saw

a --?" But even before he could say the word *bagh*, tiger, she had slammed a hand over his mouth: "No you can't use the word – to say it is to call it'" (108).

Nirmal, who is alive in the novel only through his writing, indicates the importance of language in the lives of the tide people: 'the mudbanks of the tide country are shaped not only by rivers of silt, but also by rivers of language: Bengali, English, Arabic, Hindi, Arakanese and who knows what else?' (247).

Monolingualism and Multilingualism in *The Hungry Tide*

Amitav Ghosh seems to be concerned about 'communication between humans' in *The Hungry Tide*. Ghosh juxtaposes both language and silence to evaluate human communication in this novel. Amitav Ghosh creates Piyali and Fokir, two of his three central characters of *The Hungry Tide* monolingual and Kanai, the third of them, as multilingual. Kanai is an interpreter by profession who knows six languages, apart from the dialects: "...how many languages do you know?" "Six. Not including dialects" (11). As she has refused to learn Bengali which is her parents' language in her childhood, Piyali's language is only English. And she is not even 'much good at it either'. Fokir is communicable only in the local dialect of the tide country. He is endowed with a powerful and enchanting voice to sing the legendary song of Bon Bibi, but in regular social conversation he remains silent in most of his presence in the novel. As if he is a character out of the world and not that much interested to be a part of the regular mundane world. With their different linguistic abilities, these three characters are created by the author to explore the power and limitations of language regarding human communication.

Monolingual Piyali does not face any problem with her linguistic limitation though she travels in different countries. While in her childhood she was not interested to learn Bengali and compelled her parents to translate their messages in English in order to be carried out by her, now after so many years Piyali regrets for not learning Bengali: 'My mother used to say that a day would come when I'd regret not knowing the language. And I guess she was right' (249).

In spite of Piyali's regret about her monolingualism, Ghosh shows that communication does not always really depend on the knowledge of language. Piyali could utter only two words on the boat, 'Lusibari' and 'Mashima'; yet, they were enough to communicate with Fokir and serve her purpose.

Ghosh's aim remains the same, communication through language and silence, when Kanai goes to Fokir with Piyali's offer. Apparently dumb, Fokir is never any match for Kanai who loves and lives on languages. Yet, Ghosh has shown that silence can be as much powerful as language.

She (Piyali) hadn't understood what had passed between the two men, but there was no mistaking the condescension in Kanai's voice as he was speaking to Fokir: it was the kind of tongue in which someone might address a dimwitted waiter, at once jocular and hectoring. It didn't surprise her that Fokir had responded with what was clearly his instinctive mode of defense: silence. (210)

At the same time Ghosh surprises us by showing that the knowledge of language or multilingualism is not always enough to understand the situation or to have a proper communication. Multilingual Kanai, who thinks that the knowledge of languages gives him all the power of communication, cannot accept it when Moyna says that he would not understand her reason of marrying Fokir: 'She smiled, as if to herself. "You wouldn't understand," she said. He was nettled by the certainty in her voice. "I wouldn't understand?" he said sharply. "I know five languages; I've travelled all over the world. Why wouldn't I understand?" [...] "It doesn't matter how many languages you know," she said' (156).

In spite of his knowledge of six languages, Kanai is unable to speak the language of heart with any other characters till the later part of the novel. Whereas, apparently unable to communicate in between them, Piyali and Fokir have their clear understanding of each other.

Ghosh goes on further in his endeavor as he points out how language can sometimes become mechanical and meaningless when we do not tell the truth in this modern world. We do not express what we really feel. At the beginning of the novel Kanai politely lies to Nilima that he could have found his way to Lusibari.

'You shouldn't have taken the trouble to come to station,' said Kanai. 'I could have found my way to Lusibari.' This was a polite lie for Kanai would have been at a loss to know how to proceed to Lusibari on his own. What was more, he would have been extremely annoyed if he had been left to fend for himself in Canning. (22)

Ghosh draws our attention to the powerlessness of language to do any real communication here. Thus, Amitav Ghosh uses both language and silence of his monolingual and multilingual characters to show that meaningful human connection does not always depend on the ability to utter words from the standard language.

Language in Context

Transformation of language takes place, in many cases, to meet the need of the context. Amitav Ghosh delineates situations that show how language can be translated to different meanings in different situations. Also human interests about language are changed at times. It is 'because words are just air' (258). Piyali is startled when the boatman interprets her flashcard of the Gangetic dolphin as a bird. Another time, to relate her position with that on the positioning monitor screen, Piyali draws stick figures on a paper. This time, Fokir's costume comes as an obstacle to the interpretation of the message. 'In the past, she had always used a triangular skirt to distinguish her stick women from her men – but this didn't quite make sense in a situation where the man was in a lungi and the woman in pants' (139). Piyali once tried to resist Bengali language that 'was an angry flood trying to break down her door. She would crawl into a wardrobe and lock herself in, stuffing her ears to shut out those sounds' (93). That same Piyali is found to try hard to recall 'gamchha', the Bengali name for a towel.

Ghosh has shown the inconsistency of the meaning of words as well. Meanings can change depending on the con-

text and the users. Moyna wants to use Kanai's linguistic skill to safeguard her marital relationship and asks him to change the meanings of language if needed: '...whatever they say to each other will go through your ears and your lips. But for you neither of them will know what is in the mind of the other. Their words will be in your hands and you can make them mean what you will' (257).

Amitav Ghosh also uses code-switching to match the depth of different situations. Kanai used the lower form of address in Bengali, 'tui', with Fokir to establish his (Kanai's) superior social status. And Fokir switches from the higher address, 'apni', to 'tui' with Kanai when their meeting is in a changed context: 'Kanai noticed [...] that Fokir was using a different form of address with him now. From the respectful apni that he had been using before, he had now switched to the same familiar tui Kanai had used in addressing him: it was as though in stepping on the island, the authority of their positions had been suddenly reversed' (325).

Language and Translation

Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ states – 'Language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture' (13). The translingual writers translate their culture with a different language for a different non-native audience. The difficulty of their work becomes immense when words become inadequate to express the emotion properly. When Fokir sings on the boat, Piyali can make him understand to sing louder. She can also sense a trace of grief in his tune. But, she knows immediately that she would never be able to get the full meaning of this music – 'She would have liked to know what he was singing about and what the lyrics meant – but she knew too that a river of words would not be able to tell her exactly what made the song sound as it did right then, in that place' (99).

Following Achebe, Amitav Ghosh also wants to let us know that English would be able to translate most of the colonised culture but not the whole of it. It can only do the job once it is transformed to grab the full of it. Boastful Kanai is helplessly out of language to express his thoughts when he faces life in its reality in Garjontola – 'He could not recall the word, not even the euphemisms Fokir had used: it was as if his mind, in its panic, had emptied itself of language. The sounds and signs that had served, in combination, as the sluices between his mind and his senses, had collapsed' (329).

Like Piyali, Kanai could also understand that in spite of all his knowledge of languages, he is unable of translating the emotion and feelings of the song of Fokir. It is possible for him to translate the lyric of the song, yet it is out of his league to grab the essence of the story that has become a part of Fokir himself.

Transformation of English Language in *The Hungry Tide*

What Amitav Ghosh does in *The Hungry Tide* is the ground work of his linguistic experimentations in the upcoming novels. In this novel he shows different aspects of translingual-

ism. He shows how writing in a different language can be possible but, because of metonymic gaps, translating the full essence of a culture is not always possible. And to grab the full essence of a different culture, language must transform itself from the standard form. To this end Amitav Ghosh transforms the standard form of English in this text to some limited extent. He uses many native words and expressions in the text. He substitutes the English words with the native words sometimes without any translation or interpretation. Bindi, cha'ala, achol, mohona, chai, bokachoda, puja, gamchha, daa, jhi, faqir, nomoshkar, tej, jhola, nouko, danob, matal, tufaan are some of the words used without any translation or interpretation in the text. Ghosh wants his readers to have their meanings understood from the situations and thus engages them with active reading.

Amitav Ghosh's use of untranslated native expressions reminds the reader of the metonymic gaps between the two cultures. They are the vehicles used by Ghosh to present the indigenous culture to the international forum. 'Are moshai', 'are mashima', 'are Kanai' – all these expressions would, probably, make the reader come to know of the common expression of addressing to a listener in Bengali -- 'are', to show intimacy. While 'tai naki?' (is it so?) or 'eki re?' (what is it?!)' are simple interrogatory terms during conversation, 'Kanai re', 'bal to re', 'ha re' are Bengali expressions to articulate genuine affection for the listener. All these are the most intimate expressions of spoken Bengali that only a native speaker would know to use appropriately.

Finally, Ghosh's selection of the menu and use of the native terms for the food would make the non-native reader know about some tide country cuisine. Ghosh says about 'koimachh', 'chhechki machh', and 'tangra machh' on different occasions. These are different types of common, yet popular fishes ('machh' is the Bengali word for 'fish'). The food Moyna prepares for Kanai is a simple yet classic menu that leaves him 'giddily replete'. 'The meal was simple: plain rice, *musuri'r dal*, a quick-cooked *chorchori* of potatoes, fish-bones and a kind of green leaf he could not identify. Finally, there was a watery *jhol* of a tiny but toothsome fish called *murola*' (143).

Most of these foods, mentioned in *The Hungry Tide*, are daily consumed normal items and basically fish curries, commonly available in coastal areas. Any Bengali would long to have these familiar and mouthwatering traditional foods as these items are not that much available in restaurants. Thus, Ghosh makes his non-native readers to come across the most intimate Bengali cuisine.

CONCLUSION: GHOSH'S *IBIS CHRESTOMATHY*

'Words! Neel was of the view that words, no less than people, are endowed with lives and destinies of their own. Why then were there no astrologers to calculate their kismet and pronounce upon their fate?'

These first two lines of the *Ibis Chrestomathy*, from Amitav Ghosh's webpage are not only Neel's view point about words, they tell us Ghosh's own consideration of words as living beings. In *The Ibis Chrestomathy* Ghosh gives us the list of almost three hundred and fifty Indian words, recorded

by Neel, his predecessor. Neel, in the late nineteenth century, worked with his favourite native words; tried to find out their origins and pathway to be included in the Indian languages; and above all, he predicted about their entry in the standard English lexicon.

As the European colonisers were in Indian subcontinent for more than four hundred years, with two hundred years of active British governing, many native words were amalgamated with English, the imperial language. In the course of time, these Indian words permanently got their entry in English language. *The Ibis Chrestomathy*, at the end of the nineteenth century, lists the Indian words that were being used at that time in English language. It did not know for sure which of these words would actually be accepted in English. After two hundred years we, the present day people, know that many of those words are finally acknowledged as part of English glossary.

The Hungry Tide is a novel of the last decade and therefore, comparatively easier in its linguistic adventures. Still, the novelist keeps in mind the location, setting and the social backgrounds of his characters while choosing languages for them. Boris Kachka writes about these linguistic experiments of Ghosh in *New York Guides* that –

There's a glossary of sorts, and Ghosh makes no apologies for his pidgin-riddled sentences. "When Melville says 'the mizzenmast,' who today knows what that is? The idea that language is a warm bath into which you slip in a comfortable way, to me it's a very deceptive idea."

Using multiple linguistic devices in different ranges, Ghosh does two things in *The Hungry Tide*. They are – i) he uses many native words that may be recognised within the English glossary in future. And, ii) Amitav Ghosh takes Indian culture to his non-native readers. By using words for Indian cuisine or daily lives Amitav Ghosh is representing Indian culture in its real form. The foreign readers would probably feel like knowing this rich culture with a first-hand experience once they have read this novel.

Ghosh's optimism about the untranslated native Indian words can be traced from a mild example of a particular word – 'gamchha'. In *The Hungry Tide*, Piyali recalls this Bengali word, meaning towel, with the help of Fokir. She immediately remembers how her cosmopolitan father preserved his 'gamchha' as the only symbol from the previous Indian life. Even when it was worn out, he did not allow Piyali to through it away. With this elaborate explanation of what it is and how it can become the symbol of an Indian daily life, Ghosh transports this word to his next novel *Sea of Poppies*. But, this time he does it without any explanation, interpretation, or translation. 'Dressed as he was, in a torn lungi and banyan, with a faded gamchha tied around his head, Jodu knew that his chances of penetrating these defences were very small;' (101). This is done in a way as if Ghosh considers 'gamchha' to have been accepted in the English lexicon already.

Ghosh's linguistic experimentation can be supported from Okara's viewpoint about the transformation of English language by the non-native writers. Gabriel Okara in his essay 'African Speech ... English Words' says:

Living languages grow like living things, and English is far from a dead language. There are American, West Indian, Australian, Canadian and New Zealand versions of English. All of them add life and vigor to the language while reflecting their own respective cultures. (Kellman, 187)

At this present age of globalization, English language is used in the farthest corners of the world. Amitav Ghosh does his best to represent the Indian share in the process of this globalization. Considering 'words' as living migrants, Ghosh tries to map their route from the Eastern world to the Western shores of English language.

Finally, this essay finds that translingual writers justify the transformation of English language from the point that in this way they can represent their custom and culture properly to the world. Thus, these transformed languages basically work as means of communication among different cultures and bring all human kind on a single platform.

END NOTE

1. My own translation (My mother tongue is Bengali).

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