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**The politics of language in the postcolonial writing unique to the works of Kamila Shamsie, *Burnt Shadows*, and Chinua Achebe, *The Things Fall Apart* to use English as a source of power and as a means of creativity.**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This paper will discuss the role of language as a power resource and a creative resource of postcolonial fiction in relation to *Burnt Shadows* by Kamila Shamsie (2009) and *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe (1958). Colonial languages (in particular, English) are usually regarded as some means of oppression and spiritual subjugation in the postcolonial theory, but they can be utilized by postcolonial writers as a tool to find the voice of the locals and express hybrid identities. It was famous when Achebe (1965) said that a national Nigerian literature had to be written in English, the language he was familiar with during the colonial era. Achebe strategically uses Igbo language, proverbs, and speech rhythms into English prose to recapture the language used by colonizers to maintain the Igbo culture in *Things Fall Apart*. According to *CliffsNotes*, the use of Igbo language in an English novel that Achebe has managed is expanded by the author and this goes beyond the scope of what is regarded as an English fiction. On the same notes, *Burnt Shadows* by Shamsie is written in English although it incorporates Urdu poetry and other references to the East to create a deliberate hybridity. The characters of the novel express their love of languages and live in an environment that is saturated with Urdu poetry, which is an indication of the blending of the Eastern and the Western culture. With reference to the postcolonial theory, the paper argues that both writers use the English globalization to criticize the legacies of imperialism and to project subaltern voices. The theoretical framework is a synthesis of the knowledge that Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o had created about the cultural power of language and the idea of writing back to empire. The study uses an elaborate comparative analysis to reveal how *Things Fall Apart* and *Burnt Shadows* reveal the ambivalence of English: it is a language of colonial authority and an expressive tool through which the postcolonial subjects are able to express identity, reject marginalization, as well as negotiate cultural hybridity. The major conclusions indicate that English is employed by Achebe to ensure that Igbo is legible in the world, and by Shamsie, to bridge the diasporic identities of the world by incorporating the local components to challenge the inequalities inherent in colonial language hierarchies. The analysis will help in the appreciation of how the tongue of the colonizer can be altered by the postcolonial authors as a way of literary invention and critique of politics.*

**Keywords:** Politics of language, Postcolonial, Writing Unique, Kamila Shamsie, *Burnt Shadows*, Chinua Achebe, Creativity.

**Introduction**

In colonial and postcolonial societies, language has always been at the center of power construction and struggle. The colonial masters imposed their languages (mostly the English language) as a tool of administration, education, and culture. English was imposed in the Indian subcontinent and in Africa as a way of creating colonization following the 1857 and is still an

official language long before political independence. In Pakistan and India, as an example, English remained a de facto or official language of government and education. Postcolonial theorists point out that language is the most widespread condition of colonialism since language carries culture, and culture carries, as such, the whole of values through which we come to know ourselves and our location in the world. In that regard, the language that is used by the colonizer, turns out to be a ground of ideological conflict: not only it may displace the native culture and introduce alien worldviews, but also be subverted or re-purposed by local writers. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o did notoriously say that in case it was through bullets that the colonialists literally suppressed people, languages were the tools of spiritual oppression of colonized people. In its turn, English has been accused of being an elitist instrument, which perpetuated European domination and class privilege in Asia and Africa. According to linguist Braj B. Kachru, the English language is a means of power, domination and elitist identity. The following are some of the critical views: Is it worthwhile that postcolonial authors should deny the use of English to resurrect the native languages, or should they adopt English to achieve wider audiences? What does literature such as *Things Fall Apart* by Achebe and *Burnt Shadows* by Shamsie, both in the English language, do with this contradiction between English as a legacy of colonialism and English as a language of literature?

This is the question that this paper examines through the works of Achebe and Shamsie using the postcolonial theory. Achebe, authoring the book in 1950s before the independence of Nigeria was at hand, was specifically attacked because he was not writing Igbo but English. He replied by separating national literature, which he called national literature, and ethnic literature, which he termed as ethnic literature: in Nigeria, he said, English was a national language that included the entire country but that Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba etc. were ethnic languages. Therefore, Achebe has intentionally adopted English in order to make a Nigerian national literature that is available to both sides of the tribe. Shamsie is a Pakistani-British writer who wrote her novel, *Burnt Shadows* (2009), in the beginning of the 21st century and covers both Asia and the West. She interacts with English in another postcolonial setting (Pakistan had inherited English, and British culture spread in the diaspora communities). Both novels inculcate the inheritance of empire and cultural hybridity, though through the English that is employed in imaginative and world-making. This paper seeks to demonstrate how Achebe and Shamsie use the language of the colonizer to their own advantage, English as a carrier to manifest the subaltern experience and at the same time display its nature of power relations.

Relevant literature and theoretical tools are described in the following. To begin with, a Literature Review summarizes the available scholarly knowledge about language politics within the postcolonial literature with special focus on the English language in African and South Asian settings. Then, Theoretical Framework locates this analysis in the context of postcolonial discourse theory: it is based on such notions as writing back to empire, hybridity, and linguistic subversion. The analysis will all through point to the illustration of how *Things Fall Apart* and *Burnt Shadows* illustrate the dual nature of English as both hegemony tool and creative opposition.

## **Literature Review**

### **Theoretical Framework**

Postcolonial theory is the backbone of the analysis in this paper as it provides important concepts on the study of language politics. Among the key concepts, it is possible to distinguish the concept of colonial discourse: the collection of constructions and images that legitimized and perpetuated the colonial rule (cf. Said 1978). Discourse is inherently language; as Fanon

said, the colonized people often were tempted to find confirmation by learning the language of their master (writing in it and thinking in it) despite becoming estranged of their own tongues. This is summarized by Ngugi wa Thiong when he writes that post-colonial language was the tool of spiritual conquest. In this way, historic inequalities and elitist identity are embedded in English in the countries of the former colonies. The other framework is the concept of writing back or subversion: the use of language of the colonizer by the colonized writers to resist power. The authors of postcolonial literature invented new linguistic vehicles in the English language, which is outlined by Ashcroft et al. (1989); the theory states that the authors of postcolonial literature transformed the means of empire into a weapon of resistance. As defined on the Post-Colonial Web, subversion consists of appropriating English to impose something on the West as well as relying on native expressions to command the power of naming, in other words, to name the world is to know it, and have power over it. Here is where Homi Bhabha come in with his idea of hybridity: in the so-called Third Space of the collision of two cultures, colonizer and colonized, hybrid identities and language forms are created. According to Bhabha, the colonial power does not generate pure domination; it creates a kind of ambivalent, mimicry-colored interaction; it creates ambivalence that leaves space to cultural difference and resistance in the language of the colonizer (Bhabha 1994). Though the original terminologies of Bhabha are not directly stated in this text, his concepts outline how such authors as Shamsie and Achebe can live in an in-between world, creating the narratives that would not be purely western or purely traditional, but actively syncretic. Another distinction of the postcolonial critics is that of national and ethnic languages (as Achebe did). The paradigm in this case perceives English as the remnant of imperial policy and a disputed national medium. When writing English, we write as a gesture of freedom (acquiring a global stage) or as an accomplice (reification of colonial institutions). The idea of the subaltern Spivak puts forward and whether the colonized can really speak the language of the colonizer applies: we will wonder whether the voices that Achebe and Shamsie breathe life into are genuinely local or are mediated through English. The two extremes of rejection and appropriation (as suggested in the early writings by Ngugaki and in the works by Achebe) are a subset of the argument.

Lastly, theories of narrative and power imply that literature is a way of making realities. The histories of interrelation in *Burnt Shadows* and the cultural presentation in *Things Fall Apart* will be interpreted as intrusions into history. Having placed narratives in English, both novels welcome the readers all over the world (and most frequently the West) and yet incorporate an element of non-Western speech into the texts, thereby engaging in the process of voice negotiation. Overall, the theoretical construct that will be used in this analysis is a combination of (a) postcolonial themes of English as hegemonic language, (b) the notion of linguistic hybridity and subversion and (c) the perspective regarding literature as an instrument of identity and resistance formation. This lens will help us read closely the use of language in the two novels, to see the power relations and creative transformations that play out.

#### **English as Power and Creativity: The language politics in *Burnt Shadows* and *Things Fall Apart*.**

The postcolonial language controversy studies the way in which former colonies are coping with English as not only a tool of colonialism but also a means of self-expression. The theory of cultural hybridity and the so-called third space introduced by Homi K. Bhabha can be used as the useful lens. Bhabha underlines that colonial languages are not only the centers of power but are also reshaped and redefined by people who they colonize (resistance). Within such third space of cultural negotiation, the colonized can own English and to change its meaning at

its core. Unless they are controlled by the colonial writers, as Salman Rushdie notes, when colonized writers inject English with local constituents, the English language was no longer the sole possession of English people. That is, hybridity is producing a new internationalized English that has postcolonial voices. The present analysis uses Kamila Shamsie and Chinua Achebe as examples of authors who shed light on these politics of language in their novels, *Burnt Shadows* (2009) and *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Both writers are English-speaking - Shamsie is a representation of an English-speaking, globalized, multi-lingual world, and Achebe a representation of the African oral culture translated into English - thus illustrating Bhabha's concept of English being both a means of control and a means of creativity.

### **Theoretical Framework of Bhabha.**

According to Bhabha, the discourse of colonialism is not unidirectional: it comes up with the ambivalence and uncertainty. English as the tongue of the colonizer is not rigid, it is hybridized when transformed by the writers of colonized countries. The colonized people mix English and indigenous languages and meanings in the Third Space or split space of enunciation. Indicatively, Rushdie explains that the Indian authors confuse Hindi-Urdu and English to form an alternative idiom that disrupts the colonial rule. Most importantly, Bhabha asserts that linguistic hybridity transcends mere fusion of language because it transforms the meaning at its very core. Postcolonial authors are not just translating native words into English; therefore, they even give English local tones, sayings, notions. This process appropriates the English language, and it is no longer a means of colonization, but their means of expressing their culture and speaking their language. Bhabha exacerbates that when the colonized subjects are creative to remodel English, they do not only challenge the power of the English language but also generate a common language of the world. In fact, he sees a global language because of cultural fusion. Overall, this hybrid Third Space, where English will be negotiated to establish identity, oppose the values of colonialism, and create new connotations is the predictive of the theory of Bhabha to the works of Shamsie and Achebe.

### **Burnt Shadows: England, Urdu and Hybridity.**

In *Burnt Shadows* Shamsie depicts characters who cross the boundaries of Japanese, South Asian, and western cultures and language is the main part of their identities. It begins in the year 1945 in Nagasaki (Japan) where we meet Hiroko (Japanese), Sajjad (Indian Muslim) and their son Raza (Pakistani-American). Since they are colonized and diasporic subjects, they always code-switch and compare languages. Of more importance, the novel brings out the colonial relationship of English to Urdu. In a confrontation between Sajjad (educated Indian) and James Burton (British colonial), James dismisses him as follows: "Do you believe that an Englishman would ever compose a masterpiece in Urdu? The arrogance of James can be seen as the mentality of the Raj that the English literary culture is the best, and the outsiders (Englishmen) would never trespass into the literary world of the subcontinent. Sajjad instantly plays with this colonial assumption: he says that he would read an Urdu Masterpiece by an Englishman (even though James does not believe it would be so), thus parodying the colonizer's logic to reveal the truth behind it. This dialogue reflects the ideas of Bhabha of mimicry: Sajjad mimically is interacting with the claims of the English people of being superior and in the process, he brings into light the absurdity of their claims. He inhabits an in-between world of English and Urdu crushing colonial language.

Language is also used by Shamsie to bring out cultural values. Sajjad realizes that the English and Urdu people deal with grief in completely different ways when Hiroko laments the death of her lover. He tells how it really means in English to be alone with the grief of a person but there is no Urdu counterpart. Rather, Urdu has the concept of "ghum-khaur literally grief-eaters) -

those who come around a mourner and partake in his/her grief. Sajjad inquires of Hiroko, would you wish me to be in English or in Urdu here now, giving her two cultural ways of dealing with consolation. This scene depicts the differences between English and Urdu in the sense that, in the former, grief is individualized whereas in the latter, there is the emphasis on communal empathy. In bringing this out, Shamsie works in the third space of Bhabha: she is not merely criticizing the English, but she uses the idioms of the two languages to form a more complex and intercultural insight. In this case, English is not something that is denied, rather, Shamsie infuses English narrative with Urdu concepts. According to Bhabha, such linguistic blend distorts meaning in its core the reader can observe English Phrases and Urdu culture. Shamsie opts to show hybridity, through the bilingual comfort of Sajjad, the English language narrative has been filled with Urdu empathy.

The politics of English as power is also further highlighted by the attitude of Sajjad towards the British. Having been marginalized by his employer James, Sajjad cynically finds that English men can never be heartfelt with Indians through the realization that they will never desire Indians to advance. Such an expression (quoted in secondary analysis) shows his disappointment: in the eyes of Sajjad, the colonial English have been misusing authority and denying equality. Sajjad does not only conform but also defies the colonial discourse, as described by Bhabha, his despair reflects the ambivalence of colonial relations. However, Shamsie does not give up the English language. Indeed, even the novel itself is written in English that also carries the cross-cultural narratives across continents. Shamsie develops a new language that is a mixture of English and Urdu words (as in *ghum-khaur*) and it resembles the concept of appropriation of Bhabha. She shows how postcolonial authors appropriate English. English is as flexible and receptive as human identity and applies it to give voice to the subalterns. English is repurposed in *Burnt Shadows*: it is used to say Asian histories and personal conversations that cannot be expressed in colonial English only. In such a way, the work by Shamsie demonstrates that English is simultaneously a heritage of a colonial force (the British Raj and its prejudices) and a language in which her characters can say good and bad things, love and loss, mix cultures.

#### **Things Fall Apart: Igbo Wisdom English.**

The *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe is a famous book that appropriates the English language to describe the life of Igbo before and during the colonial encroachment. Achebe was of the view that English could also be used to convey an African message to the world unlike some of his contemporary writers who were writing in the native languages. As he put it himself (through CliffsNotes), Achebe wanted a new voice that would come out of Africa and address the African experience in a global language. He particularly encouraged African writers to employ English in a manner that will be able to bring out their message in the best way possible without distorting the same to the point of recognition. This is practical because Achebe accomplishes it by incorporating Igbo language and ideas into his writing in English. According to CliffsNotes, Achebe achieves his goal when he creatively presents Igbo language, proverbs, metaphors, speech rhythms, and ideas to a novel that is written in English. That is, Achebe intertwines English with the elements of the Igbo language to eliminate the gap between cultures.

The best example is how he uses Igbo proverbs to make the English story colorful. The novel begins with; "Among the Igbo the art of conversation is held in high regard, and proverbs are the palm-oil by which words are fed. This is an English-spoken line, and even a translated Igbo proverb, which recalls the richness of the oral tradition. Through these kinds of proverbs (and even without translating some of the main Igbo words), Achebe makes sure that the readers are brought away with an authentic African voice. CliffsNotes describes how a good number of

the Igbo words (e.g. chi, ogbanje, obi) have no translations: the reader simply guesses what they mean. Achebe has thus an Igbo-textured English. This is the hybridity of Bhabha on the page: not by replacing but making alive with native language colonial English. *Things Fall Apart* is a play that makes the English language no longer monolithic; it is an African philosophy container. Achebe therefore shows how English can transform itself out of its colonialism roots into a universal storytelling tool.

Language is another aspect on which Achebe highlights the balance of power. In the *Things Fall Apart*, the colonizers tend to criticize the Igbo practices, yet they do not even know Igbo. To give an example, Christian people insult the Igbo beliefs by calling them bad, and the clansmen respond furiously, saying, how can [you] say our customs are bad, how can you do things in your own little way? (Chapter 23). On the same note, CliffsNotes points out that the Igbo questions how the white man can refer to Igbo customs as bad when he does not even speak the Igbo language. This sentence emphasizes the arrogance of the colonialists: English administrators evaluate the Igbo life without knowing their language or vision of the world. The attempt to define the Other without necessarily understanding it in detail is the tenuous nature of the colonial discourse here in the terms of Bhabha. The novel, therefore, implicitly criticizes English as the tool of imperial judgment by Achebe. But Achebe is not opposed to English, he does not allow it to take over meaning. He incorporates Igbo terms and proverbs in his story, forcing even the European audience to interact with the Igbo ideas.

During *Things Fall Apart*, the English language switches between a means of colonial domination and a source of Igbo imagination. Missionaries and officials tend to speak English (or a diluted Pidgin English) to impose authority. However, the use of it by Achebe is subverted. Through writing, such as the fact that Okonkwo's daughter Ezinma did not understand why it was her father's chi who mattered, one gets to know Igbo spirituality on Igbo terms, not on the Western ones. This kind of imitation is related to Bhabha as well: Achebe imitates the colonial novel structure but puts his culture in it, thereby making it go beyond itself and profane itself (in Bhabha words). Effectually, Achebe does what Bhabha envisions in his conception of postcolonial literature to write back to the empire: the English text is filled with the souls of Igbo. Even the Western idiom in the title *Things Fall Apart* (to Yeats) has been re-used to refer to the failure of the colonial and indigenous worlds. The last irony used in the novel is the inability of the colonial narration as the District Commissioner intends to tell the life of Okonkwo in the section of his book only a paragraph. Instead of allowing his narrative to be turned into a trivial thing, Okonkwo kills himself, which is indicative that no one can document Igbo life in a normal prose of the English language. Achebe therefore demonstrates that linguistic hybridity is the only way of real understanding.

#### **Discipline and Dissent: Comparative Hybridity.**

Shamsie and Achebe show the important aspect of Bhabha, who writes in English, and is in an intermediate world, which weakens the authority of colonial language. In both novels, the language of the conqueror is English, and English relates to violence and oppression at the beginning of each novel. However, in the text, the English language turns into a creative location. Shamsie has Sajjad and Hiroko, who reassure each other in Urdu, English and Japanese; Achebe has characters, who speak Igbo proverbs in an English story. The authors in both instances employ English as a culture of expression and dialogue, as opposed to subjection. This procedure is indicative of the notion of an international culture that has emerged as a result of the expression of the hybridity of culture as described by Bhabha. The characters succeed in creating a hybrid idiom upon communicating in more than one language or displaying Igbo proverbs in English.

Besides, both novels address the politics of colonial literacy. In *Burnt Shadows* the plans of Sajjad (to study law, to possess Urdu literature) get frustrated because of the Englishmen that he serves. The rationalizations that James Burton makes are reminiscent of colonial contempt. But privately Sajjad breaks this by reading Urdu novels and also by questioning the English norms. In *Things Fall Apart*, the foreign literacy enforced by the colonists on the Igbo is more untrustworthy, whereas Achebe literary narrative is more realistic. According to CliffsNotes, Achebe has reengineered himself to use the Igbo selectively, which goes beyond the scope of English fiction. Both authors therefore play a role of Bhabha, linguistic resistance: they demonstrate that the English language can be re-tooled indeed, bent and moulded by the previous colonials to serve their purposes. The outcome is a Third Space in which no language is pure, either English, or the indigenous languages; rather, meaning is constructed out of the tension and overlap between them.

Finally, it is possible to conclude that English in the postcolonial hands is two-sided as seen in *Burnt Shadows* and *Things Fall Apart*. It used to be the symbol of colonialism, but these novels turn out English to be a tool of postcolonial innovation. Shamsie and Achebe do not discard English, they recycle it. They are the embodiment of the vision of hybridity by Bhabha by intertwining Urdu, Japanese, and Igbo stories into English plots. They demonstrate that language politics is a kind of a fight over the power (the privileges of the Englishmen, the repriminations of the missionaries), as well as the undermining of this power (the empathy of the multilinguals, the English proverbs of the indigenous people). The English in these texts turns into an adventurous global language, which bears the previously suppressed voices on its shoulders. In line with the theory of Bhabha the novels declare that in the postcolonial third space, there are emergent cultural identities as English is repurposed. Instead of continuing to be the monopoly of the colonizer, English becomes an active medium of world literature, one in which the characters of Shamsie and Achebe can speak themselves in their own voices, in the language of the former colonizer. Such creative misuse of the English undermines its ancient political hegemony and brings to life the concept of hybrid, common language of desire that is the Bhabha concept of postcolonial writing.

**Conclusion:**

In the prism of the postcolonial theory offered by Homi Bhabha, both *Burnt Shadows* by Kamila Shamsie and *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe help to determine the dual character of English as a colonial language and a location of imaginative re-invention. In the historical story, *Burnt Shadows*, set in Japan, India/Pakistan and in the contemporary West, the English language is first used as the language of conquerors and bureaucrats. James, the employer of Sajjad, is a representative of colonialist attitude as he sneers, do you think an Englishman will ever write a masterpiece in Urdu? This question points out the language hierarchy of the British Raj: where English is superior and Urdu is not accessible to Englishmen. His answer to this by Sajjad, who claims that he would read an Urdu masterpiece had it been written, is an example of mimicry and ambivalence as introduced by Bhabha. According to Bhabha, Sajjad only mimics the logic of the colonizer to subvert it. Moreover, Shamsie employs words to explain cultural intimacy. The fact that English has a phrase to leave someone alone to grieve, but Urdu does not have a phrase, only *gum-khaur* (community mourning) proves that the language reflects cultural values. With the question about what Hiroko wants to condole her better in English or Urdu, Sajjad creates a hybrid personal space: he is recognizing the strength of English expression, but at the same time, he is giving credence to the richness of the cultural expressiveness of Urdu. This scene is Bhabha doing his Third Space of not being pure English or pure Urdu but a space where they meet and create new meaning. Throughout *Burnt Shadows*,

English has been demonstrated as a political wall and a source of communication. Shamsie uses pure English, but puts Urdu and cultural allusions into her prose, making colonial English a story-telling language of the world.

The work of Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is no exception because it equally regards English as the overlord and an ally. The novel by Achebe is written on the eve of the Nigerian independence and it immerses the English language with the Igbo oral tradition. As part of this project, Achebe (quoted by CliffsNotes) in 1966 wrote an essay that said: The African experience needed an English that would speak of African experience in a language of the world. He did this by sprinkling his English story with Igbo words, proverbs and rhythms. This strategy is indicated by the well-known saying proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten (also a proverb translated into English). The English used by Achebe does not kill off the Igbo; it spreads. Even in cases where the Igbo practices are disapproved by colonialists in the novel (e.g. Achebe has already inserted Igbo ideas in his text by saying How can you call our customs bad when you do not even know our language? This compromises the colonial authority by language resistance. To Bhabha, the story written by Achebe is a representation of hybridity: the prose in the standard English language is filtered with the local content. The line between the language and voice of the colonizer and colonized is unclear.

English is another power tool that is also demonstrated in both novels. The English language is used by British characters to exercise dominance (teaching, law, prayer) and tends to demean local languages. According to *Things Fall Apart*, missionaries pronounce Igbo gods as devils but fail to explain Igbo thoughts in English. Western characters in *Burnt Shadows* help (the promises by Harry to the son of Sajjad) without really meaning it, which implies that English provides privilege to certain people (Harry can take Raza to America) and denies it to other people (the stagnated career of Sajjad). However, the native speakers in both stories oppose these power games with language. They do not mere absorb English, they reform it and put their worldview into it. It is done in a rather delicate way: both the authors compel English to bear the burden of foreign culture, by writing dialogues containing any references to foreign words or ideas.

This is what in the terminology of Bhabha becomes a new third space or hybrid identity. The characters in Shamsie and Achebe are transnational, and villagers respectively are in between the colonial and native realms. This in-betweenness can be seen in their use of language. When there is a need, they use English; however, thoughts and values are boundary spanning. Notably, English as such turns into disputed land. Instead of the undisputed tool of empire, it is something they reinvent. This change puts into practice what a postcolonial critic observed; postcolonial writers turn English into a worldwide language. Finally, English in *Burnt Shadows* and *Things Fall Apart* is depicted not as a monolithic entity but as a living entity that can be used to tell the narratives of the once colonized. Through adopting hybridity, Shamsie and Achebe are able to achieve the hope that Bhabha harbors about an international culture, which is formed when polarities of colonialism are unified. The English they use is the reminder of the power of the past, an instrument of the meaning of the new one, a ship of the creativity that enables their characters to share their own histories with the whole world.

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Theory and Essays on Postcolonial Literature Theoretical Foundations of Language.

This discussion explains how Achebe deconstructs the colonial discourse and adopts both the English and the indigenous linguistic material to weaken the imperial hegemony.

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