
The Resistance Against the Colonial Baggage: How Post-independence Indian English Poets and Novelists Navigated the Post-colonial Dilemmas

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Abstract

In the decades following Indian independence, the nation's authors and poets faced an existential challenge: to recover, reconstruct, and reimagine a cultural identity long overshadowed by colonial impositions. This article explores the literary resistance mounted by post-independence Indian English poets and novelists against the residues of colonialism. While the British Raj may have formally ended in 1947, its cultural, linguistic, and epistemological shadows lingered, prompting a generation of writers to grapple with inherited complexities. By examining the works of R. Parthasarathy, A. K. Ramanujan, and Jayanta Mahapatra, the paper highlights how Indian English poets internalised, resisted, and reformulated notions of identity, language, and belonging. Their efforts are further contextualised alongside novelists such as Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, and Kiran Desai, who also interrogate postcolonial anxieties through fiction. Drawing from key theoretical insights and poetic expressions, this study positions Indian English literature as an evolving discourse of reclamation, wherein linguistic hybridity, spiritual inheritance, and historical consciousness converge to forge a distinct postcolonial voice.

Keywords: Postcolonial Identity, Indian English Literature, Cultural Resistance, Linguistic Hybridity, Historical Consciousness

Introduction

After the unifying aspect that brought Indians together in the fight for independence against the British collapsed in 1947 with India becoming an independent country, Indians were left with their individual challenges to grapple with in the post-colonial era. Already destroyed

by continuous invasions and destruction brought with them, the Indian way of living was at a crossroads. The English language, culture, lifestyle, education, literature, and even Christianity as a religion were already influencing the Indian psyche before independence. Post-independence, these psychological and emotional challenges intensified further as the celebratory dust from the euphoric independence march eventually settled. Along with the challenges faced by countrymen, politicians, bureaucrats, and others, there was a continuous intellectual wrestling in the minds of authors and poets as well. These authors and poets, from the years following independence to the present, have displayed their resilience against the colonial legacies and burden associated with the same. Poets like R. Parthasarathy, A. K. Ramanujan, and Jayanta Mahapatra appear to be the most vociferous protestors against the colonial baggage, along with the novelists like Kiran Desai, Arundhati Roy and Amitav Ghosh.

The post-independence Indian literary sphere witnessed a pronounced shift from the earlier nationalist romanticism to a deeper, more troubled exploration of identity, memory, and loss. The colonial experience had dislocated India not only politically but also epistemologically. It was not merely the overthrow of an external regime that was needed, but also the interrogation of colonial knowledge systems that continued to influence literature, language, and identity. This literature hence becomes an archive of resistance against epistemic violence, cultural alienation, and the sedimented layers of internalised coloniality. The urgency to write back to the Empire, to locate an authentic Indianness amid inherited structures, and to rediscover the native idiom is most visible in the poetry of R. Parthasarathy, A. K. Ramanujan, and Jayanta Mahapatra. Their creative impulses reflect a confluence of resistance and recovery, a determined attempt to redefine selfhood and cultural allegiance through language and imagination.

Indian English Poets: Negotiating Identity in a Post-colonial Landscape

The disintegration of a common colonial adversary after India's independence in 1947 ushered in a different, more introspective struggle for the newly emancipated citizenry. As India entered the post-colonial phase, the need to forge a coherent cultural and national identity became urgent. For Indian English poets writing in this era, the struggle was not only political or historical but also linguistic and psychological. They found themselves situated within a language once emblematic of their subjugation, now turned into a tool for self-expression, resistance, and re-appropriation. This intricate process of reclamation and resistance is evident in the poetic works of R. Parthasarathy, A. K. Ramanujan, Jayanta Mahapatra, and Kamala Das, all of whom present nuanced engagements with colonial legacy, linguistic alienation, and cultural resurgence.

R. Parthasarathy: The Return to Roots and the Lingual Disquiet

Among the most vocal critics of colonial cultural inheritance, R. Parthasarathy articulates in his verse the deeply personal anguish of being estranged from his linguistic and cultural origins. His seminal collection *Rough Passage* charts the trajectory of his return to India after an extended stay in England, where he grappled with an acute sense of cultural dislocation. His poetic voice often reflects a painful awareness of inhabiting a foreign linguistic body, as seen in the lines, “My tongue in English chains, / I return, after a generation, to you” (*Rough Passage* 49). The metaphor of the tongue in chains lays bare the internal conflict of using the coloniser’s language to express a native identity.

Parthasarathy’s dilemma is emblematic of a broader post-colonial literary consciousness that struggles to reconcile historical memory with inherited linguistic forms. His poetry implores Indian writers to excavate their cultural depths, rather than rely on Western templates:

“How long can foreign poets

Provide the staple of your lines?

Turn inward. Scrape the bottom of your past”

(*Rough Passage* 50).

The call for introspection and rootedness underscores a broader literary and ideological project that seeks to dismantle residual colonial hegemonies.

In a significant admission, Parthasarathy remarks in an interview cited by William Walsh, “In England, at last, history caught up with me: I found myself crushed under two hundred years of British rule in India. I began to have qualms about my own integrity as an Indian.”

This confession marks a turning point in his poetic evolution, a moment of existential crisis that catalysed his eventual embrace of a culturally situated identity.

A. K. Ramanujan: Poetic Syncretism and the Cultural Palimpsest

A. K. Ramanujan’s poetry reveals a subtler, yet equally potent form of post-colonial resistance. While he does not exhibit the same overt anxiety about English as Parthasarathy, Ramanujan’s oeuvre is imbued with an abiding concern for cultural preservation, familial memory, and the philosophical undercurrents of Hindu tradition. His verse often weaves together personal recollections with mythological and philosophical motifs drawn from the Indian civilisational ethos.

Ramanujan’s poetry, such as “Christmas,” reflects a consciousness deeply attuned to the spiritual and ecological fabric of India. He critiques Western compartmentalisation of nature and humanity, contrasting it with the Hindu worldview that sees all life as interconnected. In *Collected Poems*, he writes:

“Here in dawn’s routine

rectangle

my eastern window
frames a tree:
Euclid's ghost
arresting life for me."

(32)

This poetic image signifies more than aesthetic observation; it reveals a tension between inherited rationalism from the West and the organic, life-embracing wisdom of the East. Ramanujan's rootedness in Indian traditions is affirmed by A. N. Dwivedi, who writes: "[Ramanujan] largely concentrates on his family and relations, on his Indian associations, on India's glorious cultural heritage, on the Hindu myths and legends, on the Hindu gods and ways of life, for his poetic utterance." His poetic world, though occasionally ambivalent, remains deeply enmeshed in Indian philosophical and cultural realities.

Ramanujan's critical awareness of Indian customs does not detract from his commitment to his cultural heritage. Instead, it becomes a way to interpret and renew it. His poems serve as textured palimpsests, layered with autobiographical, historical, and cultural inscriptions that resist both simplistic nostalgia and colonial forgetfulness.

Jayanta Mahapatra: Historical Reclamation and Cultural Re-imagining

Jayanta Mahapatra's poetic enterprise represents a determined engagement with the historical and cultural discontinuities wrought by colonialism. In his poetry, the anguish of historical rupture and the search for cultural continuity converge. A firm believer in the reconstitution of national identity through literature, Mahapatra sees poetry as a means of reclaiming what colonialism attempted to obliterate. As B. K. Das observes, "Jayanta Mahapatra as a post-colonial poet, writes to establish a native tradition by resisting the former coloniser and asserting national identity."

In his poem "1992," Mahapatra confronts the silences of history and the failures of contemporary nationalism:

"You say you are a poet;
you sit next to me
and talk to me from a distant country.
Yet your own past is too large
for you to talk sensibly about it."

(*Shadow Space* 14)

This verse encapsulates the poet's lament over the erasure of historical memory and the challenge of articulating a coherent identity amidst fragmented legacies. Mahapatra's poetic voice, although restrained, conveys a deep emotional and intellectual unease about India's post-colonial trajectory.

The poet's introspection reaches a poignant climax when he writes:

"And I, writing my poem again

What do I remember of faith and past hopes?"

This rhetorical inquiry unveils his disenchantment with the post-independence realities that failed to embody the dreams of the freedom movement. The struggle, for Mahapatra, lies not only in resisting colonial oppression but also in resurrecting the spirit of resistance in an era of national amnesia.

Drawing upon Elleke Boehmer's conceptualisation of "imagining the nation," Mahapatra's poems become symbolic acts of cultural nation-building. His literary work aligns with the post-colonial mandate of reimagining the nation, not as a monolithic entity but as a layered cultural and emotional construct.

Kamala Das: The Poetics of Personal Rebellion

Kamala Das emerges as a distinct yet significant voice in the landscape of post-independence Indian English poetry. Her poetic practice does not overtly engage with the colonial past in the manner of Parthasarathy or Mahapatra. Instead, her resistance to colonial and patriarchal legacies takes on a personal and confessional form. Das's poetry disrupts traditional codes of feminine propriety, Hindu orthodoxy, and colonial moralism, thereby challenging the deeply entrenched structures that colonialism left in its wake.

Das's poetic persona is often candid, sensuous, and unrepentantly individualistic. In her groundbreaking poem "An Introduction," she writes:

"I am Indian, very brown, born in

Malabar, I speak three languages, write in

Two, dream in one."

This assertion of linguistic plurality and regional rootedness functions as a rebuttal to the homogenising impulses of both colonial and post-colonial nationalism. Bruce King makes a significant observation in this regard:

"... of the major Indian poets, perhaps only Kamala Das unselfconsciously uses Indianized forms of English."

(MIPE 101)

Kamala Das's exploration of womanhood, sexuality, and identity often critiques the Victorian moral codes introduced during colonial rule, which lingered in Indian society well after independence.

Her work, in its unflinching subjectivity, reclaims the personal as political. The boldness of her confessions becomes an act of defiance against imposed silences. In doing so, Das aligns with a post-colonial feminist ethos that seeks to dismantle dual hegemonies, both colonial and patriarchal.

Kamala Das's poetic legacy lies in her insistence on authenticity, her refusal to accommodate normative expectations, and her power to shock and unsettle. These attributes, although rooted in personal experience, embody a larger post-colonial aesthetic of resistance and renewal.

Indian English Novelists and the Postcolonial Dilemma

While Indian English poetry captured the personal, philosophical, and aesthetic dilemmas of postcolonial existence, the Indian English novel extended this discourse by embedding the psychic residue of colonialism within complex socio-political, economic, and historical matrices. Novelists such as Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, and Amitav Ghosh emerged as crucial voices interrogating the fractured legacies of British imperialism and the evolving identity of the Indian subject. These writers, positioned both within and outside the homeland, have sought to question inherited structures, displace Eurocentric paradigms, and construct alternative epistemologies rooted in indigenous knowledge systems and lived experiences. Their resistance to colonial baggage is articulated not only through thematic decolonisation but also via narrative experimentation, linguistic hybridity, and the foregrounding of marginalised voices.

Arundhati Roy: Excavating the Violence of History

Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* (1997) is a watershed moment in postcolonial Indian English fiction. It resists colonial epistemologies not by overt polemic but through the delicate interplay of memory, trauma, caste, gender, and language. Roy masterfully deconstructs the residues of colonialism embedded in Indian social structures, particularly the legacy of Anglican education and the internalised superiority of Western cultural codes. The setting of Ayemenem becomes a microcosm of a postcolonial nation still haunted by its past, where even the church bears the architecture and decorum of Victorian legacy.

Roy subverts colonial linguistic traditions through a distinct narrative syntax and grammar. Her English is playful, self-consciously broken, and resistant to the decorum of Queen's English. As Elleke Boehmer notes that there is a "need to dismantle the authority once commanded by English" (200), and Roy does precisely that by reinventing narrative time, resisting linearity, and privileging native rhythms in expression. The repetition of phrases, capitalisation of unexpected words ("A Small Man the size of a chocolate mousse"), and childlike linguistic distortions ("Bar Nowl" for Barn Owl) disrupt the hegemonic expectations of a Western readership, making space for indigenous articulation.

The trauma of history, particularly the caste-based discrimination endured by Velutha, the 'Untouchable' carpenter, is placed at the centre of Roy's resistance to the colonial and feudal

legacies that continue to shape Indian social life. The novel's intertextual evocation of Shakespeare, Kipling, and the Bible, juxtaposed against local myths and everyday Malayalam expressions, creates a robust framework for what Homi Bhabha describes as the "third space"—a hybrid cultural sphere that resists binaries and opens new modalities of representation (TLC).

Kiran Desai: Hybridity and the Collapse of Colonial Privilege

In *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), Kiran Desai portrays a decaying postcolonial India grappling with its colonial hangover and its aspiration for global integration. The novel centres on the figure of Jemubhai Patel, a retired judge whose alienation from his native culture illustrates the internalisation of colonial inferiority. The judge's preference for powdered toast and his shame over his wife's accent are emblematic of what Frantz Fanon terms "epidermalisation of inferiority", wherein the colonised subject becomes alien to their cultural milieu by striving to mimic the coloniser.

Desai's work critically explores the diasporic condition, tracing the failures of assimilation and belonging in the West through characters such as Biju, an undocumented immigrant in the United States. Biju's experience of racism, exploitation, and rootlessness reveals the limitations of cosmopolitan fantasies and neoliberal promises. As Ulka Anjaria aptly notes, Desai's novel is part of a new wave of Indian English fiction that foregrounds global inequality and the fragmentation of the postcolonial promise (Anjaria 2015).

Moreover, Desai's narrative technique, shifting between the Himalayan town of Kalimpong and the kitchens of New York, embodies the disjunctive and fractured experience of modern identity. The novel does not romanticise return or origin but instead dwells on the impossibility of home, thus resisting the essentialist binaries of East and West, tradition and modernity.

Amitav Ghosh: Rewriting Empire through Subaltern Cartographies

Amitav Ghosh's oeuvre stands as a formidable challenge to the colonial mapping of knowledge, time, and geography. In novels such as *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *The Glass Palace* (2000), and *Gun Island* (2019), Ghosh interrogates the historical ruptures left behind by colonialism while creating literary archives of forgotten voices, lost lands, and marginalised identities. His fiction is a powerful project of epistemic resistance that dismantles colonial historiography and its reductive binaries.

In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh critiques the arbitrariness of national borders, particularly those drawn during Partition, which are revealed to be ideological constructs rather than natural demarcations. The dissonance between maps and lived realities parallels Benedict

Anderson's idea of "imagined communities," and the novel complicates nationalist narratives by presenting multiple, often conflicting, personal histories.

Ghosh's later work, particularly *Gun Island*, confronts ecological imperialism and the ongoing legacies of colonial extraction. He integrates folklore, mythology, and indigenous ecological consciousness with global climate concerns, offering what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence" as a counterpoint to colonial and capitalist acceleration. His fictional worlds are peopled by those on the margins, migrants, fisherfolk, and indentured labourers, whose stories challenge the silence of official historical records.

Ghosh's resistance to colonial baggage is not merely thematic but also linguistic and structural. His novels often employ polyphonic narratives, historical digressions, and multilingual registers, allowing for a rich, decolonised narrative ecology. This polyphony recalls Bakhtin's concept of dialogism (Bakhtin 1981), whereby multiple voices resist the centripetal force of monologic authority, whether colonial or national.

Conclusion

The resistance against the colonial baggage in post-independence Indian English literature is not merely a thematic preoccupation but a deeply embedded philosophical, linguistic, and cultural struggle. Indian English poets and novelists alike have demonstrated an acute awareness of the colonial residue that continues to shape national identity, cultural memory, and individual subjectivity. Through their creative expressions, writers such as R. Parthasarathy, A. K. Ramanujan, Jayanta Mahapatra, Kamala Das, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, and Amitav Ghosh have articulated postcolonial dilemmas with remarkable subtlety, insight, and resilience.

Their works testify to the multifaceted nature of postcolonial Indian identity, one that is constantly negotiating between memory and modernity, rootedness and globalisation, resistance and reconciliation. In examining and questioning colonial inheritances, these authors do not seek a wholesale rejection of the past but aim to reclaim agency in narrating the present and imagining the future. Whether it is through the reinvention of language, the reassertion of indigenous spiritual frameworks, or the re-mapping of historical and geographical borders, these writers resist homogenisation and reconstitute Indian cultural expression on their terms.

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