

Macaulay's Legacy: Postcolonial Hangover in Shinde's "English Vinglish"

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Abstract

Lord Macaulay's 'Minute on Education' serves as an important document on the colonizers' strategy to dominate the colonized by controlling their language, culture, religion, and way of life. Even after many years of independence, we seem to be still carrying the burden of this colonial legacy in our mindset. This paper is an attempt to look at the present status of English language not only in our society but more importantly in our psyche.

Indian cinema has played a major role in depicting various themes related to the colonial saga as well as many postcolonial themes. Films like *Lagaan*, *1942: A Love Story*, *Rang De Basanti*, etc. dwell on various subject matters related to the British rule in India. In this paper, an attempt has been made to look at the way Indians place English language on a pedestal even after many years of independence, through Gauri Shinde's movie *English Vinglish*. Shinde's film is a comedy-drama which revolves around a housewife who faces continuous insults from her family because of her linguistic inefficiency. Several scenes in the film project the protagonist, Shashi Godbole's inner turmoil as she is subjected to constant humiliations from her daughter and husband. Shinde's film portrays the fact that even after many decades of independence; Indians have not been able to come out of the hangover of colonization. This paper does not challenge the status and importance of English as a global language, but rather looks at the way English speakers look down upon people who do not speak the language. The mastery of English language is associated with social mobility and superiority. This paper also highlights the social stigma associated with the inability to speak English properly and the psychological trauma of the ones who are subjected to such humiliations.

KEYWORDS: colonization, language, class, incompetency, global, social mobility, inferiority

It is universally accepted that the most efficient and durable means of colonial control takes place through the means of controlling culture. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o pointed out, "Economic and political control can never be complete or effective without mental control. To control a people's culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others." The easiest way for the colonizer to gain a complete control over the colonized is to actively spread the colonizer's language among the natives in such a manner that gradually the language(s) of the natives are believed to be culturally inferior, crude, not fit for proper education or communication with the entire world. In due time, the colonizer's language becomes the 'lingua franca' of complete administration and gains superiority over the native tongue(s).

Similar was the case with colonial India. English language in India was introduced with the arrival of the British traders in the early 1600s. English, which was initially adopted as a language of communication in order to carry out business transactions by the East India Company, was gradually adopted as the official language when the British government took the direct control of ruling India. When in 1830s Britain a great debate ensued on the choice of an official language of colonial administration

and education, Thomas B. Macaulay, a member of the Supreme Council of India, made a winning case for English by observing that Indian languages “contain neither literary nor scientific information, and are, moreover, so poor and rude that, until they are enriched from some other quarter, it will not be easy to translate any valuable work into them.” Championing the cause for implementing English language as a means for education in India, he said,

“I have travelled across the length and breadth of India and I have not seen one person who is a beggar, who is a thief. Such wealth I have seen in this country, such high moral values, people of such calibre, that I do not think we would ever conquer this country, unless we break the very backbone of this nation, which is her spiritual and cultural heritage, and therefore, I propose that we replace her old and ancient education system, her culture, for if the Indians think that all that is foreign and English is good and greater than their own, they will lose their self-esteem, their native culture and they will become what we want them, a truly dominated nation.”

In keeping with Macaulay’s plan, the new English-based education system carefully omitted all references to the rich history, culture, and heritage of India. What came to the forefront instead was the rich English history and glorifying culture. Macaulay’s plan succeeded in creating what he described as a “... class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.” It is from this perspective that this paper analyzes the postcolonial scenario of the status of English language in India, with particular reference to Gauri Shinde’s highly acclaimed film “English Vinglish” (2012).

Highlighting the importance of English language learning in contemporary times, the narrative of Shinde’s film traces the roller-coaster journey of Shashi, a middle-class woman, who despite being a good wife, a caring mother, and a wonderful cook, is continuously snubbed by her own family members due to her inability to speak English. All the wonderful work that Shashi does as a homemaker becomes insignificant in the eyes of her husband and her teenage daughter as they consider her inferior and not presentable. Significantly, Shashi’s day to day life goes smooth without English; she neither needs the language for her survival nor to correspond with others. Shinde’s narrative assumes importance in the light of the challenges that Shashi face not from outsiders, but from members of her own family.

Shashi’s situation highlights the spell of the colonizers that we are caught up in, even after several decades of independence. The colonial hangover of placing English language as superior is projected in Shinde’s film in the way people who do not speak the language are looked down upon. In many instances in the film, it has been portrayed that Indians, even today, give English the primary importance and consider it a language of the elite class of the society. Mastery of the language denotes inclusion in the superior strata of the society; it is in fact a marker of being an elite. Of course, this paper is not to contest the importance of English language learning in India or challenge the role played by English in various facets of our lives, it is rather an attempt to understand how we are still blindly following the sinister plan of Macaulay behind introducing English language in India to boost up the process of colonization.

Shinde’s film indicates our attitude towards English, echoing Macaulay’s plan to subjugate the Indians. A careful analysis of the film portrays the dilemma and distress of the central protagonist, who despite being an epitome of perfection, is snubbed by her family members. Shashi, a happy-go-lucky woman, is distressed at her inability to speak English properly as she realizes that she is the cause of shame for her husband and daughter. What strikes us is Shashi’s capability to not only manage her home

perfectly well, but also to run a small successful catering business. A caring mother and dutiful wife, a successful business woman and loved by all, Shashi's agony then is only due to her linguistic inability.

Shinde projects Shashi's distress and her sense of inferiority through several scenes where her silence after being snubbed at or being ignored speaks volume. Jubilant after a particular catering deal, when she calls her husband to give him the news, Sathish shows complete lack of interest in her "laddoo business" and hangs up the phone saying that he is in a meeting. Shashi suffers within herself not only at being snubbed thus, but more because she realizes that she is the cause of shame for her husband and he has many more important things to do rather than listen to her less important talks. Similarly, when Shashi's grievance towards her husband's habitual late coming to home is met by silence, she herself comments, "Mere saath baat karna important nahi hai" with a rejoinder "Oh, bhool gayi, important batein sirf English mein hoti hai." Shashi's self-demeaning attitude and comments highlight her plight as well as the internal struggles that she has been going through.

An analysis of the constant humiliations that Shinde's protagonist goes through gives us the impetus to understand the reasons behind her low self-esteem and sense of inferiority. Shinde has projected Shashi's plight in various scenes all throughout the film. The ones prominent among them are the confrontations that Shashi has with her daughter and husband. Shashi's daughter, Sapna, a school-going girl, regards her mother as unfit to be taken in any social gathering and constantly lashes out at her inability to speak English well. Sapna represents the so-called modern English-medium educated youngsters who look down upon people who cannot converse in English. Parents, especially those belonging to the upper and middle classes, expect their children to get the best type of education and see English as a means to their end. On the other hand, people from the lower classes look at the superiority of the upper and middle classes as trend-setting behaviours. This has resulted in the mushrooming growth of English-medium schools in every nook and corner of the country. Shinde highlights Sapna's sense of superiority through several instances in the film. An important scene takes place in Sapna's school where Shashi accompanies her to attend the parent-teacher meeting. It is usually her husband who attends all such "important meetings" but on this occasion Shashi is forced to go as her husband is caught up in office work. While Shashi is nervous and uncomfortable at the idea of attending the meeting due to her incompetency in conversing in English, her daughter is aghast that her mother is accompanying her instead of her father. Even though Shashi somehow manages with Sapna's teachers, she falls short of words while conversing with another parent. Sapna barges in and ends the conversation in order to end her humiliation. Later at home, she lashes out at her mother for humiliating her in front of her friends and blames her for her inability to socialize.

Such incidents are rampant all throughout the film. At the very outset of the movie, we come across a breakfast scene in the Godbole home where Shashi reproves her daughter for being too diet-conscious and not eating properly. As she talks, we find Shashi mispronouncing the word 'jazz' which attracts undue mirth of her husband and her daughter. Sathish, who should be setting a good example to his children and teaching them to respect elders, immediately looks up from the newspaper and gives Sapna a mischievous glance and both of them burst out laughing. Sapna goes on taunting her mother further while Shashi quietly tolerates and carries on with her work. Neither her husband nor her daughter is able to understand her pain or her embarrassment. Another such incident takes place when Shashi mildly questions Sapna about her whereabouts after getting to know that she had been loafing around

with her friends in a café. Sapna lies saying that she had gone to her friend's place to study. When Shashi responds saying that she could as well study at home, Sapna is infuriated and lashes out at her mother asking if she would be able to teach her English literature.

These three scenes give a clear picture of Shashi's status at home due to her inability to speak English. Shinde highlights Sapna's and Sathish's insensitivity towards Shashi's feelings. It is also clear that the duo form a team to ridicule Shashi and feel superior because of their ability to converse in the Queen's language. Sapna, time and again, lashes out at her mother and also uses her mother's incompetency as a handicap to put her down. In the third scene described from the film, we see Sapna taking her mother's weakness as a strategy to not only defy her at being cornered, but also suggesting that Shashi's intervention as a mother is also uncalled for, merely because she does not know "good English".

Worth noticing in all these scenes is Shashi's reaction while being snubbed and ridiculed. A mother has all the rights to correct her daughter and show interest in her progress at school, but Shashi deems herself unfit for anything due to her growing sense of inferiority. Over time, Shashi seems to have lost all her self-confidence. It is different when strangers snub or ridicule us, but in Shashi's case, this insensitivity has come from within the family, leaving her no choice but to start demeaning herself and going inside a cocoon. Hence, Shashi bears all the insults silently and blames herself for the so-called "errors". Shashi's family makes the same mistake as many of us do even after so many years of freedom from the British rule – judging a person's worth by his/her command over the English language. In Shashi's case, Shinde beautifully projects her humiliation even though looking from a broader perspective, she should have been regarded as being successful in every way.

The attitude of Shashi's husband and daughter speaks volumes about the attitude of the English-speakers towards the non-English speakers. Similar to the time of colonization, when the Indian mind was tutored to regard English as the most elite language, Sathish and Sapna seem to be displaying similar sentiments towards the language. Macaulay's strategy seems to have won after all, when even after decades of gaining independence, we have placed English on a pedestal, refusing to see reason in many cases such as Shashi's. Shinde projects not only the superiority of English speakers, such as, Sathish and Sapna, but also at the same time, the feeling of inadequacy and inferiority of the non-English speakers through Shashi.

Equally important for us is to understand the way non-English speakers look at the English language. Shinde's film highlights Shashi's role as a mother, a wife, and a businesswoman, in fact going smooth, where English had absolutely no role to play. Other than the constant humiliation she faced from her family members, Shashi was not dependent on English language for her day-to-day survival. Later on, when forced to visit the US on her own, Shashi understands the importance of learning English where she is traumatized by her linguistic incompetence. What was earlier on a mere family affair, now hits Shashi at a larger scale. The incident in the café where Shashi is not able to communicate drives her ultimately to join an English course. The pain that she had undergone on several occasions caused by the humiliating remarks of her family members seemed trivial in front of the severe humiliation that she faced in an alien land in front of strangers. What Shashi felt at that moment may be equated to the feelings of non-English speakers who desire to speak English in order to uphold their low self-esteem. Shashi too undergoes similar feelings and enrolls for the English course without informing her family members. Interestingly, however, the support that Shashi receives in her new venture is from her niece, who is born and brought up

in the US. Unlike the insensitive Sapna, this girl understands the low self-esteem of her aunt and is bent on helping her to learn English to regain her lost confidence.

An analysis of the change that occurs in Shashi's life once she learns the language fairly well would summarize the point made in the paper regarding the elevated status of English in the post-colonial era. She is able to socialize confidently and make new friends. As far as social mobility in status is concerned, her newly learnt language is no doubt able to draw admiration of her entire family, particularly her husband and daughter. Even though slightly improbable for a person to learn such good and grammatically correct English within a short span of time, Shashi's speech during the wedding of her niece stupefies her family and draws their admiration. That Shashi finally finds her due respect and place in the heart of her husband is clear when he asks her whether she would still continue to love him as before. The shame and realization of Sathish and Sapna are of course caused by what Shashi had to say about the role played by family members in a person's life, but we cannot ignore the fact that she earned their admiration by speaking in the language that they valued the most.

Shinde's film is thus a clear indicator of the importance attached to the English language in India. It has become a ladder for upward social mobility and a 'must-know' language. Commenting on the increasing popularity which English language enjoys, Timothy J. Scrase remarks, "English is an international language. You feel humiliated if you can't speak English. People think you are dumb." Shashi's journey towards her self-discovery, is then, the trajectory of many people who demean themselves due to their linguistic incompetence.

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