

Review of International Geographical Education | RIGEO | 2020

**RIGEO** 

ISSN: 2146 - 0353

**Review of International  
GEOGRAPHICAL EDUCATION**



[www.rigeo.org](http://www.rigeo.org)

## The Subversion of Linguistic Hegemony: A Reading of Poile Sengupta's *Keats Was a Tuber*

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### Abstract

The research aims to explore the intricate relationship between English language and literature, its teachers, and students in an Indian classroom through Poile Sengupta's *Keats Was a Tuber*. The shift in language use can impact thinking patterns, leading to a preference for English over the native language. Recognizing language hegemony emphasizes the need to support multilingualism and protect endangered languages to preserve cultural diversity and fairness. While English was introduced by the British, Indians have adopted and adapted it to suit their own needs, infusing it with their unique cultural perspectives. The play concludes with the narrator reflecting on the evolution of English language in post-independent India. The research also tries to prove that the focus should be on acquiring English as a skill, not as a symbol of cultural dominance. By viewing English as a practical tool rather than a cultural imposition, one can strike a balance between global aspirations and local identity.

**Keywords:** multilingualism, native language, language hegemony, cultural diversity, cultural dominance

The research attempts to expose that English, a language passed down from British colonial rule, is now widely used in India. Though it has been adapted to fit Indian educational settings, it still bears the marks of its colonial past. English teachers in India not only develop language abilities of students but also help cultivate cultural awareness. Originally regarded as a unifying force, English has also evolved into a means of cultural influence. Despite these complexities, the deep affection for the English language and its literature endures. The English language, a legacy of British colonial rule, has been widely adopted in India. While it has been adapted to suit Indian educational contexts, it also carries the weight of a colonial past. English teachers in India play a crucial role in not only teaching language but also shaping cultural and intellectual perspectives. In the early 20th century, English was seen as a unifying force, but it has also become a tool of cultural dominance. Despite the complexities and contradictions, the love for English language and literature persists. Poile Sengupta's 1996 play, *Keats was a Tuber*, delves into these themes, exploring the intricate relationship between English language and literature, its teachers, and students in an Indian classroom.

Poile Sengupta, originally named Ambika Gopalakrishnan, was born in 1948. She is a renowned Indian playwright, particularly recognized for her work in children's literature. After completing her undergraduate and master's degrees in English Literature from Delhi University, she furthered her studies in children's literature at Carleton University, Ottawa. Her plays are set in Indian contexts and include *Mangalam* (1993), *InnerLaws* (1994), *A pretty Business* (1995), *Keats Was a Tuber* (1996), *Collages* (1998), *Samara's Song* (1999), *Alipha* (2001), and *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni* (2001). Her first full length play *Mangalm*, won award for the Most socially relevant theme in the *Hindu- MadrasPlayers Script Competition in 1993*. In addition, she had been an accomplished actor on the stage and owns her own theatre group named, Theatre Club in Bangalore.

The play opens by highlighting the challenges faced by Indians who learn English as a second language. After years of formal education in English, it becomes a dominant language in their lives, often used more frequently than their mother tongue. This shift in language use can impact thinking patterns, leading to a preference for English over the native language. This linguistic divide, a legacy of colonial influence, is particularly evident in post-colonial countries like India. The play begins with a thirty five year old female narrator who expresses gratitude for the opportunity to address the audience as an English teacher from India.

WOMAN: English is not my language. It is not the language that my grandparents and parents speak at home. In fact I do not think I knew anything of English before I went to school. But my grandparents, born when India was still a British colony, attributed the glory of the British to the power of their language and sent me when I was five to a school run by Franciscan nuns...English is now the language of my thoughts, it is the language of my reason, the language I use for loving. My perceptions are finer, my judgments more subtle, the range and depth of my emotions seem to be much greater in this language than in any other. What is it then that I and all those like me have inherited? A mode of communication that is functional in many, perhaps in most, parts of the world? Or have we inherited an entire civilization, an alien sensibility that has seduced us from the culture to which we were born?

Have we been enchanted so as to wander forever homeless? (145)

The narrator challenges the Eurocentric perspective often associated with English language and literature. She aims to shift the focus and highlight the Indian experience with English. In doing so, she becomes a representative voice for many Indians who do not have English as their first language.

The play opens in a college English department where Mr. Iyer, a seasoned professor, is preparing the room. He's known for his expertise and mentorship of young colleagues like Ms. Sarala. The head of the department, Mrs. Nathan, enters, a strict disciplinarian who is concerned about a new temporary hire, her nephew Mr. Raghu Krishnan. She justifies as, "He is capable of teaching even us. He has read latest English literature books. He will be like a new wind that sweeps us clean"(151). Despite his inexperience, Mr. Raghu is well-liked and has a modern approach to language, focusing on its practical use rather than archaic traditions.

Meanwhile, Damini, a third-year English student, seeks intellectual stimulation in the department's quiet staff room. She represents the younger generation of Indian students navigating the complexities of English language and literature, bridging the gap between their cultural roots and their aspirations for a global education. Damini frequently engages in discussions about the significance of literary titles and is often corrected by Mr. Iyer. "DAMINI: No, sir. You told me not to look at any critical notes before I read the book. You say that every year, sir. Read the text, Damini. Read the text first" (161). Many English teachers can relate to the common challenge of guiding students towards deeper understanding of literary texts. The play takes a surprising turn with Ms. Sarala's tragic suicide due to

unrequited love for Mr. Raghu. The narrator, revealed to be Damini, reflects on the complexities of balancing English language and Indian culture. This is a universal experience for many Indians who have struggled to reconcile their linguistic and cultural identities.

Initially, English was learned to facilitate communication between the British rulers and Indian subjects. However, over time, it became both a symbol of colonial oppression and a tool for social advancement. This ambiguity has persisted, leading to a complex and often contradictory relationship with the language. Language hegemony occurs when one language becomes more powerful than others, often due to historical, political, or economic reasons. This dominant language spreads widely, becoming the standard in education, government, and media. As a result, less commonly used languages can be marginalized, losing prestige and facing the risk of extinction. Recognizing language hegemony emphasizes the need to support multilingualism and protect endangered languages to preserve cultural diversity and fairness. The English teachers from Indian origin receive an absurd knowledge of its origins but establish its magnificence among students. The narrator feels the same, “When I think of myself then, as a student of English Literature, I am filled with amazement at how much insight I was given into a foreign culture by teachers who had never seen England, who had never known a snowbound winter and who could never have understood the triumphant joy of English springtime” (213). Students of English language and literature in India often find themselves torn between embracing the language and its associated Western culture, and resisting it due to its colonial origins and potential to alienate them from their Indian identity. Damini, an exceptional student, shares her teacher's confusion about the complexities of English language and literature.

DAMINI: Sir... sometimes I feel so divided in myself. As if I was two people. I read Jane Austen and Wordsworth and everything they say is like a jewel. And then my family talks to me and they seem to be using words that don't have any meaning anymore.

IYER: I have felt that too.

DAMINI: And what did you do, sir?

IYER: I made a choice, a difficult one...I chose my books and spurned the family.

DAMINI: Oh sir!...Why...why were we born in India? (180)

The conversation highlights how English language can create a divide between individuals. English teachers often feel transported to a different world, leading to potential

conflicts within their personal lives, as seen in the case of Mr. Iyer. The narrator, also an English teacher, confirms this sentiment, acknowledging the challenges of balancing one's cultural identity with the demands of the English language. The British colonial government appointed Lord Macaulay to establish an education system in India that would serve colonial interests. Macaulay openly advocated for a language and education policy that would promote British ideology, language, and culture. This policy, driven by colonial hegemony, disregarded justice, human rights, and the value of other languages and cultures. In his influential *Minute on Indian Education* (1835), Macaulay outlined his vision for this education system,

We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect. ...I have no knowledge of either Sanskrit or Arabic. ... I have conversed with men distinguished by their proficiency in the Eastern tongues. I have never met one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth more than the whole native literature of India and Arabia... (Macaulay 116).

Despite the widespread teaching of English in India, it hasn't fully become our own language. Indian writers using English are often questioned about their choice of language, while writers using native languages are not. Damini, a student in the play, echoes this sentiment, questioning the relevance of studying English literature, especially works set in foreign contexts. However, Mr. Iyer guides her to understand that literature transcends language and is about human experience. He encourages her to appreciate the works of English writers as expressions of their cultural and historical context. By recognizing the universal appeal of literature, Damini begins to overcome her prejudice against the language. Teaching and learning English in India has always been a complex and challenging process. As a mandatory subject, English is essential for academic and professional success. This emphasis on English has led to a focus on rote learning and a lack of critical engagement with the language. The play highlights these challenges and the pressure faced by students and teachers alike. She says, "Enough, Quite enough! Don't you have some shame? These students have come from poor families. Their parents are educating them with great difficulty. They think if these children learn English they stand a better chance of getting jobs" (173).

Today, English dominates the global technological and commercial landscape. Many Indians aspire to learn English to improve their lives. It is questionable whether Indian sensibilities can be fully expressed through this colonial language. While English was

introduced by the British, Indians have adopted and adapted it to suit their own needs, infusing it with their unique cultural perspectives. The play concludes with the narrator reflecting on the evolution of English language in post-independent India. In India, English is often seen as a language that can guarantee success and career opportunities. This perspective creates a divide between those who reject the colonial legacy associated with English and those who embrace it. The play aims to bridge this gap and explore the complex relationship between Indians and the English language.

Indians have adapted English to meet their technological and commercial needs. While some still view English with suspicion, it is increasingly seen as a tool for communication rather than a symbol of colonial dominance. However, fully adopting English is impossible, as language is constantly evolving. The narrator emphasizes this point, highlighting the ongoing negotiation between Indian culture and the English language.

WOMAN: I have taken from the English what was his. I have smoothed it and dented it, given it shape, polished it, fashioned it the way I want. And I know I possess it now... My life trembles with meaning and yet whatever I say, the words I use are inadequate, an approximation, But that I realize the inadequacy is my victory too, the wealth that sustains me. Macaulay, I have my revenge after all. Across land and water, over hills and desert, language is travelling. It can never arrive. (213-214)

While English has undoubtedly shaped the Indian educational landscape, it is crucial to recognize that it is simply a language, a tool for communication. It is neither inherently superior nor inferior to Indian languages. While it offers global opportunities, it should not overshadow the richness and diversity of Indian languages. The focus should be on acquiring English as a skill, not as a symbol of cultural dominance. By viewing English as a practical tool rather than a cultural imposition, one can strike a balance between global aspirations and local identity. As Indians learn English, it is crucial to maintain and celebrate the rich cultural identity. In India, diverse languages, traditions, and philosophies are integral to Indian heritage. By preserving the cultural roots, one can contribute uniquely to the global discourse. English should be seen as a tool to enhance cultural expression, not as a replacement for it. Embracing both Indian heritage and the global language can lead to a more nuanced and enriching cultural experience.

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