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Language as Power: Colonial Linguistics and the Struggle for Voice

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Abstract

Language has always been a central instrument of power, and during colonial rule, it became a critical tool for domination and control. Colonial authorities imposed their own languages—such as English, French, or Portuguese—on colonized societies, often at the expense of native tongues, which were labeled inferior, uncivilized, or even silenced altogether. This linguistic imperialism was not merely about communication, but about shaping thought, identity, and cultural hierarchy. By controlling the language of education, law, governance, and literature, colonizers dictated not only what could be said, but also who had the right to speak and be heard. In response, postcolonial writers and theorists have highlighted the deep connection between language and identity, arguing that reclaiming indigenous languages is essential to reclaiming cultural sovereignty. Writers like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o have rejected colonial languages altogether, choosing instead to write in their mother tongues as an act of resistance. Others, like Salman Rushdie or Kamala Das, subvert colonial language by infusing it with local idioms, rhythms, and expressions, thereby creating hybrid forms that reflect their own complex realities. In this struggle for voice, language becomes not just a medium of expression but a battlefield where power, memory, and resistance converge.

Key words – Colonial rule, Domination and control, Native tongues, Linguistic imperialism, Cultural hierarchy, Identity and thought, Postcolonial writers, Reclaiming indigenous languages, Cultural sovereignty, Battlefield of power

