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## Voicing the wound: Language, trauma, and resistance in Aleena Akashamittayi's *My English*

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### Abstract

Aleena Akashamittayi's poignant poem *My English* explores the intersections of language, identity, colonial history, and the lived realities of postcolonial subjects. The poem voices the struggles of individuals who inherit language born out of historical subjugation. Through the personification of English, Aleena creates a narrative in which language becomes a conflicted character, burdened by its past while yearning for acceptance and belonging. The poem addresses the concerns of power, history, and belonging, and it stands as a powerful contribution to postcolonial and diasporic literary discourse. This paper analyzes how the poet employs linguistic metaphors and powerful imagery to expose sociohistorical injustices deeply rooted in colonial legacy. This study focuses on the emotional complexity of the inherited language, its exhaustion, hunger, and persistent desire for recognition, and considers how these traits reflect the broader psychological pressures experienced by diasporic and marginalized individuals. Special attention is given to the poem's narrative structure, which moves between personal memory and collective trauma, thereby offering a layered perspective on identity formation. The paper also follows the thematic progression from alienation to affirmation, illustrating how the speaker reclaims an imposed tongue as a vital part of her selfhood. Through close reading, the study reveals how *My English* examines the conflict between assimilation and cultural preservation, showing how English becomes a powerful medium of resistance, creativity, and voice.

**Keywords:** Cultural identity, colonialism, linguistic identity, generational trauma, post-colonial literature

### Introduction

Language serves as a great storehouse of cultural identity, history, and lived experience. For communities shaped by colonial encounters, the adopted language often carries ineradicable subjugation and resistance. Aleena's poignant poem *My English* offers an interesting exploration of this post-colonial reality, particularly focusing on the intricate relationship between an individual and a language inherited through a history of colonialism and generational trauma.

The poem is set against the backdrop of an enduring colonial legacy and examines the subtle struggles of post-colonial identity to cope with an imposed linguistic framework. The central metaphor, the personified *My English*, balances the tension between its oppressed origins and deep personal significance. Aleena brilliantly portrays the psychological and emotional complexities faced by those who use English as a second language, because persistent echoes of historical injustice exist within their very mode of expression.

This research paper examines how the poem *My English* addresses the concept of linguistic identity through the lens of colonial impact and inherited experience. This paper claims the poem powerfully reflects the broader struggles of individuals and communities. Through this, they reclaim and redefine a language that was once a tool of their subjugation, making it an integral part of their distinct sense of self.

### Literature Review

A growing body of academic work examines the intersection of cultural identity, colonialism, and linguistic identity within post-colonial literature. Scholars have extensively explored how linguistic imposition and cultural dislocation affect individual and collective identities, and how literature serves as a crucial space for discussing these complex experiences.

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### Post-colonial Theory and Hybridity

Homi K. Bhabha's seminal theories, explicated in *The Location of Culture*, show that colonial encounters do not merely result in the complete replacement or assimilation of cultures. Instead, they cultivate complex processes of negotiation, ultimately leading to the creation of hybrid identities and languages. Bhabha theorizes that hybridity signifies a "third space" of expression, a space of cultural translation and development that challenges fixed concepts of identity (Bhabha 30-38). This concept is especially applicable to *My English*, where the language itself is plainly described as "a slave owner's illegitimate child." This powerful metaphorical representation surpasses simple linguistic error. It shows how the speaker's English is neither "pure" nor organically developed; instead, it is a complex and often conflicted fusion of an imposed colonial language and the indigenous experiences of deep trauma and resistance. Bhabha's theory of hybridity thus provides a strong framework for analysing how *My English* symbolizes this subtle "third space". At the same time, it reflects its origins in oppression while asserting its evolving, unique, and defiant identity.

### Linguistic Imperialism and Cultural Hegemony

Building upon foundational post-colonial thought, scholars like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, notably in *Decolonising the Mind*, accurately document how language serves as a primary, crafty tool of colonial power. This process is termed linguistic imperialism, which involves the imposition of the colonizer's language, marginalization of indigenous languages, denigration of local epistemologies, and establishment of a new cultural hegemony (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 6-18). *My English* directly confronts this deeply bullying trait of linguistic dominance. It richly portrays how the simplicity of the English stems from a distressing "fear of making mistakes punishable by death." This hyperbolic yet powerful imagery draws our attention to the severe, almost existential, pressure the colonizer's linguistic norms exert. The poem's sarcastic critique of the "mean missionary's tongue" that dishonestly spoke of "justice and equality" while imposing a language calls our attention to the sheer hypocrisy and manipulative nature of cultural hegemony inherent in the colonial project. The poem's explicit struggles with grammar, such as "subject-verb agreement" and difficulties with "tenses," represent more than linguistic errors. These struggles stand as symbolic acts of resistance. They reveal extreme symptoms of deeper universal issues. These problems stem from a history in which people were denied control over their own lives and historical progression.

### Generational Trauma and Collective Memory

Contemporary literary criticism focuses on how historical trauma is transmitted and re-experienced across successive generations, especially within post-colonial contexts. It is not confined to the generation that directly experienced the oppression and trauma. Concepts such as Marianne Hirsch's "postmemory" prove helpful for understanding this phenomenon. Hirsch defines "postmemory" as the relationship the generation after direct witnesses bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of the previous generation, which functions as "postmemory," characterized by imaginative investment, projection, and creation (Hirsch 110-120). This framework is crucial for understanding how

the speaker in *My English*, explicitly identifying as "first generation," inherits and struggles with the great historical suffering of their ancestors, whose "parents were working in someone's kitchen," "grandparents converted into Christianity," and "their parents were slaves." The poem intensely portrays the psychological weight of this inherited trauma. The language itself takes on personification, becoming "tensed about the future / And stuck in past," mirroring the psychological burden of a history one cannot fully escape. Besides, the poem's poignant depiction of its creative expressions - where "Sylvia Plaths are committing suicides" and "John Keatses dies in the cradles"- reflects the crushing weight of this trauma on artistic potential and individual well-being within the affected community. Thus, *My English* functions as a powerful storehouse of collective memory, not merely describing but actively embodying a multi-generational history of suffering, resilience, and the ongoing psychological and cultural impact of colonization.

### Narrative Structure

The poem's narrative structure significantly contributes to its thematic depth, primarily through the innovative use of personification. In *My English*, Aleena creates an intimate, first-person perspective that enables a deeply introspective assessment of linguistic struggle. The narrative unfolds as a confessional, almost biographical account of the language itself as the poet shifts between historical context and personal experience. For instance, the language's direct statements about its "fraught origins" and its present "weariness" establish a chronological movement from its violent inception to its current emotional state. This personified voice allows the poet to express the complex internal conflicts and present the language as a character struggling with its own identity, seeking validation, and ultimately asserting its belonging. The structure emphasises the active role of the language in suffering and transforming, rather than passively receiving, its colonial legacy.

### Thematic Development

The poet intricately develops several interrelated themes throughout her poem. The primary theme of linguistic identity evolves from a state of imposed "illegitimacy" to a defiant claim of "Its identity is mine." The poem follows this development by primarily presenting the language as burdened by its "slave owner's" origins and the "fear of making mistakes," indicating its struggle under colonial oppression. This fear is then visible in the "struggles with grammar," metaphorically illustrating deeper societal inhibitions. The theme of colonial legacy is evident in the poem, directly referenced through the "mean missionary's tongue," which deceptively preached "justice and equality" while enforcing linguistic dominance. This shows the inherent hypocrisy of the colonial project. The theme of resistance and self-assertion appears as the poem progresses. Despite the historical weight and internal "hunger," the language ultimately declares its ownership, which signifies a powerful act of decolonization and self-definition. It does more than surviving; it forcefully affirms a unique, hybrid identity.

### Figurative Language

Aleena's masterful use of figurative language imbues *My English* with great emotional and symbolic significance. The central and most impactful figure is the personification of

My English, which transforms an abstract concept into a living entity with feelings, experiences, and a voice. This allows for powerful metaphors like the language being a "slave owner's illegitimate child," which simultaneously conveys its forced birth and its complex, hybrid nature. Hyperbole strengthens the depiction of colonial linguistic control, as seen in the "fear of making mistakes punishable by death". Here, the poet exaggerates the psychological pressure and risks involved. The poem employs symbolism effectively, where the grammatical errors, such as "subject-verb agreement" and "tenses" symbolize the disruption of indigenous narratives and the struggle against imposed linear histories. The inventive imagery of "parents working in someone's kitchen" and "grandparents converted into Christianity" substantiates the abstract concept of generational trauma in concrete, historical realities. The scary imagery of "Sylvia Plaths committing suicides" and "John Keatses dying in the cradles" functions as a powerful metaphor for the stifled artistic and intellectual potential within a community burdened by inherited suffering. The use of these figures of speech helps the poet in conveying the overwhelming cost of the colonial encounter.

### Conclusion

Aleena's *My English* offers a striking portrayal of the inner conflicts that arise when one's voice is shaped by a language rooted in oppression. The poem does not merely reflect on grammar or fluency; it speaks of history, identity, and survival. By giving English a human voice, Aleena makes it possible to see the language not as neutral, but as wounded, burdened, and struggling.

Through close reading, this paper has explored how *My English* captures the tension between inherited trauma and the act of self-definition. Drawing on ideas from Bhabha, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Marianne Hirsch, it is clear that the poem belongs to a larger tradition of post-colonial expression. The speaker's English is fractured, hungry, and haunted by the past, but it also resists. It remembers, speaks, and ultimately declares: "Its identity is mine." This final assertion transforms the language from a symbol of domination into one of survival. The poem reminds us that even a colonizer's tongue, when spoken from the margins, can carry stories of pain and resistance. *My English* does not ask for sympathy; it demands recognition. It shows how language can bear scars and still speak with power.

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