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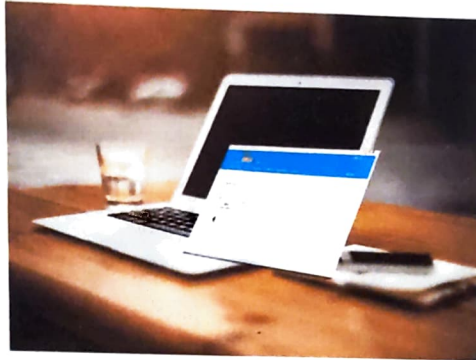
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Resisting Linguistic Crucifixion¹: A Postcolonial Reading Of Milcha Sánchez-Scott's
Latina

Abstract

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This paper, drawing from the theories of postcolonialism, proposes to show how Milcha Sánchez-Scott, a noted Chicana playwright, uses language as a mode of establishing self-identity and thus opposes the attempt of linguistic imperialism practiced by the mainstream American society. Milcha Sánchez-Scott's play *Latina* has been selected for analysis because here language has been consciously and effectively used to resist cultural dominance.

Keywords:

Postcolonialism, Resistance, Language, Milcha Sánchez -Scott, *Latina*.

"El Anglo con cara de inocente nos arrancó la lengua"². Wild tongues can't be tamed, they can only be cut out" (54). – Gloria Anzaldúa

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“*El Anglo con cara de inocente nos arrancó la lengua*”². Wild tongues can't be tamed , they can only be cut out” (54). – Gloria Anzaldúa

The language one uses, acts as a cultural bond within the language community to which one belongs. Although, the United States is a vast country and its citizens speak different languages, the principal language is English, or rather American English, spoken by over 230 million people in the country. As the country had native inhabitants and it was colonized by many European countries like England, France, Spain and Germany, a large number of languages are spoken in the territory. Of these, Spanish holds the second rank, for as per latest census, it is spoken by about 38 million Americans. Racially Spanish-descendents, the Chicanos mostly speak Spanish and despite the compulsion of learning English, they look upon English as a foreign tongue that acts as a tool of White dominance over the Chicanos and in the acquisition of which they get de-Hispanized. Rudolfo F. Acuña has narrated in his epoch-making study about the status of the Chicano/as in the USA documented in his work *U.S. Latino Issues* that a Californian businessman Ron Unz in 1998 sponsored an initiative known as “English for the Children” as an attempt to stop bi-lingual education and promoting English education, thus indirectly segregating the non-English speaking students, especially the Latino students from the English ones. As Acuña has narrated the tragic pitiable conditions of the Hispanic community in the USA, “By the mid-1920s, school districts had largely dismantled bilingual schooling. School authorities expected immigrant children to learn in English only, and they prohibited them from speaking Spanish or any other foreign language in school. Teachers often punished Latino students when they broke the no-Spanish-spoken rule” (59). This probably urges upon the immediacy of protest and resistance against the linguistic subjugation of the Latino community in the US society by the Hispanic American writers.

Language becomes a tool of subjugation when it is forcefully imposed. For Chicano writers language creates a sense of solidarity and unites them to fight the linguistic hegemony of English, the Chicanos are subjected to. Carla Jonsson, who has made an extensive study on Code Switching and Language Mixing in Chicano writer Cherríe Moraga’s plays, observes that “...multilingual resources such as language mixing (LM) can be used in theater to resist domination and to challenge and transform power relations” (118). Carla Jonsson investigates how language mixing in Chicano plays gives Chicano people power to combat linguistic dominance of the Americans. Gloria Anzaldúa in her *Borderlands/La Frontera* stresses the necessity for the Chicano writers to use two languages:

For a people who are neither Spanish nor live in a country in which Spanish is the first language; for a people who live in a country in which English is the reigning tongue but who are not Anglo; for a people who cannot entirely identify with either standard (formal, Castilian) Spanish nor standard English, what resource is left to them but to create their own language? A language which they can connect their identity to, one capable of communicating the realities and values true to themselves – a language with terms that are neither *español ni inglés*, but both. (55)

In postcolonial critical discourse, language often is viewed as a fundamental site for struggle and resistance. The process of linguistic imperialism occurs in two different ways: by displacing the native indigenous languages terming it as impure and inferior and by imposing the imperial language as standard as a mean of cultural control. Postcolonial discourse analyses how the imperial tool is manipulated into a tool for subverting imperial hegemony. Nativization, hybridity, creolization, abrogation and appropriation are some of the methods of decolonizing the culture of the colonized. Several postcolonial playwrights use these techniques to resist imperial design of homogenizing the culture of the colonized. Postcolonial linguistic discourse highlights that while some writers show zeal to slough off the language-borne cultural baggage, some celebrate hybridity and are interested in acceptance and recognition, in moving from the periphery to the centre. Carla Jonsson, in her article “Power and resistance: Language mixing in three Chicano plays” shows that bilingualism is used by Moraga as a decolonizing mode. The United States, as Jonsson writes, “... despite being a site of polyglossia, where several national languages co-exist, shows *monologic* tendencies where English is elevated without being the official language of the US” (125) and Moraga uses her plays to arrest this influx of linguistic imperialism of the US government. However the scope of investigating the bilingualism of Chicano plays is wider and in the present research it has been extended beyond the plays of Moraga. It is in this respect that the present thesis is quite novel in terms of the approach and application as it tries to examine the theme of protest in its various conjunctures in Chicano plays applying the postcolonial paradigm that suits it the best.

As Braj Kachru explains in his essay “The Alchemy of English”, during the post-colonial era, English language is used lexically to “neutralize identities one is reluctant to express by the use of native languages or dialects” (292). It is where the question of ‘Abrogation’ and ‘Appropriation’ comes as two modes of linguistic decolonization. In a pluralistic

society where several language groups co-exist, language plays a decisive role in determining the ethnic identity of a person and, therefore, a distinction should be made between 'language use' and 'language identification'. A person can speak one language at workplace and another at home, but the person's identity is determined only by his/ her native tongue. Often a tendency is found to set one form as 'standard' for every group, ignoring its right to retain its linguistic autonomy. Standardization inevitably involves the Center/Other binary of which the first in the pair is always privileged. As J. Milton Yinger has put it: " 'Standard speech' – the variety of a language, the 'center' one might say, around which the other forms are heard to revolve – is typically the speech pattern of the dominant ethnic group, especially of its middle and upper classes" (302).

Since in a multilingual society there is a tendency to give one language primacy by setting it as 'standard', thereby pushing other languages to the corner, different language groups always compete to oppose this centrality of a language in several ways. One way of doing this is to inseminate the colonial language with verbal inputs from the native language. Another technique of postcolonial subversive use of language is glossing in which the native word is placed first and for the purpose of effective communication, it is glossed with a translation usually given parenthetically or within a bracket. Ashcroft cites the example "he took him into his obi (hut)" (61) and argues that this immediately disputes the putative preferentiality of the colonial language and foregrounds the native as a cultural sign. But, it has been maintained by many postcolonial theorists that "Master's tool will never dismantle master's house" (Lewis and Mills 25). Hence the colonized often consciously reject the master's tongue as standard mode of expression, an act, which in postcolonial terminology, is described as 'abrogation'. It insists on complete erasure of colonial linguistic traces which is a precondition for returning to pre-colonial cultural essence.

While abrogation is a process of casting off or dislodgement, appropriation is a strategy of adapting the imperial language so as to qualitatively alter its texture. Appropriation, which assumes that the language of the colonizer is always modifiable, is used to purge the dominant form of all colonial linguistic flavors. While 'abrogation' is the strongest form of opposition, 'appropriation' involves assimilation and exploitation of the colonizers' language for the sake of resisting the centrality of the masters' tongue. Incidentally, Bernard Shaw, whose views on language are highly revealing, opposed all attempts to standardize English. In "Notes to Captain Brassbound's Conversion" (August, 1900), he writes: "I must, however, most vehemently disclaim any intention of suggesting

that English pronunciation is authoritative and correct. My own tongue is neither American English nor English English, but Irish English so I am as nearly impartial in the matter as it is in human nature to be” (quoted in Tauber 4). Although in *Pygmalion* Eliza attains social mobility by dropping her cockney dialect and picking up perfect English accent under the tutelage of Higgins, the play is far from being an advocacy of the standard form, as evident from Shaw’s words in the ‘Preface’ to *Pygmalion*: “An honest slum dialect is more tolerable than the attempts of phonetically untaught persons to imitate the *plutocracy*. ... *Imitation will only make them ridiculous.*” (quoted in Tauber 52).

The power of language, having an interpellative³ effect, cannot be denied and can be understood if we examine some of the ethnic derivatives of English words. The English word *pinche* is Mexican in origin. Mexican word ‘Pinchi’ (also Pinche) is used derogatorily to curse someone. The authority of a language, broadly speaking, can be contested and defied in two ways – either by learning it so impeccably as to destabilize the native users’ monopoly over it or by consciously hybridizing it that is spoiling its purity by intermixing native lexical items with the language in question.

Two other ways of linguistic ‘writing back’ are ‘Code Switching’ and ‘Language Mixing’ which involve a mutual contact of two languages. The colonized people, having learnt the master’s tongue, become bilingual with scope for shuttling between two languages – the vernacular and the Second Language. Even monolingual speakers are capable of shifting between forms, but since the shift is restricted to linguistic registers and dialects at their command, it is called *style shifting* (Bullock and Toribio 1). For bilingual speakers, switching from one language to another is very common. They are capable of segregating their language spaces, speaking exclusively in one language in certain domains (e.g. at home, with friends) while shifting to another in other contexts (e.g. school, workplace). This bilingual behavior is commonly referred to as *language shifting* (Bullock and Toribio 2). But when this shifting is done in the same context “in an unchanged setting, often within the same utterance” (Bullock and Toribio 2), the phenomenon is described by linguists as ‘Code Switching’. Code Switching clearly indicates that it is not “breakdown in communication, but reflects the skillful manipulation of two language systems for various communicative functions” (Bullock and Toribio 2). Therefore, Code-Switching when done with a clear purpose – becomes a process by which one can establish an indigenous identity without being unintelligible to a mixed group of audience.

Linguistic hybridity, in case of the Chicano writers, is a strategy to resist the dominance of English. Language, to the Chicano writers, also carries a ritualistic tradition and establishes a link to their Mayan and Aztec roots. Language thus constructs a folk identity and is a vehicle of folk culture. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o in his work *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* rejects English deliberately as a mode of literary expression. Thiong'o has rightly pointed out that mere writing in African language will not bring a revolutionary change if the language does not effectively reflect the postcolonial aspirations of the people:

But writing in our languages per se—although a necessary first step in the correct direction—will not itself bring about the renaissance in African cultures if that literature does not carry the content of our peoples' anti-imperialist struggles to liberate their productive forces from foreign control.... (290)

The relation between culture and language is an intimate one. It is the language that carries a particular culture, expresses and translates it. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o thus explains:

Culture is almost indistinguishable from the language that makes possible its genesis, growth, banking, articulation and indeed its transmission from one generation to the next... Communication creates culture: culture is a means of communication. Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world" (290).

Language and culture are thus two inseparable entities.

Latina by Milcha Sánchez-Scott, first produced in 1980, is based on the playwright's personal experience. Although Sánchez-Scott has Hispanic ancestry, she identifies herself with the Chicano people. Milcha Sánchez-Scott's plays deal with Hispanic and Chicano families and the crises faced by them. Language for Milcha Sánchez-Scott is a vehicle for expressing the feelings of her own self and that of her own community. The playwright chooses a feminine title for her play to emphasize the woman-centrality of the theme. 'Latina' as opposed to 'Latino' refers to Latin-American or Hispanic women. Milcha Sánchez-Scott's plays mostly concerns the crises faced by the Hispanic and Latino Communities in the United States of America. Language to

Milcha Sánchez-Scott is expressive of a group identity, the distinctness and the aspirations of the Hispanic Americans.

In *La Voz Latina: Contemporary Plays and Performance Pieces by Latinas*, Elizabeth C. Ramirez and Catherine Casino have shown how female playwrights like Milcha Sánchez-Scott have created a space for themselves in the broad spectrum of American stage by exploring their ethnic roots. In doing so, they have banked principally on their ethnic language. Language is used to break stereotypes associated with the community. In *Latina* it is through the characters New Girl and Eugenia that Sánchez-Scott has tried to explore an alternative space of linguistic identity. Sarita, born in the U.S.A. and reared up in a milieu that necessitates imbibing the American culture, represents a culture which is essentially imperial and hence oppositional to their indigenous culture. On the other hand Eugenia, even though plucked from her roots and having an American upbringing, is unwilling to bid goodbye to her native language in order to assert her indigenous identity. She speaks to Sarita in pure Spanish while Sarita replies mostly in English with a mixture of Spanish:

EUGENIA: Buenos días, niña Sarita. ¿Como amaneció?

SARITA: Buenos días, Doña Eugenia ... estoy bien.

EUGENIA: Ay, gracias a Dios. ¿Qué te pasa mi hija?

SARITA: Nada.

EUGENIO: ¿Desayunastes?

SARITA: Yes, I ate breakfast.

(EUGENIA: Good morning, dear Sarita! How are you doing this morning?)

SARITA: Good morning, Mrs. Eugenia. Are you doing great?

EUGENIA: Yes, thank you. What's the matter, daughter?

SARITA: Nothing.

EUGENIO: Have you taken your breakfast? : my translation) (Latina 87)

The character Sarita is a unique creation of the dramatist. At the beginning of the play, she does not seem to identify herself with the Latino community. She feels that in order to be accepted in the American society, she must remove every trace of her Latino identity not excluding her language:

SARITA: You thought I was a maid ... I am not a maid or a housekeeper.

Housekeeper is what polite people call their maids. (Pause.) I don't want to look Latina.

...

SARITA: (*Unaware of Eugenia*) See, I hate ... the illegal women who come here everyday looking for illegal jobs... Well, I don't hate the women ... it's just that ... I am not one of them ... I don't want to be identified with them. (*Latina 87*)

Sarita believes that the only way to forestall discrimination is accepting the American way of life. But gradually she discovers her mistake as is evident from her speech where she ruefully admits that despite her attempt to distance herself from her community, she is bracketed with other members of the community. As she is an actress, she is assigned only stock stereotyped roles which she hates to perform:

SARITA: I was a barrio girl who got raped by a gang in *Police Story*, a young barrio mother who got shot by a gang in *Starsky and Hutch*, a barrio wife who got beat up by her husband who was in a gang in the *Rookies*. I was even a barrio lesbian who got knifed by an all girl gang called the Mal flores ... that means Bad flowers. It's been a regular barrio blitz on television lately. If this fad continues, I can look forward to being a barrio grandmother done-in by a gang of old Hispanics called Los Viejitos Diablitos, the old devils. (*Latina 89*)

As ghetto is to the Blacks, 'barrio' is to the Hispanics which in the American society, plays as a cultural tool for segregation. The repeated references to the word 'barrio' refers to the fact that even though Sarita feels that assimilating American way of life would end her discrimination, the American society always treats her as an outsider based on her ethnic identity.

The play is dealing with a number of women characters who are Hispanics and Latina coming to America in search of jobs as maids. But knowledge of English is a must for a girl even to get a job of a housemaid. The words of Don Felix who is an employer are worth quoting in this context:

DON FELIX: (on phone) ... Now what we got there? Over there, with you, in the downtown office? What we got there? How many girls? How many for maid jobs? Any English-speaking one ... you think! She said, "Excuse me?" Carlos, I don't care if she is polite. I want to know if she speaks English. (*Latina 91*)

When the New Girl drops in seeking a job, Don Felix wants to know if she can speak English. As the answer is 'No', Don Felix tells Sarita:

No English, no references ... Why don't you teach her to count to ten in English? Yeah, just to ten. That's all she'll need. ... See, honey, if she can count to ten in English, we can say she speaks enough English to answer the phone. (*Latina* 92)

Don Felix is an employer, a domestic maid service agency who employs maids but with working knowledge in spoken English. Thus, English language is used as an imperial tool that can override other indigenous cultures.

In the play *Latina*, Sarita is a Hispanic, but she has accepted the American way of life in order to get acceptance. She is critical of Eugenia but is also sympathetic to her and thinks that Eugenia should not stick to her own native culture and should (Eugenia) rather accept the alien culture. This ambivalent position creates a psychological tension which is evident in the conversation between Maria and Sarita:

MARIA: That's right, Sarita, she has her children and her grandchildren.

SARITA: Oh, yeah, where are her precious children now, huh? They don't want her around. She doesn't fit in with their lives, so she hangs around here.

MARIA: So sad, she fights to bring her children here, for a better life. She feeds them, educates them, and they turn against her. They take up new American ways and leave her and the old ways behind. Yet, she is proud of them.

...

SARITA: Well, I worked real hard to change, to be different from my parents.

MARIA: Ah, sure, you improve yourself, but you are *still* Latina.

MARIA: ... you Mexican

SARITA: ... English

MARIA: ... Latina

SARITA: No I'm not. (*Latina* 94)

In *Latina*, the technique of code-switching and language mixing has been used creatively. In the conversation between Sarita and Don Felix and other Latina maids, who have been working in the U.S.A., code switching has been used for two reasons – firstly, to adulterate the purity of English and secondly to give the play a realistic touch. It is easily understood that the Latina women, who have been working in the U.S.A. households as

domestic maids for long and come in contact with English daily, tend to pick up English language. The knowledge of English language, on the other hand, helps them to counter the linguistic hegemony of American English. An example in point is the conversation between Don Felix and Evita. When Don Felix inquires whether Evita still works in the household of Mr. Hodges, Evita answers that she has left the job referring to Mr. Hodges' loose moral character and requests Felix to get her a new job. Evita uses Mexican slangs to call Mr. Hodges, an American man and his mother, names:

DON FELIX: Oh, sure, honey, sure. That's why I been dying to reach you.

EVITA: He is un desgraciado! Un Viejo pinchi! (*He is the miserable wretch! The fucking woman: my translation*) (*Latina 98*)

But the strongest response has been given by the playwright when the New Girl, few hours after taking her English lessons from Maria, is seen responding to Sarita in broken English often mixing it with Spanish:

SARITA: God save us from the yu yu disco...(Sees the NEW GIRL passionately scrubbing the walls.) What is going on here? What's with Miss Peru?

NEW GIRL: No se nota , pero yo soy muy fuerte . Yo soy muy fuerte . Yo soy trabajadora Buena. Por favor, señorita Sarita, necesito un trabajo. Mire, mire, yo sé...(Very slowly in broken English.) I don pay atencion...one...two...three.... (*You don't see, I am very strong. I am very strong. I am a good worker. Please, Miss Sarita, I need a job. Look, look, I know...: my translation*) (*Latina 126*)

New Girl learns English but adulterates it with Spanish, so it is no triumph of colonization, rather an act of bold resistance on the part of the colonized. In another act of resistance, when Maria is seen teaching New Girl English numbers, New Girl replaces the pronunciation of the English numbers with identical Spanish pronunciation. Although New Girl does it out of her ignorance, the playwright manipulates it to subvert the linguistic hegemony of English and also as an act of disavowal to accept English as a standard mode of expression:

MARIA: (*MARIA using her fingers to teach the numbers.*) One.

NEW GIRL: Gwone.

MARIA: Two.

NEW GIRL: Tu.

MARIA: Three.

NEW GIRL: Tree.

ARIA: Four.

NEW GIRL: Pour. (*Latina* 103)

Maria criticizes Sarita who has assimilated American culture and feels no attachment to her heritage. Maria castigates her saying that mere bookish knowledge does not mean one is educated. To be properly educated means to have respect for one's heritage and also to know manners and how to behave well. This is why Doña Eugenia, who is not as 'polished', as Sarita, is "better educated" as she holds her roots in high esteem:

MARIA: But not education from the books. It means you do not have manners, that you do not have respect for other people and their ways... Doña Eugenia is better educated than you. (*Latina* 104)

In *Latina*, one can come across several instances where Mexican slangs and non-respectable dictions are used to abuse an American. Chata uses Spanish to comfort a crying Alma and also to abuse Mrs. Homes calling her "vieja pinchi" (*Latina* 112) or "the fucking woman":

CHATA: (*With drink in her hand. She is tipsy.*) Andale, Almita, no llores...What do you care what that vieja pinchi said. (*Come on Alma, Don't Cry: my translation*) (*Latina* 112)

Chata in another context, refers to the White American mistresses as "pinchi pendejo" (*Latina* 116) or "asshole". Evita in Act II describes all Americans as cowards as she says in Spanish "pero los gringos son cobardes" (*But the gringos are cowards: translation*) (*Latina* 128). Clara describes Mr. Xavier, her master, who is an American, as "Viejo vago" (*Latina* 127) or "lazy old".

Another example of linguistic protest is found in Clara's words. When Clara informs Sarita that Chata's daughter has changed her Mexican name 'Maria Consuelo Sandoval de García' in order to retain an American name 'Connie Gar', Clara expresses her contempt and anger over this change:

LOLA: Consuelo changed her name?

CHATA: Si, pues, María Consuelo Sandoval de Garcí a. Ahora se llama, Connie Gar. (*Of course, Maria Consuelo Sandoval de García, now she is called, Connie Gar: my translation*)

SARITA: Your daughter is now Connie Gar?

CLARA: Connie Garr (*Trilling the r's.*) Two R's... Garrrrr. (*Latina* 134)

Articulating 'Gar' as 'Garrrrr' is a phonetic expression of contempt and anger. The playwright also shows the height of her brilliance by choosing the name 'Connie'. 'Connie' in American English refers to someone wise. The playwright is sarcastic at her best, when she refers to the girl, who has taken the decision of changing her Mexican name for an American one, as 'Connie' or 'wise'. This decision may seem wise to the girl, but actually is foolish for, simply by changing a name, one cannot become an American.

Thus through the creation of a number of immigrant characters and especially through Sarita, Milcha Sánchez-Scott shows that loss of native tongue is loss of identity and the only way to assert it is by having a respect for the indigenous culture. Those who feel critical of it ultimately get terribly disillusioned as found in the case of Sarita, who finally comes to embrace the native language. Milcha Sánchez-Scott shows how language operates as an institutionalized agent of colonial power and she de-colonizes it. For Sánchez Scott, language is more extreme a form of social satire.

Notes

1. In her work *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa remarks in the context of speaking Chicano English, "Because we speak with tongues of fire we are culturally crucified. Racially, culturally, and linguistically *somas huérfanos* - we speak an orphan tongue" (*somas huérfanos* means "to be orphan": my translation). What she means is that many Mexicans view speaking Chicano English as an act of 'Linguistic Terrorism', an imminent threat to Mexican culture. Anzaldúa defends by opining that Chicano English is the characteristic of the Mexican borderlands and a mode of connecting with the Mexicans, especially the Chicano/as living in various parts of the U.S.A.

2. Donaldo Macedo translates it as 'The Anglo with the innocent face has yanked our tongue'. Anzaldúa here laments the cultural silencing of the Chicanos done by linguistic imposition. For more, see Macedo, Donaldo. 'Decolonizing Indigenous Knowledge'. *What is Indigenous Knowledge?: Voices from the Academy*. Ed. Ladislaus M. Semali and Joe L. Kincheloe. New York and London: Falmer Press, 1999. Print.

3. Louis Althusser, a Marxist critic, coined the term “interpellation” to denote ‘subject formation’. Althusser says that ideology *interpellates* individuals into subject, a process that describes the formation/creation of subjects. It is a process of ‘hailing’ someone. As an example, when a policeman asks someone to ‘halt’ and the moment he/she freezes, he/she becomes a ‘subject’.

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