

# An Analysis of Language and Power in the Literature of the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century Till 2010

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## Abstract:

Literature of the contemporary era has been greatly influenced by the changes and influences that affected the same in the former years. The ever-changing history of the world had a great part to play in the making of the modern English day language. It is undeniable that literature had many a time turned the government laws around, enlightened the world of the truths behind the romanticized ideas of war, paved way for a clear understanding of the cognitive mind and so forth. This paper aims at reaching the depths of the power that lie dormant behind seemingly simple words and the impact that language creates. Starting from the literature of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century to that of the present age, the works will be analyzed in the light of the inspiration it is drawn from and the inspiration it hopes to spread to the generations that would follow. The poems of Derek Walcott and *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* by Dario Fo are the chosen works that come under the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The works that cover the present age are *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini and *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak. The books that are available in our nearest stores are the resultant products of the past and the illuminating light of the future. To study this gap and find the innumerable possibilities behind that endeavor is another bliss that literature offers amongst the many others.

**Keywords:** Language, literature, power, impact, historical.

## Introduction:

English Literature of the 1950s was marked by distinctive changes pertaining to history of the blacks, aftermath of wars and the severity of the then prevailing effects of Jim Crow laws which were established till 1965. Writers from all around the world pooled in to contribute their works to the field of English Literature. The language took tremendous changes from that period and there has only been a vast improvement in the power of literature of the present age. The latter has been a continuation of the themes reflected in the past years and an addition of the present day development and post-modern dilemma also has a part in it.

Colonization had a major role to play in shaping the individuals. Advertently or inadvertently, people of the 1950s were infused with foreign ideas and their longing for the unreachable can be seen in their heart cry. The development of modern theatre did great justice to the masterpieces that were given to them to be performed. *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, for example, proved to be a huge success following its daring theme on the sham in politics and the discrepancy behind historical narrations.

The millennium has seen the birth of stunning literary works which generally covered the black identity, conflicts within and without and the reiteration of the noteworthy historical and political occurrences.

## Literature Review:

The unchanging fact about language is that it keeps changing with time. T.S. Eliot in his *Four Quarters* said, "For last year's words belong to last year's language/ And next year's words await another voice." (T.S. Eliot: Little Gidding II.4.)

Linguistic analysis of language in discourse helps us to better comprehend the language used in literature and the effect it has on the readers. The use of language to “persuade and manipulate, and convey social, racial or sexist ideologies” (Bielsa 1) are elaborated by the authors in this book.

### **Interpretation and Discussion:**

#### **Select Poems of Derek Walcott:**

Lauded for his work by the Nobel committee as “a poetic oeuvre of great luminosity, sustained by a historical vision, the outcome of a multicultural commitment”, Walcott etched his name in history as one of the influential poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (“Derek Walcott - Poems” 2). His Caribbean identity is made manifest in many of his poems and so is his loyalty towards the English language and his own mother tongue.

Frequently, Walcott faced the uncertainty of his allegiance to both languages but was torn by the wars that took place that killed people from the two ends. His powerful words are still remembered as they created a great uproar during the period of crisis. His poem titled “Far Cry From Africa” brings out this conflict in a poignant way. The land which was once considered a “paradise” was covered with corpses. The admirable part about the poem is that the poet was impartial in blaming both the conquerors and the conquered. It is in this that the beauty of poetry and its impact is made manifest.

I who have cursed

The drunken officer of British rule, how choose

Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?

Betray them both, or give back what they give?

How can I face such slaughter and be cool?

How can I turn from Africa and live? (“Derek Walcott - Poems” 8).

The colonized of that period started to more than just appreciate the foreign language that was used by the colonizers. To them, it had become another mode that communicated the unsaid in a fluent fashion. Just like Walcott, they came to “love” English. This waging internal conflict has delivered with utmost intensity the agony of the poet. By the end of the poem, imagery is formed of a once beautiful land, now broken and filled with blood by accusers on both ends. In the corner stays a poet whose heart is scarred with the tough decision of choosing one amongst the two languages he dearly loved.

In his poem “A Lesson for This Sunday”, Walcott mourned for the things lost in the hands of violence. The tone of the first stanza is in stark contrast to the last, signifying the change in his mood and perspective. His respite on a hammock on a Sunday was intruded by children who caught a butterfly and dissected it until the black maid stooped them. A beautiful imagery is artistically woven for the readers to see and feel pain the way he did. The lines “Hereditary of cruelty everywhere/And everywhere the frocks of summer torn” bring out the idea of the nature as a paradise that has been equated to a bright summer frock that has been torn apart by humans (“Derek Walcott - Poems” 9). Walcott had been right to mourn for the loss of blissful ignorance in children as well. Violence had become hereditary. The poet’s choice of words brings out the effect in its fullest form. The use of appropriate language is more than able to powerfully influence the people and Walcott’s poems are the proof of it.

#### ***Accidental Death of an Anarchist:***

Drama, as popularly believed, presupposes action. It demands to be performed and revolutionary works like Dario Fo’s *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* have changed one’s perspective on the veracity of historical records. Political dramas carry a history within themselves.

During December 12, 1969, Piazza Fontana in Milan was bombed in which 16 were killed and about 90 citizens were injured. The media blamed the anarchist groups and an anarchist named Pinelli, an innocent man, was detained in the station for three days before he jumped out of the window and took his own life. It

is to be noted that another anarchist named Pietro Valpreda was locked up behind bars for three years. Both these men were guiltless. The play was premiered on December 10, 1970, a year after the death of Pinelli.

The character of the maniac stands out in the whole work. Contrary to the normal beliefs, the maniac was a genius unappreciated. Though he was a certified maniac, his madness manifested the follies during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The maniac constantly referred to how the documents were twisted by tales narrated by the police men.

The maniac went on to disguise as the judge who was to take on the case pertaining to the death of the anarchist. After having superbly played with them, he made them tell different versions as to what actually happened. The best part is where they were actually made to play roles and eventually confronted the loopholes in their setups. The lines that follow are poignant and daring. “If one of your suspects was to contradict himself one half as much as you have, you’d have had him hung, drawn and quartered by now!” (Fo 163). The language that Fo used here was intentionally political and severe in tone. He clearly pointed out, by not mincing words or sweetening the truth, the inhumanity of the cops. “Your version of the facts, as well as being total bullocks, lacks humanity. Not a shred of fellow-feeling... You never ever let of yourselves go... Let rip... Laugh, cry... Sing! (Fo 163).

As tension mounted up in the presence of the journalist, the maniac drew home a pertinent point of how scandals were used by the government because power can be maintained in a way and at the same time they can highly diffuse people’s anger on other issues. The maniac called it “A liberatory catharsis of tension” (Fo 201).

After gathering all that he required, the maniac exposed his plan. He had been recording the statements of the officers and he wanted to make hundreds of copies. The copies were to be sent to newspapers and the pretensions of the police would be out on the streets. He believed it would be a “scorcher” (Fo 206).

The play of words and the compelling effect of this drama make it a masterpiece. Fo uses the Maniac's quick wit to show how language can be manipulated to utterly confuse and disguise the truth (“Accidental Death of an Anarchist Themes.” 1). Literature has always tried to endeavor in bringing out the virtues and vices alike but when the latter is in abundance, it is no longer hid. To bring out the concept of insanity, sanity is used. In this case, the madness of the nation is brought to light by madness itself!

### ***The Kite Runner:***

If a novel can prove to be unforgettable by the devastation and heartbreak it brings, then it has to be Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner*. Chosen as “A Book of the Decade” by *The Times*, *Daily Telegram* and *Guardian*, this novel brings out the traumatic experiences of courage and cowardice alike. The experiences of Amir as a disloyal friend to his journey to that of a true hero are seen in a stretch of 340 pages. Each page unravels a new mystery, journey, defeat or a victory. The magnificent effect of the catharsis felt at the climax proves the novel to be “morally acute” (“Summer Fiction Special 2004” 1)

The tone of the novel begins with the powerful rendition of a child’s perspective, set amidst problems in Afghanistan and in the family as well. His betrayal and the burden which came as a result brought Amir back to Afghanistan, several years later. His unfaithfulness to his friend who had in turn vowed a lifetime of friendship, turned into a curse that refrained Amir from becoming a father.

A phone call from Rahim Khan changed the entire nature of Amir. Khan reminded Amir that “there is a way to be good again” (Hosseini 2). This statement is reiterated time and again to pave a way for redemption.

Some of the most powerful statements consist of just a word or two. Amir found out, much to his shock, that the Talibs dragged Hassan and shot him. Farzana, Hassan’s wife, was also shot dead when she attacked them. The stunned Amir could only breathe out “no, no” when Khan narrated the incident. This portion is undoubtedly one of the most powerful scenes in the novel. Every “no” resounds disappointment, loss, anguish and the denial of Amir’s dreams to reconcile again. “...all I could manage was to whisper “No. No. No” over and over again” (Hosseini 202).

Sohrab, Hassan's son, was expected to be adopted by Amir. The latter grabbed the opportunity to atone his past sins but Sohrab cried for his old life to be back. The boy's cry made Amir wish for the same but for different reasons. He could set the wrongs right and could have done justice to his true friend's love but it was an impossible dream. The monologues help us to better understand the state of Amir.

*Your old life, I thought. My old life too. I played in the same yard, Sohrab. I lived in the same house. But the grass is dead and a stranger's jeep is parked in the driveway of our house, pissing oil all over the asphalt. Our old life is gone, Sohrab, and everyone in it is either dead or dying. It's just you and me now. Just you and me* (Hosseini 325).

These narrations have reminded the people all over the world of the cruelty practiced by the Talibans and many a number have been purged by choosing to narrate their stories of the same kind. People have found redemption in reading the story of the redeemed Amir. The story of Amir reminds the readers that it can never be too late to be good again and those whom we least expect to help us keep doing just that. Hassan saved Amir once and the former's son saved Amir later. Hosseini's language highlights a burdened, insomniac Amir in the first few chapters but the latter portion reveals him to be man saved by the selfless act of love.

### ***The Book Thief:***

War is one of the most gripping and devastating history in the lives of all mankind. Several novels have depicted the cruelty of war and its aftermath on the people. *The Book Thief* stands unique in war literature because Zusak's writing style sets it apart. There is no defined framework which in turn highlights the structure of the flow of thought and the dramatic effect it has on the readers.

The perspective constitutes for the most interesting study because it is narrated by death. This seemingly simple tale is magically woven together through a series of flashbacks by the narrator, death. The introduction is of a stranger kind as death tries to acquaint with us, the readers, in a genteel way.

Language is an important factor in the novel. Set in the backdrop of the reign of Hitler, it can be guessed that everything in the novel would be gruesome but the author had intended otherwise.

The novel shows us the very best and very worst ways language can be used... Sprinkled with German words and phrases, the novel also helps us feel the friendliness and beauty that this language can embody. This is important because after World War II and the Holocaust, German was seen as a language of hate and fear (S 1).

When Liesel Meminger lost her brother, she never thought that she would discover a new, fiery passion during his funeral. Spotting *The Gravedigger's Handbook*, she caressed the book and hid it. The silver writing on the book intrigued her and that was the beginning of her new career as a book thief.

The story of her adoption led her to gain three beautiful friendships: her new father Hans Humbermann, her best friend Rudy and a Jew named Max. Liesel gained courage through the power of words and the gift of friendship. The way in which these two factors are brought together makes the novel an unforgettable read.

The strangest sense of connection between the father and the daughter is seen in words that are powerful yet grammatically incorrect. When Humbermann proved to be a loyal companion, Liesel greatly appreciated his presence. Death talked of it thus: "Trust was accumulated quickly, due primarily to the brute strength of the man's gentleness, his *thereness*" (Zusak 38).

Zusak's beautiful portrayal of love is unique. One would consider it magical and the other, cursed. "The only thing worse than a boy who hates you... (is) a boy who loves you" (Zusak 53). The thing that mattered to Liesel was the love of Rudy but she realized it only after his death. Love, to her, proved to be a balm and a bane at the same time. Such experiences are seen to be in common during the times of war. Destruction and calamity attacks first and then results in a birth of realization later.

Liesel's relationship with books can be summed up in her own thoughtful utterance. "I have hated the words and I have loved them, and I hope I have made them right" (Zusak 562).

Zusak presented a different view on war and the ideas can be studied parallel to many a great war classics like *Catch 22*. The bloodthirstiness of war cannot be quenched and in Zusak's masterpiece, the narrator, death, elaborated on this idea.

They say that war is death's best friend, but I must offer you a different point of view on that one. To me, war is like the new boss who expects the impossible. He stands over your shoulder repeating one thing, incessantly: 'Get it done, get it done'. So you work harder. You get the job done. The boss, however, does not thank you. He asks for more (Zusak 331).

### Conclusion:

The superior power of literature lies in the fact that it is undeniably life-changing. It is power-packed and acts a solid ground to base one's foundation upon. The contents and themes in books keep changing with time but each piece of literature is uniquely different in the way they appeal to people. The words, small or big, have had huge impact on the reading public. Even the strongest of men are made to shed tears and the feeble are made strong.

Language renders unseen power and has brought the world to us in all sincerity and truth. The power is made whole when it is transposed to the readers and the latter strive to enlighten the future generation through the incomparable tenacity of words.

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