World English-language user is no historical anachronism or anomaly but the business man who desires increased profit, the scholar who wishes to increase his learning, the ordinary man or woman who would share in the goodness of freedom and individual liberty.

For while the English-language user may be motivated by subjective or selfish ends, he is grafting himself not only to a tree of language but to a larger history of human development. English is no longer that Anglo-Saxon-based speech of a few million people living on a small northern island off the Atlantic Ocean. English, in fact, has not been a national language of that kind for more than a century. It is, factually, a global language, the first of its kind; serving more than the needs of empire, unlike Latin; more than the prestige of that originating island nation. Right now, it serves the needs of every human whose understanding and imagination would overlap tribal and national boundaries. The student in Beijing who practices her English with tapes imported from Ohio; the Nigerian who studies for his O levels in his village-school; the Indian journalist who writes his copy in English while he interviews in Marathi; to these and many more, the English language is the means by which they communicate as a species. Independent nations today no longer see English as a tool of western imperialism but as a medium for trans-national species communication.

And yes, in the process of our discovering what we share with others, our tribal boundaries can become unstuck, our ancient or recent national identities can be shaken. This is the risk that Third-World English language writers take, the risk that all explorers come up against in travelling too far, the possibility of alienation from their native cultures, of losing one’s way home. The child who leaves home, seduced by a stranger’s tongue, and never returns is to be mourned for.

But exile presumes that such a child is forbidden to return. The language this child has learned is surrounded by an aura of illegitimacy, danger, and taboo. This rejection of their English-language writers, in India or Nigeria or Southeast Asia, can only damage those societies themselves. In denying a place for writers who have attached themselves to a language tree other than the politically correct one, these societies are seeking to control the act of creativity at its very root. It is an attempt at social control which sets loose the worst tendencies towards cultural paranoia and authoritarianism and which destroys that which should be precious for young nations and ancient communities alike: the lyric voices of their free men and women celebrating their past and inventing their future.

We should all support nationalistic measures to recover and reconstruct that cultural self-esteem a colonial history has almost obliterated. However, to carry on a vendetta against English-language users is a dangerously divisive policy in countries where social cohesion is most necessary. More to the point, it is ultimately futile when ordinary citizens can see how the political elite are educating their children in English.

As for me, choosing to make my future with the language I love, I find, of course, that language is never enough. The whole of a person is of sights, sounds, smells, motions, tastes, a community of sensations we call country. The naming is in English, but now the objects for naming are no longer at hand. I do not wish to be in exile. To remain faithful to my origins, I must be unfaithful to my present. To be constant to my Malaysian identity, I must continue in the United States to be a stranger in a strange land. Still, I have a language in my hand. To me, it is a language where the idea of freedom is broader and stronger than it is in any country.


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