

Article

Reclaiming Voices: The Interplay of Language, Literature and Cultural Memory in Contemporary Movements of Decolonisation

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Abstract: Decolonisation is often viewed as the conclusion of colonial rule, yet its cultural consequences extend well beyond political independence. This paper examines decolonisation as a continuing process that influences language, literature, and cultural memory in the 21st century. Language remains a crucial site of struggle, as native tongues once silenced under colonialism face threats of decline but also revival through community initiatives. Literature, long shaped by external standards, now evolves through indigenous storytelling, multilingual expression, and experimental forms. Cultural memory, sustained through oral traditions, art, and local archives, is increasingly reshaped by global migration and digital technology. These forces can both safeguard and distort traditions. The study introduces the concept of *cognitive reclamation*, the conscious effort of communities to reclaim control over the narration of their histories and identities. Focusing on postcolonial theory, cultural memory studies, and digital media analysis, this paper highlights decolonisation as a dynamic cultural practice, arguing that the right to narrate one's own story is fundamental to preserving identity in an interconnected and rapidly changing world.

Keywords: decolonisation; language; cultural memory; cognitive reclamation; indigenous storytelling; identity preservation

Introduction

The process of decolonisation does not end with the attainment of political freedom; rather, it extends into the cultural, linguistic, and intellectual lives of societies (Fanon 45). In many postcolonial contexts, the languages spoken, the stories told, and the histories remembered still carry traces of colonial domination. Language can act both as a shield for cultural identity and as an instrument of control. Literature,

meanwhile, becomes a site where memory is revisited, challenged, and reconstructed (Adichie 102). Studying these dimensions allows us to understand how societies reclaim their voices and resist lingering colonial legacies. In the contemporary world, decolonisation requires a broader lens than the mid-twentieth-century frameworks offered. Migration, globalisation, and the rise of digital technologies have reshaped how heritage is preserved and how identities are expressed. Memory now circulates not only through oral traditions and books but also through online archives, digital platforms, and trans-national communities (Gilroy 78). These spaces create new opportunities for marginalised voices, yet they can also replicate older systems of inequality. Analysing how these forces shape cultural memory is therefore vital for present-day decolonial scholarship.

This paper investigates how language, literature, and cultural memory contribute to ongoing decolonisation. It engages with classical postcolonial thinkers while situating their insights in a globalised, digital era. The aim is to demonstrate how identity, meaning, and memory remain dynamic and contested, and how both literary texts and digital narratives serve as tools for reclaiming cultural heritage. By bringing together theory and contemporary practice, the study offers a framework for understanding decolonisation as a living, evolving process in the 21st century.

Review of Literature

In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o argues that colonial languages suppress native thought systems and that using mother tongues is essential for cultural survival. His work provides a foundation for linking language to identity, but does not address the role of digital communication in language revival. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon explores the psychological effects of colonialism, focusing on how language becomes a tool of both assimilation and alienation. He shows that adopting the coloniser's language can lead to cultural disconnection, yet also be a space for resistance. His ideas remain relevant in analysing how dominant languages influence identity in globalised and digital contexts. In *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak questions whether marginalised voices can truly represent themselves within dominant systems. She warns that even when space is given, power structures often reshape or silence their narratives. This view is vital for understanding how postcolonial identities are negotiated in modern literary and online spaces. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha introduces hybridity and the "third space" as sites where new identities emerge. His theory highlights how language and literature can blend influences to create innovative cultural expressions.

Existing studies on decolonisation, language, and cultural memory largely centre on 20th-century contexts shaped by traditional media. However, the 21st century has introduced digital platforms, global migration, and new forms of cultural exchange that reshape these debates. Few works connect classical postcolonial theories with these evolving realities. This paper addresses that gap by exploring how contemporary media and literature can reframe cultural memory in ways that resist ongoing colonial influences.

Objectives

- To examine how language acts as both a tool for cultural preservation and a means of influence in postcolonial societies.
- To explore the impact of digital media on decolonisation and the preservation of cultural narratives in the 21st century.
- To connect classical postcolonial theories with modern global and technological contexts.
- To propose ways in which literature and digital storytelling can support ongoing decolonisation efforts.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach, analysing literary texts, digital media, and cultural narratives to explore contemporary decolonisation. Primary sources include novels and online literature that reflect postcolonial experiences. Secondary sources consist of works by key theorists such as Fanon, Spivak, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and Bhabha, providing a theoretical framework. Digital platforms like social media and online archives are also examined to understand how cultural memory is preserved and shared today. The study compares classical postcolonial theory with modern examples to highlight changes and continuities in language, literature, and cultural expression.

Analysis

Language plays a critical role in shaping identity and cultural memory in postcolonial societies. Colonial languages often dominated education, literature, and administration, creating distance between people and their indigenous cultural knowledge (Ngugi 12). Today, many writers and communities deliberately reclaim local languages as a form of resistance. For example, African authors such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o write in Kikuyu to preserve cultural heritage and challenge the dominance of English, while Indian writers explore regional languages alongside English to reflect complex identities. This demonstrates that language is not only a means of communication but also a tool for asserting agency and protecting cultural memory.

Literature continues to be a vital medium for preserving historical experiences and challenging dominant narratives (Adichie 102). Contemporary novels and short stories revisit colonial histories, highlight marginalized perspectives, and provide new ways of understanding cultural identity. Caribbean and South Asian literature, in particular, often depict the experiences of communities affected by migration, displacement, and cultural loss. By retelling these histories, authors create spaces for collective memory and cultural continuity. Digital media has created new ways for communities to preserve cultural memory and share their stories. Social media, online journals, and digital archives allow writers, indigenous groups, and diasporic communities to tell their experiences and reclaim histories that were often ignored. These platforms give more people a chance to hear these voices. At the same time,

unequal access and algorithms can make some stories more visible than others, showing that challenges in representation and fairness still exist.

Combining literature and digital media creates spaces where culture and memory are shared and reshaped. Writers and communities mix traditional storytelling with modern platforms to express identity and experiences in new ways. Homi K. Bhabha's idea of the "third space" helps explain how these hybrid forms allow different cultures and perspectives to meet and influence each other. Similarly, Gayatri Spivak's idea of giving voice to the subaltern is seen when marginalized groups use online platforms to speak and be heard (Spivak 271). These examples show that decolonisation is ongoing, as people continue to reclaim their histories and shape cultural memory today.

Discussions

The study finds that literature plays a vital role in allowing marginalized voices to reclaim histories and challenge dominant narratives. At the same time, digital media provides new opportunities for visibility, though it also reflects inequalities in access and representation. When combined, literature and digital platforms create hybrid spaces where culture and memory can be negotiated in innovative ways. Overall, the findings suggest that decolonisation is not a completed process but an ongoing one, continuously shaping language, literature, and cultural identity in the 21st century.

Limitations of the Research

This study is limited to literature and digital media, mainly from African, South Asian, and Caribbean contexts, which may not represent all regions or cultural expressions. Access to digital platforms varies, and the qualitative analysis relies on interpretation, which may influence findings. Earlier historical developments are only touched upon and not explored in depth.

Scope for Further Research

Future research can examine decolonisation in other forms of culture, such as film, music, and visual arts, or in regions beyond Africa, South Asia, and the Caribbean. It can also explore how new digital technologies, like virtual reality or interactive storytelling, affect the preservation and sharing of cultural memory. Comparative studies across different postcolonial societies could provide a better understanding of global trends in language, literature, and identity.

Conclusion

The study highlights how language, literature, and cultural memory continue to shape decolonisation in the 21st century. Indigenous languages and literary works help preserve heritage and strengthen identity, while digital platforms provide new spaces for marginalized voices to share their stories. The combination of traditional and modern media creates hybrid spaces where cultural memory is negotiated and reinterpreted. Findings show that decolonisation is an ongoing process, requiring continuous efforts to reclaim histories, challenge dominant narratives, and adapt to global and technological changes. Instead of viewing decolonisation as a closure of the

past, it should be understood as an open-ended dialogue that shapes how communities imagine and create their futures.

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