The Inherited Lexicon: Where the Matrubhasha Meets the Rajabhasa in the Search for an Odia Self

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Article Detail:	Abstract
	This article investigates the role of the "inherited lexicon"—the embedded presence of English vocabulary within Odia literary writing—and argues that such linguistic borrowing functions as a historically situated literary practice rather than a mere stylistic choice. By situating Odia-English hybridity within the political history of the Odia language, from its contested recognition in 1936 to the lexicographic ambitions of Gopal Chandra Praharaj's Purnachandra Bhashakosha, the study demonstrates how questions of linguistic autonomy and cultural authority shape literary expression. Through close readings of texts ranging from Fakir Mohan Senapati's Chha Mana Atha Guntha to contemporary works by Pratibha Ray and Akhil Mohan Pattnaik, the article analyzes how English loanwords, code-switching, and hybrid compounds map social hierarchies and reveal authors' negotiations among linguistic purism, social realism, and postcolonial identity formation. Drawing on Bakhtin's heteroglossia, Bhabha's "third space," and sociolinguistic theories of diglossia, the article contends that Odia-English hybridity constitutes a deliberate literary technology that articulates the layered complexities of postcolonial selfhood. It concludes by advocating for an ethically attentive, creatively generative hybridity that expands Odia literature's expressive possibilities while challenging the exclusionary privileges embedded within inherited linguistic structures.

Introduction: Language as a Site of Identity

If you grow up speaking Odia at home but English at school, you learn very quickly that language is never neutral. It organizes where you belong, who holds power, and how you see yourself. This "double life" is common across India, but in Odisha, it carries a heavy historical weight. Odia only won official recognition as a distinct language in 1936 after a long, hard-fought cultural struggle. Because of this, the language itself became a symbol of survival and regional pride.

In this light, seeing English words in an Odia novel is never just about style. Every borrowed word reopens old questions: What is "authentic" Odia? Who gets left out when a book becomes bilingual?. This article looks at the "inherited lexicon"—the English words that have found a home in Odia literature over the last 150 years. I argue that Odia writers use English borrowing as a deliberate strategy to map out social hierarchies and explore the fractured experience of being "modern" in a postcolonial world.

The Historical Layers of Odia Identity

Odia's literary history goes back long before the British arrived. From the *Charyapadas* (8th century) to Sarala Das's 15th-century *Mahabharata*, the language

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proved it could handle deep philosophy and complex storytelling. Later, medieval *bhakti* poets added a rich devotional vocabulary rooted in local life.

British rule brought a second linguistic layer. English arrived not just as the language of government, but as a carrier of Western ideas and modern "realism". Schools like Ravenshaw College (est. 1868) created a bilingual class of thinkers who could read both Shakespeare and local classical poets. Yet, Odia never gave up its authority easily. The movement for a separate Odisha state in 1936 made the language a political claim. This history is why English borrowing still feels "fraught"—every English word asks if we are making progress or losing our way.

The Purnachandra Bhashakosha: A Lexicon of Sovereignty

We cannot talk about Odia identity without mentioning Pandit Gopal Chandra Praharaj's *Purnachandra Odia Bhashakosha* (1926–1940). This seven-volume dictionary was more than just a list of words; it was an ideological statement. Containing over 185,000 entries, it proved that Odia was as rich and ancient as any other major language. Praharaj even sold his own property to fund it. In this study, the *Bhashakosha* acts as the benchmark of "authentic" Odia—the point where the *matrubhasha* claimed its full independence.

Borrowing in Both Directions

Linguistic exchange wasn't a one-way street. Odia actually gave English words like "juggernaut" (from *Jagannatha*), "bungalow," and "loot". Often, these terms were reframed through a colonial lens, and postcolonial writers now work to reclaim their original cultural context.

English borrowing into Odia followed the path of administration and education. Words for government (*court*, *collector*), education (*school*, *book*), and now digital culture (*Facebook*, *internet*) entered Odia not as neutral tools, but as markers of change. How a writer uses these terms tells us a lot about their view on tradition versus modernity.

The Evolution of Hybridity: Odia Novels Across Time

- **19th Century: First Encounters** Early novels like Ramaranjan Basu's *Anandamoyee* (1897) used English very sparingly, mostly for legal terms like "judge". Fakir Mohan Senapati's *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* (1897–99) was more clever. He used English and Persian legal terms to show how villagers were trapped by colonial red tape. He turned the "language of power" into a tool for social critique.

- **Early 20th Century: National Pride** As nationalism rose, so did a desire for linguistic purity. Writers like Gopabandhu Das kept English to a minimum. Kalindi Charan Panigrahi's *Matira Manisha* (1931) took a realist approach: village scenes used pure dialect, while urban scenes allowed English for commerce. This was social accuracy—documenting how class boundaries sounded in the 1930s.

- **Mid-20th Century: Modernization Fears** After 1947, English became a practical necessity rather than just a colonial rule. Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja* (1945) used this to show a power gap: tribal characters speak "pure" Odia, while the officials who exploit them speak in English administrative terms. On the other hand, Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* (1984) rejected English entirely to show that a feminist voice doesn't need Western words to be modern.

- **Globalization and the Digital Present** Since 1991, English has flooded everyday life. Manoj Das uses code-switching to show social aspiration and irony. Chandrasekhar Rath's *Jajabara* (1992) portrays a protagonist who feels "split"—thinking in English but feeling in Odia. Today, writers like Paramita Satpathy show millennials for whom mixing the two languages is just the "default" way of speaking.

Theory: Why the "Mix" Matters

The "mix" of Odia and English—what we call linguistic hybridity—is far more than a casual byproduct of bilingualism; it is a profound literary mechanism. To understand why this mixture matters, we must move beyond the view that English is a "contaminant" and instead see it as a site of active negotiation. Several theoretical frameworks help explain this complexity:

Bakhtin's Heteroglossia: The Dialogue of Worldviews Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "heteroglossia" (many tongues) is essential here. He argued that when you put multiple languages or registers in one book, they don't just sit quietly side-by-side; they carry their entire worldviews with them. In Odia literature, English often represents Western-style progress, academic distance, or bureaucratic authority. Odia, meanwhile, carries centuries of local memory, community rituals, and emotional history. When a novel like Chandrasekhar Rath's *Jajabara* switches mid-sentence, it isn't just showing off a bilingual character. It is forcing two different ways of seeing the world to "talk" to each other. Meaning is produced through this tension—it is "dialogic"—showing that postcolonial identity is built on a conversation that never quite reaches a final, single answer.

Bhabha's Third Space: Beyond the Binary Homi Bhabha's "third space" theory suggests that when two cultures collide, they don't just mix like ingredients in a bowl; they generate a completely new space that belongs to neither original side. In this view, Odia-English writing is not "Odia plus English"; it is a hybrid form with its own unique logic. A perfect example is the way contemporary Odia writers use English psychological terms like "depression" or "trauma". These aren't just translations. When a character uses the word "depression" within a traditional Odia family structure, the word's meaning shifts. It isn't exactly the Western medical definition, nor is it the traditional Odia view of "melancholy" (*abasada*). It becomes something "third"—a way of expressing a modern mental state that is still deeply embedded in Odia life. This hybridity is a form of resistance because it creates a space that refuses both the absolute authority of English and the rigid demands of "pure" tradition.

Sociolinguistic Domains and Diglossia: Mapping Social Power Sociolinguistics offers a map of *how* this mixture is organized socially. People don't switch languages at random; they do it based on social "domains". In Odisha, the family and religious domains typically "belong" to Odia, while the tech, professional, and consumer domains often belong to English. This is a stable situation known as "diglossia". Literature becomes powerful when it shows these boundaries breaking. When Jahnabi Mohanty has

women use English for talking about their careers but switch to Odia for motherhood, she isn't just being realistic—she is revealing the exact terrain where women have to negotiate their autonomy against patriarchal traditions.

Translation Theory and the "Untranslatable" Finally, translation theory explains why certain English words stay untranslated even when Odia is lexicaly rich. Some concepts are "worldview packages". Words like "privacy," "individual," or "rights" carry Western assumptions about the self that don't map directly onto Odia frameworks centered on family duty (*dharma*) and community. Keeping these words in English serves a literary purpose: it signals that the character is operating within a specific, imported way of thinking. It acts as a marker of cultural difference—sometimes as a sign of intrusion, and sometimes as a sign of how much the culture has genuinely transformed.

Conclusion: Becoming, Not Choosing

The inherited lexicon—the English vocabulary woven into the fabric of contemporary Odia literature—represents neither a betrayal of tradition nor a simple triumph of globalization. Instead, it is a site of ongoing, vital negotiation. As this study has traced across centuries, from Senapati's strategic use of legal jargon to Samantaray's radical modern hybridity, Odia literature has not decayed through contact with English; it has transformed.

Intentionality over Purity The central question facing contemporary writers is not *whether* to use English, but *how* to do so with awareness. Purity is a static goal that belongs to the museum; vision is a dynamic goal that belongs to living art. Every choice to borrow, code-switch, or refuse a translation is simultaneously aesthetic, ethical, and political. To use English unthinkingly is to risk reproducing old colonial hierarchies and exclusionary class privileges. But to strictly refuse English is to deny the genuine, lived realities of transformation in Odisha today.

The Search for the Odia Self Ultimately, the search for an Odia self does not end with a choice between the mother tongue (*matrubhasha*) and the language of power (*rajabhasa*). Such a choice would be a false one, as the postcolonial self is irrevocably shaped by both. The "self" is found in the very act of forcing these languages to speak through each other. The

Purnachandra Bhashakosha recorded what Odia *was*—a monument to linguistic sovereignty. Contemporary hybrid writing explores what Odia *is becoming*—a living, breathing medium capable of navigating an interconnected world without losing its distinct soul.

Odia's vitality is measured by its capacity to illuminate human experience in all its layered complexity, using whatever resources genuinely serve that purpose. The "inherited lexicon," when wielded with skill and conscience, is one such powerful resource. It allows the literature to remain fiercely local while participating in global conversations. This unfinished dialogue—this state of "perpetual becoming"—is exactly what keeps Odia literature relevant, resilient, and profoundly alive in the 21st century.

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