THE DECOLONISATION OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN SALMAN RUSHDIE’S “MIDNIGHT’S CHILDREN”, “SHAME” AND “THE MOOR’S LAST SIGH”

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ABSTRACT

Post-colonialism has emerged as one of the most exciting and challenging fields of study in recent years. Post-colonial fiction, too, is a new genre that started flourishing in the late nineteen seventies and has now developed into an interesting and vast field of research with manifold and myriad literary contributions in this field. Rushdie uses English in his own unique way to decolonise the language. Salman Rushdie’s novel Midnight’s Children is the first deliberate attempt in Post-colonial Fiction, with regard to the aspect in decolonising the English language. This paper provides numerous examples from Rushdie’s books Midnight’s Children, Shame and The Moor’s Last Sigh on how deliberately Rushdie attempts to decolonise English in his own unique style.

KEY WORDS : Post-Colonialism, Decolonisation of English, Magic Realism, Language, India, West.

Post-colonialism has emerged as one of the most exciting and challenging fields of study in recent years. Harish Trivedi, a noted Indian critic, sums up the phenomenal rise of Post-colonial Literature as follows: “Of all the terms of academic discourse which have risen to ascendancy successively over the last two or three decades, perhaps none has done so more quickly and completely, more glibly and globally than Post-colonialism”. Post-colonial writing has in the recent years become a process of overturning the dominance of the Empire from the colonies. If colonialism involved ‘colonising the mind ’, then the resistance to it required, in the contemporary Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiongo’s phrase the terminology of ‘decolonising the mind ’. As Salman Rushdie, one of the pre-eminent Post-colonial writers puts it: “The language like so much else in the colonies, needs to be decolonised, to be remade in other images, if those of us who use it from positions outside Anglo-Saxon culture are to be more than artistic Uncle Toms”. Language is more than simply a means of communication; it constitutes our world-view by splitting up and arranging our sense of social reality into meaningful units.

The acclaimed Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong has made the following remarks on the significance of language: “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.
How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture, at their politics and at the social reproduction of wealth, at their entire relationship to nature and to other human beings”. As Ngugi says, language does not just passively reflect reality; it also creates a certain way in a person’s mind about his/her understanding of their world.

Salman Rushdie’s article in the London Times issue of July 3, 1988 is a significant document in which he speaks of two waves of decolonising imposed on English. The first wave was the wave of the American and Irish writers, James Joyce-Samuel Beckett, Ralph Ellison-James Baldwin, and their contemporaries. The second wave is in the erstwhile colonies where, “English, no longer English language, grows from many roots; and those whom it once colonised are carving out large territories within the language for themselves”.

In the same article Rushdie also refers with admiration to the work ‘All About H.Hatterr’ by G.V. Desani “who showed how English could be bent and kneaded until it spoke in an authentically Indian voice”. Desani is considered as the first writer who attempted to decolonise the English language in his book ‘All About H.Hatterr ’, though not seriously and consciously as Rushdie did in his books.

In his article “Common Wealth Literature does not exist” Rushdie comments “Indian society and Indian Literature have a complex and developing relationship with the English language”. He also remarks in the same article that English is the Post-colonial India’s literary language “not only because of its technical vocabularies and the international communication which it makes possible, but also simply to permit two Indians to talk to each other in a tongue which neither party hates”.

Salman Rushdie is a Post-colonial writer who wants to beard the British literary lion in its own den. He comments thus: “We can’t simply use the language the way the British did; it needs remaking for our own purposes […] To conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free”. Rushdie uses English in his own unique way to decolonise the language. He has kneaded and twisted English so that it had become the right medium for expressing his thoughts and views just as he wanted.

Rushdie adopts the style of ‘magic realism’ in his fiction. ‘Magic Realism’ is term originally coined by Franz Roh, a prominent German art critic in 1925 to describe the tendencies in the work of certain German painters. Essentially the art described as “Magic Realism” was realistic and also simultaneously possessed with a strange dream like quality. The term got recognition and was adopted as an art form in the United States with the 1943 exhibition of Modern Art by American artists at the New York Museum of Modern Art. The term was applied to literature in the late 1940’s by the Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier, who recognised the tendency of his native region’s traditional storytellers as well as contemporary writers to illuminate the mundane by means of the fabulous. Magic realism was basically a Latin American literary phenomenon characterised by the incorporation of fantastic or mythical elements matter-of-factly into otherwise realistic fiction.

Magic realist novels and stories have typically a strong narrative drive, in which the recognizably realistic mingles with the unexpected and the inexplicable, and in which elements of dream, fantasy, fairy-tale or mythology combine with the everyday realistic happenings, often in a mosaic or
kaleidoscopic pattern of refraction and recurrence. Some of the prominent writers who nursed up this new style of writing after the post-War years were Jorge Amando (from Brazil), Jorge Luis Borges (from Argentina), Gabriel Garcia Marquez (from Colombia), and Isabel Allende (from Chile). Rushdie has adopted the Magic realist style to perfection and his ‘Midnight's Children’, ‘Shame’ and ‘The Moor's Last Sigh’ are classic examples to illustrate and explain his style. He had consciously adopted ‘Magic Realism’ as the ideal form in his fiction for representing the fragmented histories of the Post-colonial societies of India and Pakistan.

Midnight's Children is a successful fusion of East and West in the terms of form and context. Rushdie employs the narrative technique of the rural Indian oral storytellers and the textual form of Western fiction. He achieves the amalgamation of the literary elements of the ‘East’ and the ‘West’ in terms of narrative technique and form in Midnight’s Children. He also adopts a new form of hybrid Post-colonial text – the hybrid referring to the amalgamation of the Western style of writing and Eastern style of storytelling. Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children is the first deliberate attempt in Post-colonial Fiction, with regard to the aspect in decolonising the English language.

Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children is hailed as a classic in Post-colonial Literature. There emerged a gifted, glittering novelist – one with startling and imaginative and intellectual resources, a master of story telling with the publication of Midnight’s Children. In a much quoted New York Times article, Clark Blaise, a famous American critic wrote that in Rushdie’s writing the whole subcontinent has found its voice.

A first reading of Midnight's Children gives the readers an impression of the book being an ambitious and amorphous work of fiction. The protagonist - Saleem Sinai strikes the reader as not only preternaturally clever, but also omniscient and wholly incredible as a human being. But if we consider Saleem Sinai as Rushdie’s ‘alter ego’, we can understand that the life of Saleem Sinai is the story of the newly independent nation called India, as Rushdie like his hero Saleem was born at the end of the British Raj in India.

Rushdie was exposed to English from an early age. His family spoke Urdu but Rushdie started to learn English from the age of five. He was encouraged by his parents to use English at home for everyday discourse. This double exposure to English and the vernacular from an early age can be considered the main reason for much of the word play and versatility in Rushdie’s fiction. Rushdie’s experimentation with language is one of his remarkable achievements. “No Indian novelist has had the courage to handle English language with the gaiety and joyousness of Rushdie”, remarks M.L. Raina, regarding Rushdie’s style.

Rushdie’s use of English flavoured with the vernacular, a combination of Hindi and Urdu words in the text is a new dimension of Post-colonial writing. African writers like Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Chinua Achebe, particularly follow this style of writing. They introduce the folk songs of the African tribes, the name of their festivals and the war chants in their text. Although Indian English writers like Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, Khushwant Singh and G.V. Desani are forerunners in this
aspect, Rushdie stands out among the lot with his cunning and startling use of translated words, phrases, allusions and metaphors from the vernacular incorporated into the English text.

Rushdie’s attempt to decolonise English starts in the very first paragraph of ‘Midnight’s Children’, where Saleem Sinai tells the readers about the various names by which he had been addressed in his lifetime. The phrase ‘Piece-of-the-moon’ is obviously a literal translation of the Hindi phrase ‘chand-ka-tukra’. He often brackets a Hindi word or phrase or idiom with an English translation placed immediately before or after it for the benefit of the western readers. For instance, we can consider three of the North Indian idioms translated and used by Rushdie in Midnight’s Children:

“The smoke will take time to go”

“In any war the field of battle suffers worse devastation than either army”

“I swear on my mother’s head.”

He uses Hindi words like “ayah, baba, begum, dupatta, paan, kurta, junglee, janum, goonda, badmash, bibi, mausi, muhalla, sadhu, maharaj”, and ‘haddi-phaelwan’ expansively in his text making an acrobatic exuberance in his English prose. At times he makes both a Hindi and an English word come together to form a name or phrase. For instance we can consider the following coinages from the text: ‘lathi-stick’, ‘Picture Singh’, ‘dhobi-bundle’, ‘jaikhana’, and ‘Dilli-dekho machine’.

In Midnight's Children the vocabulary used by a character is part of the narration. Rushdie transcribes many of Padma’s interjections and imperatives to retain the vernacular flavour in his narration. Her constant use of the word ‘Mister’ and inverted statements like “Why you’re waiting? Begin, Begin all over again” are examples to justify Rushdie’s translation because they retain the unique and intriguing flavour of the vernacular.

Rushdie also takes care about the language used by the social classes in India. He attempts to distinguish between the language spoken by the upper class Adam family with that of Mary Pereira’s Goanese English. He takes much care to use the right language at the right place. He also distinguishes the use of English from Saleem’s school friends and that of the American girl Evelyn Lilith Burns.

The metaphorical nature of language, and the question of how far language can be a bar to communication, is explored in Midnight's Children. Rushdie apparently enjoys playing with the literal and metaphorical meanings of different phrases, for instance consider: Ahmed Sinai’s ‘frozen assets’ refers to the failed business venture symbolized by his icy testicles. In another instance, Saleem plots the shift from the literal to the metaphoric. Facing financial ruin following the collapse of his land reclamation programme, Ahmed Sinai is further tormented by plans to alter the system of taxation, complaining that the government is going to pot all over the people. “He stomped off”, declares Saleem, “leaving me with a clear understanding of what people meant when they said the country was going to pot.” It serves as a possible explanation of one of English’s many cryptic phrases while at the same time redefining it – an example of the ‘Indianisation or Rushdification’ of English, to use the terminology of Catherine Cundy, a well-known critic on Rushdie.
The Canadian critic Neil Ten Kortenaar, who is engaged in an extensive study of the various aspects of Midnight’s Children, has recently compiled a long list of all the Indian words, phrases and allusions in the novel. The list includes names of places like Amul Diaries, Bandung, Chhamb, Dadar etc., which amounts to a total of 144 such names; names of historical figures that includes A.V. Alexander, Catherine of Braganza, Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira, Khushrovand, Sabarmati, and Maneka Gandhi – a total of 178 names; words from Indian languages baap-re-baap, bhang, badmash, charas, dhobi, laddoo, falooda, etc., - a total of 223 such words; words connected with religion like Shiva-lingam, puja, Atharva-veda, Gandhara, sadhu, Kali-yuga, etc., making up of a total of 112 such words; literary and cultural allusions which includes names like Arjuna India Bike, Mumba Devi, Filmfare, Ranji etc., – a total of 139.

One very important aspect that cannot be overlooked is the linking of words together without any commas or hyphens. Midnight’s Children is full of this unique type of usage. For instance, Naseem Aziz’s constant utterance of ‘whatsitsname’ without any full stops or commas in between the words can be cited. Rushdie just places words in unison without any commas making no attempt in separating them, accounting to the exoticising of language done by him in his fiction. The following excerpts from Midnight’s Children are worth noticing:

“And there are so many stories to tell, too many, such an excess of intertwined lives events miracles places rumours, so dense a commingling of the improbable and the mundane!”

“Whatdoyoumeanhowcanyousaythat, they chorused […]”

“I swear Iswearonmymother’shead”

In the first example Rushdie does not insert any commas between the words. Such startling phrases are strewn all over the book making the language quite innovative and interesting. The author feels that Rushdie uses a passage without any punctuation marks to indicate the haste and confusion of his narrator-protagonist Saleem. Rushdie creates his narrator with superhuman vision and extraordinary powers of thought reading in order to make his accounts of different lives as the life of the nation and to make the narrative appear as coming a single witness.

Midnight’s Children talks about three countries – India, Pakistan and Bangladesh but Shame is entirely about Pakistan. The story of Shame is narrated by a disembodied third person, whom Rushdie interrupts frequently with asides about the country of which he is talking about.

Rushdie’s craftsmanship is mature in Shame. The book also has the startling metaphors and vernacular allusions of Midnight’s Children. The narrative is strewn about here and there with Urdu words, translated phrases and idioms from the vernacular.

Shame is a thinly veiled excursion through the history of Pakistan, narrating the rivalry between the most prominent leaders of the country – Chairman Iskandar Harappa (Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in history) and General Raza Hyder (General Zia ul-Haq in reality).
Rushdie’s brilliant tool for narration is his magnificent prose and with the supreme command he has over the language, he fuses fiction with factuality. He recreates English to his taste by combining it with the vernacular colloquialisms and with Hindi and Urdu words. For instance consider these passages from Shame:

“Barbs were flung though the same lattice: ‘Ohe, madam! Where do you think he gets your grand grand clothes?’ ”

“May your grandsons urinate upon your pauper’s grave”

In the second example Rushdie quite skilfully translates literally into English the Urdu curse without undermining the vernacular flavour.

There is an element of fantasy and intrigue prevailing all through the novel. Rushdie symbolizes the home of Omar Khayyam Shakil, ‘Nishapur’ as a womb. The unused rooms, dilapidated staircases, rotting books in the libraries, beautiful women shut up in their massive house all contribute to the pervasive atmosphere of a wonderland. The world described in Shame is one where anything is more than likely to happen. It is a world of magic and reality, of pleasant daydreams and shivering awakenings, of delicate poetry and brutal battles.

Rushdie has deliberately given Shame the dynamics of a fairy-tale, calling it a ‘legend’, ‘a sort of modern fairy-tale’, ‘my fairy story’ and using some of its accepted conventions and inventing a few fanciful features of his own – the ‘once-upon-a-time’ setting, an extensive and isolated mansion almost impenetrable with three mothers being the only inhabitants who jointly give birth to two sons. It can be said that in Shame Rushdie pauses his versatile word play and language pyrotechnics and concentrates on the technique, form and content of the work.

‘The Moor’s Last Sigh’ is an example for Rushdie’s cleverness and brilliance in using language though at some places it appears contrived. Rushdie in this novel has constantly and consciously attempted to exoticise the language of his fiction, probably wishing to amuse and entertain the western readers. The literary gymnastics of Rushdie can be realised by considering the following passages:

“One day you will killofy my heart.”

“Patience is a virtue. I’ll just bide-o my time.”

“‘I’ll give you one chapat,’ she promised, ‘that will breakofy the teeth in your cheeky face.’ ”

Rushdie makes his characters in the novel especially Aurora Zogoiby and the three sisters of the Moor to pull and stretch some of the words they articulate. Numerous such modified words are found in the novel. Here are a few interesting examples: ‘inflictofy, proceedofy, scrubbofy, tubbofy, exceed-o, look-o, wait-o, croak-o’ and ‘dirtified’.

Rushdie consciously tries to exoticise the language spoken by his characters. There is a passage in The Moor’s Last Sigh where Aurora, who is an accomplished painter, utters the following words to Jawaharlal Nehru while receiving an award from him: “That chicken-breasted mame! Edweenie
Mounteenie! ”. One more interesting example is the song that Rushdie has composed in praise of the beauty queen Nadia Wadia’s complete sweep of all the three major beauty pageants of the world.

“There was a song about Nadia Wadia after she conquered the world.

Nadia Wadia you have gone fardia
Whole of India has admiredia
Whole of world you put in whirlia
Beat their girls for you were girlia
I will buy a brand new cardia
Let me be your body guardia […] “.

Rushdie calls the beauty queen not just Nadia, but always Nadia Wadia. The repeated coinages of rhymes though nonsensical are quite amusing. Much of the English coinages used by Rushdie in The Moor's Last Sigh are imaginary. Still the unauthentic usage adds a special flavour to the exotic prose cuisine of Rushdie.

Rushdie undoubtedly is a master manufacturer of felicitous phrases, while attempting to decolonise English. His prose is resplendent with such brilliantly startling words and phrases. He has brought into his writing the first look emerging from new language rhythms, exploiting to great advantage his native experience of Indian vernacular tongues. To validate the claim that Rushdie was the first writer who consciously attempted to decolonise English, the author wishes to present certain literary devices used by him along with a cursory list of suitable examples.

Rushdie inserts North Indian vernacular language habits into flawless English intoned sentences, like double usage of the same word for fluency and rhythm. Consider the following examples.

“Chhi, chhi,” Padma covers her ears, “My God such a dirty- filthy man, I never knew! ” (Midnight 319).

“ – there were grown men rolling in the aisles clutching their bellies, not laughing but crying, Hai Ram! Hai Ram! ” (143).

“These badmashes would not get away with their whistling shistling if it was my affair! ” (Shame 61).

“Only child,” Hasmat Bibi creaked, always always they live in their poor head ” (32).

“You can have. Pudding – shudding? ” (The Moor 23).

“There is no God. Hocus – pocus! Mumbo – jumbo! There is no spiritual life ” (84).

He inserts crisp, befitting vernacular words / phrases into flawless English sentences. Consider the following examples.

“Inspector Sahib, what are you waiting for? ” (Midnight 147).
“Why such formality, such takalluf?” (288)

“I innocently wide – eyed Chaalak Sahib” (Shame 19).

“You stop being someone’s daughter and become someone’s mother instead ekdum, fut-a-fut, pronto ” (155).

“However, after years of such persecution Totah gave in and snapped, bad temperedly: ‘Peesay – safed – hathi!’ ” (The Moor 126 – 127).

“Children at Mahalakmi played ankh micholi, hide – and – go – seek, in and out of the crowds of adult legs” (319).

He engages in transliteration of vernacular idioms. Consider the following examples.

“ […] donkey from somewhere!” (Midnight 118).

“ […] madman from somewhere!” (122).

“ all these persons left simultaneously after a very few moments, without having broken bread or eaten salt ” (Shame 16).

“ May your grandsons urinate upon your pauper’s grave” (17).

“ Sukha lakad ola zelata. You don’t speak Marathi. “When the dry stick burns, everything goes up in flame.” ” (The Moor 293)

“ Hum do hamare do (we two and our two) ” (338).

His masterstrokes in word jugglery are seen in the mixing of metaphors of native and foreign tongues in his texts. For example - the using of phrases like “ garment of humanly honour” (Shame 64) and “ the cloth of modesty ” (Midnight 57), for ‘dupatta’, a mere scarf in the western context.

It could be argued that the most remarkable literary device that Rushdie introduced in his use of English in his fiction was the incorporation of some exclusively Indian (mostly Hindi or Urdu) words, phrases and collocations. He did not alter the basic ingredients; he only added some new spices, which brought exceptional flavour and spiciness to his exquisite prose cuisine. His attempts to decolonise English include the technique of selective lexical fidelity, which leaves some words from the vernacular in the English text. This method is becoming a widely used device for conveying the sense of cultural distinctiveness by most of the Post-colonial fiction writers nowadays. Such a device not only acts to signify the difference between the cultures, but also illustrates the importance of discourse in interpreting cultural concepts.

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