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Decolonising the Colonial Language: Reading Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*

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Abstract: It is always language in which one reads one's culture and its institutional representations. History, hegemony, culture, and memory of any place find their due manifestation through language. And, here, if we look at the linguistic space of India, we find that since the colonial era, it was equally threatened and challenged; however, it remained strong and all-absorbing and hence, like a phoenix, it rose from its ashes, attaining new heights by donning the new colours of the colonial encounter. Indeed, the study of the evolution of English in India undoubtedly presents a story of inevitable conflict between power and resistance, and adoption and subversion. The growth of Indian Writing in English has always been entangled with "the politics of the Empire", where the promotion of the study of the British language and literature in India was part of a well-thought-out colonial enterprise to demean Indian ways of reading and interpreting their own vernacular tongues. However, writers across generations subverted this attempt, and the language itself, to write "back to the empire". Thus, the idea of 'Indianness' in Indian English through literature becomes an even more dynamic phenomenon. In this context, the present paper discusses Salman Rushdie's vision of Indian Writing in English as presented in his novel *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990). He uses an English that decolonises itself and articulates the land's and its people's complexity.

Keywords: Indian English, Imperial English, Hybridity, Multiculturalism, Discourse.

It is always language in which one reads his/her cultural documentation and the institutional representations. History, hegemony, culture, memory of any place finds their due manifestation through language. And, here, if we look at the linguistic space of India, we find that since the colonial era, this has also remained a viable space of contestation and has been equally threatened and challenged, nevertheless, it has always remained strong and an all-absorbing phenomenon. Almost like phoenix it has evolved from the ashes of threats and decay attaining new heights by donning on the complex colours of the colonial encounter. Thus, the study of the evolution of English in India undoubtedly presents a story of an inevitable conflict

between power and resistance; of adoption and subversion. The trajectory of Indian Writings in English has always been entangled with “the politics of the Empire” (Krishnaswamy) where the promulgation of the study of British language and literature in India has been a part of a well thought colonial enterprise to demean Indian ways of reading and interpreting their own vernacular tongues. However, writers across generations have subverted the attempt and the language they use to successfully write “back to the empire”¹. And, here, the idea of ‘Indianness’ in Indian English through literature becomes all the more dynamic as an event. And, to further corroborate the issue and power dynamics involved in use of English in particularly in the writings from post-1980s, the article will take into account Salman Rushdie’s vision of Indian English as presented in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990). The author here uses an English that is decolonising itself and effectively articulates the complexity of the land and its people.

Indeed, one can veritably look at the evolution of the Indian English through the changing lens of Indian English Fictions. Salman Rushdie’s gamut of works in this respect offers an academic milestone. Authors like R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, (‘the undisputed trio’) who build the much-needed literary ground for the generations of writers to flourish are undoubtedly hailed as the grandmasters in this field. Nirad C. Chaudhuri has also been a pioneer in this area. These writers try to emulate and acclimatise the foreign masters through their writings in keeping with an English language that is more or less ‘Standard English’ or rather ‘Imperial English’, highly Eurocentric in form and syntax. The next generation of writers comprised of such great names like Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Arun Joshi and the like. All these writers followed the fundamental tenets of Imperial English or British English. But as Raja Rao in his “Foreword” to the novel *Kanthapura* (1938) voices the gap between the medium of expression and the content of his writing, soon a need is felt to indigenize the medium to capture the complexity of Indian life through a language which will be close to the soil and soul of the people it speaks of. It has to be code breaking and capture the essence of Indian culture which is fluid and flexible. Rushdie here attempts “to break up the natural rhythms of the English language in a different way... to dislocate the English and let other things into it” (Goonetilleke 43). Indeed, when he comes to use the language, it has become a part of sensibility of the Indian subcontinent though yet limited in its scope to affect the life of the masses. However, the urban Indians have started to think in English and expressing themselves in that tongue as something which is core to their interpreting of things in everyday life. Rushdie and his contemporaries like Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth thus further broaden the horizon of Indian Writings in English. With them, the genre gains immense popularity. And, though ever since its publication *Midnight’s Children* (1981) has remained the centre of mass acclaim and critical attention, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* too in its limited frame explores powerfully the dynamics in the use of English in depicting the South Asian sensibility and existence. The book is read more as a novel of fantasy that has the scaffold of a folk lore with mythic creativity, modernity and ingenuity. In fact, the book “operates as a children’s quest narrative that features a young boy travelling to distant lands in search of a

happy ending and as a potent political allegory that confronts pertinent contemporary issues, ranging from the restrictions on freedom of speech imposed by fundamentalist regimes to the pollution of the environment by irresponsible multinational corporations” (Teverson 454). It is almost similar to the literary tradition created by such works as Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726-35), Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in the Wonderland* (1865) or even Sukumar Ray’s *Abol Tabol* (1923) (which is originally written in Bengali and translated in English as *The Weird and the Absurd*). In fact, in the brochure brought out by the ‘British Film Institute’ on *The Wizard of Oz* (1992), Rushdie explains how this film greatly motivated the weaving together the plot of his own work in a more distinct manner. He felt strongly that “to write the tale in such a way as to make it of interest to adults as well as children: . . . from seven to seventy” (qtd. in Sen 662). These writings create a subgenre which in the guise of children’s tell-tale retell the issue of the adult world. However, though can be somewhat put in the same parameter, the narrative successfully flouts the pure English storytelling tradition. And, thus, syntactically too, the book within its thin frame as compared to the grand thickness of *Midnight’s Children* that has much more complex way in presenting the ‘chutnification’² of language, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* too challenges and breaks the lexical code used in Imperial English. And to accomplish this task Rushdie here deploys some definite linguistic strategies. These techniques give a flexibility to handle the work with an effortless ease and finesse.

Rushdie’s first lexical defiance is seen in the manner he consciously uses a plethora of words that are taken from the vocabulary of Hindi, Urdu and Arabic or “Hindustani” as Rushdie calls it in his “Postface” to Indianize, revitalize and decolonise the Colonial English--- *Shah, Baba, Maa, Alif, goalie, Bezabaan, Batcheat, Kitab, Mali, Chup/Chuppee, Gup/Guppee*; names like Haroun, Rashid Khalifa, Soraya, Buttoo, Khattam-Shud, Goopi, Bagha, the symbolic Chattergee Wall, etc. This technique is not something very innovative, experimental and limited as a resource to South Asian writers only. This is rather a well-established tradition. It showcases the importance of fidelity of language. The use “of untranslated words is a clear signifier of the fact that the language which actually informs the novel is an /other language” (Ashcroft 64). Here, Rushdie more than promoting the vernacular Hindi or Urdu, the words, in fact, enrich the English language. He indeed creates a distinct idiom which is postcolonial and postmodern conveying the South Asian experience. And it is through the language that his novel becomes lively, touching and strike a chord with the core of British English.

Also, the reading becomes even more multicultural in perspective as the mannerisms of the people are transferred into syntax that convey particular cultural upbringing and seasoning. For instance, here we may refer to the scene in the book when the protagonist, the titular character, Haroun, along with his father, Rashid, were in ‘The Mail Coach’ (Rushdie 14). It was moving higher on the hilly path in a rocket speed, Haroun looking at the mailbags filled with letters that the driver forgets to collect or deliver, he exclaims, ““Don’t we need to stop for the letters?”” (15). The driver hardly bothers to answer him. He speeds along the road in a desperate manner. At this moment Rashid also cries out to the driver, ““Do we need to go so

blinking fast?” (15). But the driver, Mr. Butt, manages to make the mail coach go even faster. He even compares the bus ride with a slithering glide of a snake. He has made a commitment to the boy to take his father to the top of the mountain to show him the “most spectacular view on earth” (14). The “view of the Valley of K with its golden fields and silver mountains and with the Dull Lake at its heart” (14). An excitement runs through the atmosphere as the driver hurls faster to get to the golden view of the sun-soaked valley. His words and intonation show his overwhelming exhilaration: ““The boy here says that the you sir, Need a View Before Sunset, and maybe it’s so and maybe no. And some might say that the boy here needs A Mother, and maybe it’s so and maybe no. And it’s been said of me that Butt Needs Speed, but but but it may be that my heart truly needs a Different sort of Thrill”” (15). Again, the awkward expressions as in the lines, ““O, Need’s a funny fish: it makes people untruthful. They all suffer from it, but they will not always admit. Hurrah! . . . ‘Thee snow line! Icy patches ahead! Crumbling road surface! Hairpin bends! Danger of avalanches! *Full speed ahead!*”” (15) give a sense of comic relief too.

The driver thus doesn’t even take the mails so that he can fulfil his commitment made to the boy. The speed of the bus shakes the passengers up and down, and thus a lady in anger curses him as ““Crazy buffalo! Looney tune! Desist from your speeding or my possessions will be thrown to Kingdom Come!”” (Rushdie 15). However, what is interesting is the childish manner in which a boy reads the entire event unfolding before him takes us too on a roller-coaster ride where we can very much visualize the entire episode oh how the driver must have been wrestling with the steering wheel, rather balancing the vehicle on the zigzag hilly road and making sharp moves on the curvy turns. The passengers like popcorns on a frying pan popping out of their seats and getting tossed. The speech used here evokes the natural rhythm of Indian diction as well as the rhythmic cacophony of Indian daily life of travelling in public transport. The lines have bumps and so do the Indian roads, yet there are speed and spontaneity. Here, this particular styling of English becomes a veritable medium of defining Indian identity and sensibility. Indeed, as Suchismita Sen says in her article “Memory, Language, Society in Salman Rushdie’s *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*” that the “ . . . use of English to re-create experience that the language is not traditionally equipped to express is one of the prime attractions of Rushdie’s literary style, a style that has been crucial in bringing home the reality of a lost Indian childhood to many of his readers” (656). Another similar case is seen in the text through this dialogue when the character of Oneeta Sengupta, a lonely middle-aged Bengali woman, says to Haroun as she comes to know that he and his father will be out of Alifbay for a trip to the “Valley of K” (Rushdie 11): ““Tip top plan, she said. ‘Yes, both of you, go; it will be like a little holiday, and no need to worry about me, sitting sitting all by myself”” (11). This dramatically records the grief and monotony of her life.

Quite significantly, the book shows that how even gesture is so important in language. It is justly pointed out as Rashid while interpreting the hand movements of Mudra comments: “He has been using the Language of Gesture. As for

what he said, it wasn't 'murder', but Mudra. That's his name. He's been trying to introduce himself! Mudra. Speak Abhinaya. That's what he's been saying. "Abhinaya" is the name of the most ancient Gesture Language of all, which it just so happens I know" (51). The act of speech is not so much what it says in literal sense but what sentiments it evokes in the minds of those who are part of the process of interaction and thus gesture becomes a potent tool as sights and sounds are equally important in communication. One evinces the power of gesture in Indian ways of communication. We love to make patterns with hands and are considered more expressive as means to make one understands our immediate feelings and emotions.

Again, while discussing the impact of sound, it becomes worthwhile to see how Rushdie here uses the effect of onomatopoeia to capture sounds typical to Indian mundane habits and conveying the flavour of a local indigenised cultural perceptions --- 'glug, glug, glug' to capture the noise while an Indian drinks ridiculously; 'varoom varoom' is created from the sound of the jammed accelerator as mostly the way a child mimics it. In fact, Rushdie somewhat ruthlessly overruns the sanctity of purity of British English and throughout the text he conceives a language that is audaciously creative and hybrid. He also invents new forms of words by the technique of hybridization like---Iffing, butting, twistery, fat-cat smiles, slippery snake, pussy-collar-jee/cal, flim-flam, thieflet, tip-top-type, kissy-poo, cuddly-bunny, go-goae. Again, he also incorporates mis-spellings like marvelloso, incredible, fantastick, wonderment. All these are done to read and write in an English that comes very close to the habitual linguistic mannerisms of the people whose stories he is depicting. The incorrect and correct lexical, syntactical binary is here demolished. This has also remained controversial too. Many prominent literary critics of the time like Nalini Iyer and Bonnie Zare who in the "Introduction" chapter from their book *Other Tongues: Rethinking the Language Debates in India* (2009) look down these stylistic features as mere technical gimmicks, a kind of linguistic gymnastic.

However, Rushdie's works are celebrated and will serve as academic milestones in reading Indian English literature. Rushdie effectively forges a multilingual, postcolonial medium to capture the hybridised sensibility and multicultural reality of the people, their attitude, ideological status and perspectives. He seizes the language of the centre and suits it to the cultural ambience of South Asia in general and India in particular. It gives a jolt to the illusory standard of normative or correct usage. Reading Rushdie's work is a syncretic postcolonial experience. And, hence, the text towards the very end makes an emphatic declaration: "'If Khattam-Shud could synthesize anti-stories,' said the Walrus with just a hint of injured pride, 'I should think you'd accept that we can synthesize things, too. . . .'" (Rushdie 79).

Rushdie's playing with language to create a synthesis can be further seen when Haroun's father gives a fanciful detail by using a double pun, of the ostensible French origin of the name of the "Valley K" (17). He then proceeds to further explain how the present name of the valley comes into use. The name actually comes from "the ancient tongue of Franj" (17). After "Kach-Mer" (17), "Kosh-Mar" (17), it is now "Valley of K" (17). When the boy out of curiosity asks "'Do those names mean

anything? (17)”, Rashid emphatically replies that “[a]ll names mean something” (17). “Kach-Mer” (17) once meant “the place that hides a Sea” (17) while “Kosh-Mar is a ruder name” (17). In earlier days, the word in fact used to be synonymous with evil thoughts. And, hence, it is no longer in use today. Creativity is linked to hybridity. The book thus promotes linguistic and cultural heterogeneity. The characters in the novel thus fight absolutism and any kind of singularity. It speaks of fluidity and flexibility in the nature of very existence. And, the ending is thus highly optimistic that successfully demolishes despotism.

Indeed, Rushdie exploits the resources he can wield to have a re-orientation of the English language in this book. He creates poetic synthesis. Undoubtedly, the plurality of lives in India and the natural rhythm in Indian speech, due to colonial linguistic encounter, English to us is an everyday language where one freely mixes it up with vocabulary items of other languages and the so-called impure ways of writing are now being quite accepted medium of communication. The book is thus fluently postmodern in its form and theme. And the use of language justly celebrates de-centring and hybridity. The technical/stylistic elements therefore stretch further to underscore a larger dimension of a sensibility that is unique and is quite fluid and flexible in perspective like the sea of stories in the text. The characters are locked in stories that are again truly postmodern and defying boundaries of language. We have intertextual references to *Arabian Nights*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Goopy Gayen and Bagha Bayen* and many more. It creates a profusion of India’s multicultural experience. Its history is rooted and shaped by encounter with different culture and their language hence the sanctity of any pure form of language is always a myth although the elementary inalterability of any language is also equally true. But that doesn’t matter much as language always depends upon its functionality rather than purity. Rushdie’s discourse in the text produces meaning that resists shadow lines of divisions at any level and embraces fluidity and multiplicity which is the ultimate reality of India. Instead, the text interweaves languages to create a linguistic continuum.

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Endnotes:

1. Echoing the title and thematic issue as put in the book *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) which foregrounds the relationship between colonialism, language, and literary resistance. Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. Routledge, 1993.
2. The term "chutnification" is used by Salman Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* to signify the hybridization and mixing of Indian linguistic and cultural elements into the English language. Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight's Children*. Vintage Books, 2006.