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FROM ENGLISH TO 'englishes': APPROPRIATING LANGUAGE AND NARRATION IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*

Nisha Nambiar¹✉

Abstract:

The paper examines the problematics of the splintering of English into 'englishes' in the postcolonial context and deciphers how the postcolonial exegetical tools have been employed by the Indian English novelists of the late twentieth century. The writers have been successful in creating a new identity by adapting their own linguistic, cultural and sociological contexts in their writings. The new-words which have been invented, borrowed, or however devised in any given culture have their own resonances and their own connotations. The need to preserve one's identity and culture to resist the hegemony of globalization is one of the most pressing concerns of these writers. To elaborate upon this, the paper will discuss the narrative technique and language as creatively employed by Arundhati Roy in her debut novel, *The God of Small Things*. It will analyse how the text succeeds in "writing back to the empire" through the linguistic processes of appropriation and abrogation. Roy has freed herself from the shackles of traditional stiffness in the usage of English and has in the process created a new 'english' to absorb the nuances of her region. *Small Things* has been applauded for its fresh innovative language, its narrative energy and its willingness to raise questions that are socially relevant.

Keywords: Innovative Language, Narrative, Regional Nuances

Before I venture into an appraisal of Arundhati Roy's re-fashioning of language and the subtle nuances of her narrative strategies, a brief introduction on postcolonial writing would be pertinent. Postcolonial writing distinguishes the English of the erstwhile imperial center and the 'english' which as a linguistic code has been transformed into several distinctive varieties throughout the world. This necessitates for postcolonial writing to define itself, as Ashcroft et al. observes, by "seizing the language of the center and replacing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place" (*The Empire* 38). Writers refashion the language using direct glossing in the text, new lexical forms which have semantic and morphological exigencies of a mother tongue, direct inclusion of untranslated lexical items, ethno-rhythmic prose, by refusing to follow standard English syntax and transcription of dialect and language variants of many different kinds (61-77). A metonymic or cultural gap is formed when the language is thus appropriated. The unglossed words, phrases and allusions unknown to the reader become synecdochic of the writer's culture wherein he represents his world in the coloniser's language and at the same time emphasizes difference. In his lecture on "The Future of Englishes", David Crystal opines that the language does not show great variations in pronunciation and grammar but they increasingly display

1 [Author] ✉ [Corresponding Author] Assistant Professor of English, Krishna Menon Memorial Government Women's College, Pallikunnu, Kannur, 670004, Kerala, INDIA. E-mail: nishasudesh@gmail.com

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cultural differences which are reflected primarily in the lexicon. The language which operates in this way achieves what a simple translation could never have (10). The texture, sound, rhythms and syntax of the original language determines the shape and mode of the new 'english'. The meanings of unfamiliar words which emerges from the context must be deciphered by the western/other readers in the same manner other culturally embedded terms are done. This refusal to make concessions for the western reader marks a new phase in the writing of fiction in Indian English. The novels of the last two decades of the twentieth century have achieved this by bringing "different languages into comic collision, testing the limits of communication between them celebrating India's linguistic diversity, and taking over the English language to meet the requirements of an Indian context (Mee 320). Like Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy too displays a creative inventiveness in breaking all the rules of standard English and creating a new register close to the vernacular Indian tongue. In Roy, the wordplay is sustained through a supreme command over the language as evident in her award winning debut novel, *The God of Small Things* (cited here after as *Small Things*). This is also true with regard to her second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* which poses to include not two languages as in *Small Things*, but several tongues of India with special emphasis to Urdu and Kashmiri.

I

Ayemenem in the Kottayam district of south Kerala becomes Roy's chosen locale for her narrative in *Small Things*. To her mother's query on having chosen Ayemenem as the village and the Meenachal as the river, Roy elucidates: "'Because I want people to know that we have stories.' It's not that India has no stories. Of course, we have stories— beautiful and brilliant ones. But those stories, because of the languages in which they're written, are not privileged. So nobody knows them" ("Development Nationalism" 77). The novel narrates not one story but a number of them encompassing four generations and she connects her region with others of the state, the country, and even with those of other continents. The narrative makes use of several 'texts' to narrate itself which include encyclopaedias, atlases, novels, dramas, fairy tales, films, music and theatre. The very first chapter of the novel, as in the exposition of a Shakespearean play, introduces most of the characters and almost all the events that are related to the Ipe family of Ayemenem. Despite its conventional plot, what makes the novel unique is the manner of its narration, the language used and the treatment of the intricacies of the locale. Referring to her innovative use of language, Nancy Ellen Batty observes:

Through the use of free indirect discourse, occasional lapses into stream of consciousness narrative, and frequent recourse to word play, Roy manages to capture the immediacy of perception from a child's point of view, using its juxtaposition against the impoverished and often cynical interior lives of the adults to condemn the latter's self-interested actions. (334)

Small Things pivots around the feudal Syrian Christian family of the Ipes. The plot develops around the ill-fated forbidden relationship of the high caste Ammu, the twins' mother and the untouchable, Velutha. The death of the English Sophie Mol (Ammu's brother, Chacko's daughter) by drowning in the Meenachal river sparks off the events in the story. To save themselves and their mother the twins are forced by their grand aunt, Baby Kochamma to testify Velutha as the murderer. The realisation that they had unknowingly been responsible for the brutal death of their beloved Velutha in the police station shatters their childhood and leads to their estrangement. Roy weaves her narrative strategies with the oppressive socio-cultural realities that her characters are confronted with. In doing so it closely overlaps Ranajit Guha's theorising of the 'small voices of history.' Guha observes that when the small voices get a hearing, it will do so only by "interrupting the telling in the dominant version, breaking up its storyline and making a mess of its plot" ("The Small Voice" 316). As a major part of the story is narrated as seen through the eyes

of Rahel, it is only natural that the trauma encountered by the children has forced her narrative as well as Roy's to shudder. In a novel which gives prominence to the small voices such tremors are bound to happen. The linear time frame of the plot is bifurcated wherein the novelist effortlessly shifts from one point of view to another to mingle the past, present and future.

Roy reconstitutes her narrative with a thorough mixing of history and story, fact and fiction, the private and the public, and the big and small things. She interrogates western linear historiography through the metaphor of the Earth woman. Chacko describes the Earth woman, the four-thousand six-hundred-million-years-old earth to be a forty-six-year-old woman. As the first animals appeared only when she was forty, human civilisation the most recent "began only two hours ago in the Earth Woman's life" (*Small Things* 54). Hence Chacko makes the twins understand that "the whole of contemporary history, the World Wars, the War of Dreams, the Man on the Moon, science, literature, philosophy, the pursuit of knowledge – was no more than a blink of the Earth Woman's eye" (54). By radically deviating from the dominant model of historiography prevalent for over a century, Roy's intention is to deflate man's claim to superiority over histories on account of his reason by unlocking the laws of the universe. In doing so, she reaffirms the significance of the existence of the 'small things' while contrasting it with man's diminutive role in the cosmos.

Roy's linguistic strategies function as a tool of resistance to the West not just by appropriation but by endowing a new legitimacy to this hybrid form. Recognising her innate ability to sport with the language, Kamala Das observes that "Arundhati uses English as a plaything" (qtd in Ghose 125). Roy's text tears apart standard English as she subverts the traditional rules of grammar and syntax, discards standard punctuation, invents neologisms (vomity [107], outdoorsy [13], stoppited [141]), telescopes words ("furrywhirring", "sariflapping", "whatisit?" [6]), splits them apart ("Bar Nowl"[193], "Mo-stunfortunate"[130]) and reads them backwards ("NAIDNI YUB, NAIDI EB"[58], "'nataS in their seye'"[60]). Commenting on her verbal wizardry and exuberance, Jaydeep Sarangi states that she "re-pidgins" (Indian) English through her stylistic experimentations (151). Roy's penchant for framing compound words, few of which are "viable die-able age" (3) "kind-schoolteacher-voice" (146), "dinner-plate-eyed" (308). She also uses literary strategies such as repetition (of lines and instances) thereby suggesting that each instance can be metonymically extended to the larger social world. Commenting on the structure of her book, the architect in Roy says in an interview to Taisha Abraham:

To me the architecture of the book is something that I worked very hard at. It really was like designing a building . . . the use of time, the repetition of words and ideas and feelings. It was really a search for coherence—design coherence — in the way that every last detail of a building — its doors and windows, its structural components—have, or at least ought to have, an aesthetic, stylistic integrity, a clear indication that they belong to each other, as must a book. I didn't just write my book. I designed it. (90-91)

II

The language of the text highlights the rich overpowering regional element. Aijaz Ahmad who has been critical of her ideology and political positioning vis-à-vis communism acclaims her as "the first Indian writer in English where a marvellous stylistic resource becomes available for provincial, vernacular culture without any effect of exoticism or estrangement, and without the book reading as a translation" (108). Through her interpolation of words from Malayalam, Roy ascertains that the intensity of the world she perceived remains intact. The rhyme on trains, one of the first lessons learnt in school ("Koo-koo kokum theevandi" [285]) and the vellam song ("Thaiy thaiy thaka thaiy thaiy thome" [211]) sung by the children are some of the favourites of Keralites.

The essence of her Ayemenem is captured through the graphic descriptions of the weather, the Meenachal river, the flora and fauna, the Kathakali performances and its people. The local colour is further established through Adoor Basi, the ace comedian of Malayalam movies of yesteryears (143), the song from the popular Malayalam movie, *Chemmeen* (219-20) and the folk song sung by Kuttappen (206). “mittam” (295), “chenda” (192), “Akkara”(196), “*Aiyyo paavam*”(131), “*ickilee*”(177) are among the numerous words used from the vernacular. The un glossed expressions in the text begin from the very kinship terms associated with the names of the characters as addressed in the Kottayam region among Christian families–Baby Kochamma, Pappachi, Mammachi, Ammachi, Esthappen and Sophie Mol. Names of food items like “chakka vilachethu”(138), “idi appams for breakfast, kanji and meen for lunch”(210) “avalose undas”(273); items of clothing and ornaments(14) appear in the text as unitalicised whereas terms like *veshya* used by the Inspector on account of Ammu’s connections with the untouchable have been italicised.

Belonging to avowed Anglophile family, the use of English authenticates their aversion for the mother tongue. Chacko insists on speaking in English at home but resorts to Malayalam when he thanks the protestor in the rally for shutting the car’s bonnet at the level crossing in Cochin (“Thanks, *keto!*...’Valarey thanks!’ [70]). Mammachi addresses the servant as “*Kando Kochu Mariye*” (178) and Baby Kochamma uses “meeshas” in Malayalam in connection with Inspector Thomas Mathew. This stresses not only the deviance from standard English but also makes clear the power relations imbricated within the society. Under Chacko’s influence, the twins seem to enjoy speaking English, though in private they speak their native language Malayalam. They are punished to write ‘impositions’– “I will always speak in English” a hundred times by Kochamma for the sin committed. The use of English, through its very utterance, was an indication of the supremacy of the white civilisation against the vernacular. Their naughty behaviour of reading English backwards signifies the rebellion of the colonized against the colonizer. This recalls Bhabha’s concept of mimicry which simultaneously discloses the ambivalence of the colonial discourse as well as disrupts it. This obsequiousness to English, in a sense, recycles the same history of the colonialist enterprise. Hence, Pappachi and his sister, Baby Kochamma in the novel are akin to the coloniser imposing new regimes on the women and children of the family.

Vernacular speech is mainly resorted to by the characters who do not belong to the Ipe family as also those of the lower strata of Ayemenem society. Cynthia Van den Driesen considers Roy’s use of untranslated words as “perhaps the most arresting mode of appropriation” which forces “the reader of the master text to negotiate this encounter with the opposed cultural identity of the racial Other” (369). The critic further points out that by reverting to the vernacular it “serves as a mode of reinforcing a sense of special intimacy, even a collusion between speaker and person addressed.” Comrade K.N.M. Pillai who converses to Chacko in stilted idiomatic English switches to Malayalam when he discusses the role of Velutha as a communist and the undue privileges he obtains at the pickle factory (“*Oru kariyam parayattey*”[277] or when affectionately addressing his wife as “*Allay edi, Kalyani?*” [278]). Other such expressions are used by the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man (101), Murlidharan at the level crossing (64), the workers of the pickle factory (171), Kochu Maria (179, 185) and Kuttappen(206).

This moulding of a new hybrid vocabulary assists the overall framework of the novel in staging a protest against the marginalising of local cultures. The Kottayam dialect of Malayalam is brought into the dialogue to create a sociolinguistic authenticity. An imitation of the Malayalee speaker’s English accent is created in the rendering of Sir Walter Scott’s poem, “Lochinvar” (271-72) and Mark Antony’s speech from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*: “*I cometoberry Caesar, not to praise him./ Theevil that mendoo lives after them/ The goodisofit interred with their bones;*”(274-75). Other such

indigenised pronunciation of English words are found in “Amayrica” (129), “Die-vorced”(130) “one mint”(134) and “stoo”(210). Priyamvada Gopal notes that “a bilingual sensibility where English is not taken for granted as a first language opens up literary possibilities in this novel, which is constantly aware of the joys and pitfalls of language acquisition” (154). This is illustrated in the following dialogue:

‘Thang God,’ Estha said.
 ‘Thank God, Estha,’ Baby Kochamma corrected him. . . .
 Their Prer NUN sea ayshun was perfect. (154)

The interesting feature to be noted here is that Roy’s striking use of the language attempts to not only make aware the metonymic gap that exists between the indigenous culture and the colonialist on the other but also reflects a world located in its own difference of experience. For the novelist, Indian English operates as just one among the many languages of India. In his essay “Imagining India in English”, Murari Prasad traces her art of unique phrasing and rhythm to the early Indian English writer G.V. Desani (*All about H. Hatterr* [1948]) as well as Salman Rushdie. But Prasad argues that she goes well beyond them in her “multi-level linguistic manipulation” (128). Comparing the two, Aijaz Ahmad claims that unlike Rushdie, Roy writes of the vernacular culture with an assuredness and is “deeply committed to Realism to take flight into magic Realism” (108). He applauds the naturalness in which Roy uses English and adds that “the novel is actually *felt* in English.” Roy observes that a writer “spends a lifetime journeying into the heart of the language, trying to minimize, if not eliminate, the distance between language and thought” (“Power Politics” 152). “Language”, she says “is the skin on my thought” (Abraham 91). In *Small Things*, she “wrenches the English language from its cultural roots” by using “collaged words, regional aphorisms, and culturally eclipsed meanings” to create, as Taisha Abraham terms it “her own ‘Locusts Stand I’” (89).

The novel’s preoccupation with the issues of social relevance is presented by Roy through her natural and spontaneous wit which supersedes all traces of sentimentality. Resorting to many of the conventional devices such as irony, exaggeration and sarcasm, she assaults the lopsided values of the male dominated society. The study thus concludes with the observation that Roy’s style of toying with the language and the perception of her region has challenged the hegemonic power of the colonial language and subverted it by using different strategies.

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