

Linguistic Experiments in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* O.P. Dwivedi

*The English language is nobody's special property. It is the property of the imagination.*¹

The use of English language in the postcolonial era has undergone a significant change and this has been possible, as Derek Walcott implies in the quotation above, because of the writer's flying imagination. Prominent writers of Indian English Fiction like Raja Rao, G.V. Desani, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai have used English creatively, showing in their writings how far English can be 'Indianised'. Indianisation and hybridisation are traits in their works which constitute an integral part of their linguistic experiments.

Salman Rushdie created a furore with the publication of his novel, *Midnight's Children* (1981). Its popularity rests on two things: the innovative use of English as a language, and the fantastic representation of history. While Rushdie resorts to the use of 'magic realism' to oppose the Euro-centrism of master discourses, the innovativeness of Rushdie's English is prompted by a desire to capture the spirit of Indian culture with all its multiplicity and diversity. As a linguistic experimentalist, Rushdie attempts to destroy 'the natural rhythms of the English language' and to dislocate 'the English and let other things into it'.² Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* best illustrates his strategy of 'Indianising, revitalising and decolonising the English language'.³ Here in this paper, I shall try to highlight the linguistic innovations of Salman Rushdie in his *Midnight's Children*.

At the first glance, the most inviting feature of Salman Rushdie's language is the bounteous sprinkling of English with Hindi and Urdu words throughout *Midnight's Children*, and this colourful sprinkling provides a certain amount of oriental flavour to the novel. This is probably done for two specific reasons: firstly, to situate the novel in its geographical location in the various cities of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh; and secondly, to subvert a language associated with colonial powers. Evidently, the English of *Midnight's Children* is not the Queen's English (or Standard English); it is the English best suited to express the sensibility of South Asian readers, even if they are living abroad. But though the novel abounds in Hindi and Urdu words, Rushdie has added no notes or glossary to explain them fully to Western readers, as Raja Rao has done at the end of his monumental novel, *Kanthapura* (1938). Like Vikram Seth in his famous novel,

¹ William Baer, *Conversations with Derek Walcott* (Jackson : University of Mississippi Press, 1996), 109.

² Sisir Kumar Chatterjee, "Chutnification": The Dynamics of Language in *Midnight's Children*, *Salman Rushdie's 'Midnight's Children': A Reader's Companion* (New Delhi: Asia Book Club, 2004), 253.

³ Chatterjee, 253.

A Suitable Boy (1993), Rushdie does not think it necessary to provide explanations.⁴ Rushdie rather thinks that the text of the novel should be self-explanatory and absorbing in itself. In truth, Raja Rao's English remains Sanskritised, whereas Rushdie's English is an example of the hybrid discourses of a cosmopolitan writer. According to Tabish Khair, Rushdie is 'mostly trying to appropriate a kind of Indian English that his characters are supposed to speak while Rao is *mostly* translating the vernacular spoken by his characters.'⁵ This fact accounts for a lot of difference between the attitudes of these two writers towards English.

True to his grain, Rushdie makes use of a number of Hindi, Urdu and Hindustani words, phrases and expressions in *Midnight's Children*. Such words, phrases and expressions form a long list, including 'ekdum' (at once), 'angrez' (Englishman), 'phut-a-phut' (in no time), 'nasbandi' (sterilization), 'dhoban' (washerwoman), 'feringee' (the same as 'angrez'), 'baba' (grandfather), 'garam masala' (hot spices), 'rakshasas' (demons), 'fauz' (army), 'badmaas' (badmen), 'jailkhana' (prison), 'baap-re-baap' (o, my father), 'hai hai' (exclamatory expression), 'sab kuch' (all things), 'bas' (enough is enough), 'chi-chi' (an expression of contempt), 'yaar' (friend), 'gora' (white-skinned one), 'pyar kiya to darna kya' (why to fear in love), 'goondas' (musclemen), 'hubshee' (demon), 'ooper nichey' (up and down), 'sarpanch' (head of a village), 'kahin' (said), 'bhai-bhai' (brother-brother), 'it' (end), 'zenana' (harlem), 'crorepatis' (a man of crores), 'ayah' (nurse), 'nimbu-pani' (lemon-juice), 'paan' (betel), 'khichri' (mixed food), 'gur' (a molasses), 'rasgullas' (a kind of sweet), 'gulabjamuns' (another sweet), 'jalebis' (a variety of sweet), 'barfi' (a sweet), 'bhel-puri' (a sort of tasty snack)⁶, and many others. The use of such expressions provides an amount of authenticity and credibility to the novel. It also enhances the quantum of reality which is so much needed in an historical novel like *Midnight's Children*.

In her Introduction to *Rushdie's Midnight's Children: A Book of Critical Readings* (2003), Meenakshi Mukherjee mentions 'linguistic risks' that Rushdie took with utter abandon, defining them as 'getting away with the use of the mongrel street language of cities, daring to translate idioms and puns mediated by no apology, no footnote, no glossary.'⁷ Though Mukherjee's contention that Rushdie 'get[s] away with the use of the mongrel street language of cities' is difficult to accept, as Rushdie occasionally resorts to film-songs and film-language in this novel, her observation that he

⁴ In an interview with T. Vijay Kumar, Rushdie remarks that 'to do footnotes or to do notes at the end was a kind of defeat. The story has to tell itself, it must not rely on explanations. If it needs footnotes, it's a failure'.

'An Interview with Salman Rushdie', *Rushdie's Midnight's Children: A Book of Readings*, ed. Meenakshi Mukherjee (New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2003), 217.

⁵ Tabish Khair, 'Language Problems of Dialogue and Mapping', *Babu Fictions: Alienation in Contemporary Indian English Novels* (New Delhi : O.U.P., 2005), 110.

⁶ Chatterjee 253-4.

⁷ Meenakshi Mukherjee, 'Introduction', *Rushdie's Midnight's Children: A Book of Readings* (New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2003), 10.

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is 'daring to translate idioms and puns mediated by no apology, no footnote, no glossary' is definitely sustainable. She commends *Midnight's Children* as 'a theoretical discourse about nation, history and their narrativity,' as 'the paradigmatic post-colonial text subverting the notions of received historiography and indigenising both the language and the narrative mode of the colonising culture', and as 'the quintessential fictional embodiment of the postmodern celebration of de-centring and hybridity.'⁸

The English of Rushdie is decidedly postcolonial and postmodern. It gives us glimpses into his conscious craftsmanship, which aims at decentering and hybridity. And his skill at 'decentering' and 'hybridity' is best seen when he, at the lexical level, employs some Latin and Arabic words. Some of the outstanding examples of this are: 'mucuna pruritis', 'feronia elephanticus', 'sunt lacrimae rerum' (all Latin), 'kam ma kam', 'fi qadin azzaman', 'tilk al-gharaniq al', and 'ula wa inna shafa ata-hunna la-turtaja' (all Arabic).

Sometimes Rushdie combines words and phrases to make compounds, a style later imitated by Arundhati Roy in her *The God of Small Things* (1997). Such compounds are galore in *Midnight's Children*, such as 'overandover', 'updownup', 'downdowndown', 'suchandsuch', 'noseholes', 'birthanddeath', 'whatdoyoumeanhowcanyousaythat', 'blackasnight', 'nearlynine', 'nearlynineyearold', 'almostseven', and 'godknowswhat'.⁹ These compounds display the extent of Rushdie's inventiveness and show his mastery of the English language. He employs it as he wishes it to suit his purpose. But the danger of deviations from the traditional English, especially in matters of grammar and syntax, lies in creating unwanted difficulties for readers. Also, the novelist might be branded modish or faddist who is out to demonstrate his sharp perception of the language in order to dazzle his readers. Rushdie may be a trendsetter of 'mongrel English', but his writing smacks of a touch of artificiality and appropriation. Hence Tabish Khair rightly points out:

The only Englishes which could be dubbed 'not artificial' and 'unproblematically Indian' would probably be the types used by Narayan or by Ghosh in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, who more or less write their minimally stylized version of the English grapholect.¹⁰

In a way, Khair suggests here that Rushdie uses a highly 'stylized version of the English grapholect.' And as Ben Jonson said of Shakespeare, Rushdie is 'not a safe model' for the future writers of English because of his 'chutnification' of English.

Rushdie uses slang – mostly Indian – very often in the text of *Midnight's Children*; for example, 'funtoosh', 'goo', 'gora', 'zenana', 'hubsee', etc. He does not stop here and proceeds to create new slang words like 'other pencil', 'cucumber', 'soo soos', and 'spittoon'. Thus, Padma (the heroine) says to Saleem Siani (the hero/protagonist),

⁸ Mukherjee 9.

⁹ Chatterjee 254.

¹⁰ Khair 109-110.

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'Now that the writery is done, let's see if we can make your other pencil work!'¹¹ Here 'writery' is used for 'writing' and 'your other pencil' for male sex organ. The language has become both inventive and suggestive here. Similarly, 'cucumber' also refers to the male generative organ, as in the expression 'the useless cucumber hidden in my pants' (141). It is quite imagistic and suggestive. Rushdie is fond of using such suggestive words and phrases, and is sharp to watch others urinating behind a bush, and then he writes: '...now I saw him and Cyrus behind a bush, doing such funny rubbing things with their soo-soos!' (18). He does not spare, in his playfulness with words, even the female sex organ, for which he uses the word 'spittoon', as found in Saleem Sinai's frank confession: '... despite everything she tries, I cannot hit her spittoon' (39). Thus through these examples we discover that nothing is sacrosanct for Rushdie when he is involved in gimmickry with words, phrases and expressions.

Occasionally, Rushdie resorts to deliberate misspellings of words. Examples are: 'unquestionabel', 'straaange', 'existance', 'ees', etc. He also uses some incorrect words, from the grammatical viewpoint, such as 'mens', 'lifeliness', and 'informations'. All these deliberate misspellings point to the use of English by Indians in their daily lives. We also discover certain lapses of grammar in the novel, such as in 'August 15th, 1947' and 'June 25th, 1975', and no use of the article 'the' before 'Emergency'. Such lapses are, probably, deliberate in order to flout the traditionally accepted norms of grammar. The use of 'once upon a time' in the passage quoted above seems to be redundant, though it serves to create the impression of a fairy-tale. This kind of expression tends to create 'magic realism' in the novel, for *Midnight's Children* is both history and fantasy at the same time.

In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie tries to destroy 'the notion of the purity or centrality of English' by inventing new forms of existing English words or by effecting 'creative hybridization.'¹² Though one can find a number of examples of this in the text of the novel, some of them are given here: 'dislikeable', 'doctori', 'unbeautiful', 'sonship', 'memoryless', 'historyless', 'dupatta-less', 'chutnification', etc.

A remarkable feature of Rushdie's linguistic experiment is repetition of words, phrases, even descriptions of events. Some words/phrases have been recurrently used in *Midnight's Children*; for instance, 'form', 'shape', 'fragments', 'broken', 'cracks', 'pieces', 'centre-parting', 'spittoon', 'black', 'white', 'nose', 'knees', 'snake', 'ladder', 'chutney', etc. In fact, a fine example of the repetition of words, phrases and even descriptions of events can be witnessed at the very beginning of the novel, where Rushdie writes about Saleem's birth in a grandiloquent manner:

I was born in the city of Bombay...once upon a time. No, that won't do, there's no getting away from the date; I was born in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on

¹¹ Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (New York : Avon, 1982) 39. Subsequent references are given in parentheses in the text.

¹² Chatterjee 254.

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August 15th, 1947. And the time? The time matters, too. Well then: at night. ...On the stroke of the midnight, as a matter of fact. Clock-hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came. Oh, spell it out, spell it out: at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world. There were gasps. And, outside the window, fireworks and crowds. (3)

A parallel description of the birth of Saleem Sinai's son is found towards the close of the novel:

He was born in Old Delhi... once upon a time. No, that won't do, there's no getting away from the date: Aadam Sinai arrived at a night-shadowed slum on June 25th, 1975. And the time? The time matters, too. As I said: at night. No, it's important to be more... On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. Clock-hands joined palms. Oh, spell it out, spell it out: at the instant of India's arrival at Emergency, he emerged. There were gasps; and, across the country, silences and fears. And owing to the occult tyrannies of that benighted hour, he was mysteriously handcuffed to history, his destiny indissolubly chained to those of his country. (419)

By using such repetitions, Rushdie successfully associates the history of the individual to the history of the nation, and thus Saleem is 'handcuffed to history'(1) right from his birth.

An important matter to be discussed is Rushdie's narrative style. He makes use of the first-person narration in *Midnight's Children*. Right from the very beginning to the end of the novel, one can easily mark the unfolding of the story in the first person; for instance, 'I was born in the city of Bombay' (3) 'I permit myself to insert a Bombay-talkie style close-up' (414). The use of 'I' renders the narration authentic and trustworthy. It is through the eyes, and the language, of the narrator Saleem Sinai that various events, turns in history and characters are seen. Rushdie uses a childlike idiosyncrasy to create the character of Saleem. The language which he uses for this purpose is what Tabish Khair calls 'a stylized staged-cum-spoken-English'.¹³ There is a dramatic element in Rushdie's prose style, and it contains the flavor of speech. Rushdie uses the ironic pidgin English as spoken in certain middle-class urban circles in and outside India. At times he translates literally from Indian languages. He also makes use of incorrect English (as pointed out in the preceding paragraph) as spoken by semi-literate Indians. The first-person narration displays the involvement of the narrator in the happenings around (and this is diametrically opposed to the sense of detachment usually found in the third-person narration).

In her well-known critique of Indian English Fiction, *The Twice Born Fiction* (1974), Meenakshi Mukherjee comments, 'the most significant challenge is the task of using the English language in a way that will be distinctively Indian and still remain

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English'.¹³ Rushdie has faced this challenge squarely and churned out an Indian English that is peculiarly a mixture tasty and spicy. This could be possible for him because of his tendency for amalgamation or, in Rushdie's own words, 'chutnification' of various narrational registers. At times Rushdie makes use of the filmic language, as in the following:

I permit myself to insert a Bombay-talkie-style close-up – a calendar ruffled by a breeze, its pages flying off in rapid succession to denote the passing of the years; I superimpose turbulent long-shots of street riots, medium slots of burning buses. (414)

The expression 'zooming out into long shot. ... Merrily it rolls along, rolls along, rolls along. ... (Fade out)' (283) also has a ring of the filmic language about it. The use of such language clearly shows Rushdie's postmodern interest in mass culture. Occasionally Rushdie indulges in verbal fantasy (and 'fantasy' is an integral part of his structural strategy along with 'reality').

Rushdie frequently uses lengthy and complex sentences in *Midnight's Children*. One may mark the following extract in this connection:

O, spell it out, spell it out; the operation whose ostensible purpose was the draining of my inflamed sinuses and the once-and-for-all clearing of my nasal passages had the effect of breaking whatever connection had been made in a washing chest; of depriving me of nose-given telepathy; of banishing me from the possibility of midnight's children.(304)

Clearly, Rushdie has become wordy and rhetorical here, and his description of the operation on Saleem's nasal passage tends to be lengthy, witty, humorous, and complex.

To conclude, Rushdie's numerous experiments with the English language have made *Midnight's Children* a highly challenging and complex work of fiction. Along with the content and its marvellous treatment, these linguistic experiments have enabled Rushdie to capture the topmost position among the winners of the Booker Prize over the past twenty-five years. His linguistic experiments in *Midnight's Children*, strange and startling at times as they are, have attracted readers and reviewers the world over, and have placed Indian English fiction on a sound footing in the present-day highly competitive literary scene.

¹³ Meenakshi Mukherjee, *The Twice Born Fiction* (New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1974) 165.