
Empire Speaks Back: Appropriating the language of the colonizer in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract

In India, which is a multilingual nation, as are many South Asian countries, English is a lingua franca that is often used for communication between peoples of various linguistic backgrounds. It functions in close interaction with the local languages in multi lingual contexts and is strongly influenced by the local languages. Postcolonial Indian English writers like Arundhati Roy play with the English language, by moving away from the rules and regulations that govern the English language in order to express the local, social and cultural meanings. It is not surprising that the varieties of English used by these writers are formally and functionally quite different from those used by the native speakers. In her Booker winning novel *The God of Small Things* Arundhati Roy makes use of the English language in her own style, making new compound words, phrases, sentence structure etc. and thereby appropriating the language to reflect the rhythm, and syntax of indigenous language. In this process, she creates a postcolonial *non-native English* that questions and subverts the language of the colonizer and develops a hybrid conscience that establishes an Indian identity. This paper is an attempt to trace the efforts of Roy in depicting a touching story of exploitation and discrimination that explores how small things affect people's behavior and their lives in a very poignant way by engaging and negotiating with the language of the colonizer before settling into a multiplied, fragmented, hybridized and indigenized form of English.

Keywords: colonization, language, postcolonial, hybridity, identity

“The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own---English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up- like Sanskrit or Persian was before-but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the language world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which

will someday prove to be as distinctive and colorful as the Irish or the American. Time alone will justify it”- Raja Rao, “Preface” to Kantapura New Delhi, OUP, India 1963.

Introduction

The dilemma of the Indian writer in English is effectively outlined by Raja Rao in the quotation cited above and it is applicable to most of the postcolonial writers who write in English. Undoubtedly, Postcolonial writers across the world have had an uneasy relationship with the language of the colonizer. In their search for a specific identity, these writers have bent and molded the colonizer’s language to their purpose. The sustained use of local language, images and metaphors, slang and colloquialisms is a mode of experimentation that these writers use in order to bring their authentic voice to their narratives their authentic voice. Salman Rushdie is a precursor in this sort of experimentation with English language through his Booker winning novel *Midnight’s Children*, where he mixes English with Hindi songs, and Bombay/Mumbai street slang with breathtaking effects. Like Rushdie, Roy also engages and negotiates with the English language before settling down into a hybridized form mixing English with Malayalam [language spoken in Kerala, the Southernmost state in India] words, introducing numerous unconventional formal elements that comprise its critically revered language and style like repeatedly breaking the standard rules of spelling, grammar, syntax and punctuation and other devices that reflect upon the relationship between the novel’s form and content. By using strategies of appropriation Roy shows the postcolonial Anglophone writer’s efforts to interrogate and rewrite the language of the colonizer.

This negotiation between languages is a central issue of postcolonial literature per se. According to Ismail S. Talib, postcolonial literature is “literature written by colonized and formerly colonized people [including] literatures written in various languages, not only the language of the colonizer” (Talib 11). Talib also argues that postcolonial literature may also include works written in the author’s native language. This statement applies to Roy in particular as she wrote her novel mainly in English, requiring the reader to deduce the meaning of the Malayalam (her mother tongue) words that she has used there. Chinua Achebe, the well-known Nigerian author states, ‘What I was trying to do was to put two languages in a room. They engaged in a conversation. It was not translation but a conversation’ (Achebe 2005). In postcolonial

discourses, languages grow around one another, each drawing resources from the other with the result that the English language gets multiplied, fragmented and indigenized by authors and cultures across the former colonies. The so-called Standard English is being deconstructed or rather recreated with the result that it brings forth different local variants. Indigenization of the language here marks a process of postcolonial resistance through ‘adaptation and rejection of standard English’. About this indigenization, and localization of English, Kamala Das, another famous Indian writer who wrote both in English and Malayalam aptly says:

I speak three languages, write in two, dream in one...The language I speak becomes mine, its distortions, its queerness all mine, mine alone...It is as human as I am human, don't you see?" ("An Introduction", 1973:26-7).

According to Mary Snell-Hornby, this “new English with its own individual language ‘norms’, along with the many ‘exotic’ cultural – bound items, which in their entirety often carry the message of the text, present a genuine challenge for the [reader’s] capacity of understanding, and for his or her creative powers” (Hornby 187). Here, the readers who are native speakers are bound to feel a sense of displacement so far as their native tongue and custom are concerned and they are taken to a new ‘textual world’ with different rules yet to be learned.

The Plot

Set in the backdrop of Ayemenem, a small village in Kerala (South India), *The God of Small Things* depicts un-chronologically the undoing of the Iype family of Ayemenem in 1969 and its impact on the protagonists –seven year old twins Esthappen and Rahel. Through an omniscient narrator we learn about the family dynamics of the Ipe family as the twins, their mother Ammu, grandmother Mammachi, great aunt Baby Kochamma and uncle Chacko prepare for the arrival of Chacko’s ex-wife Margaret Kochamma and nine year old daughter Sophie Mol from England. As a result of this preparation family tension is running at a high pitch. Ammu and the twins though always disliked are constantly berated as the family expects Ammu and the children to be on their best behavior for Margaret and Sophie Mol’s visit. During the visit Mammachi and Baby Kochamma learn that Ammu has been secretly sleeping with Velutha, a worker in the family and a member of the ‘Untouchable Class’. While the family attempts to hide the affair by calling it rape the three children run away from home by crossing the Meenachil River. The tiny boat capsizes, and Estha and Rahel swim ashore and see that Sophie Mol drowned (her body is found

a day later floating down river). As the children sleep in the abandoned “History House” they awake to see Velutha beaten within an inch of his life because of the lies Baby Kochamma tells. Later, Estha is forced to say that Velutha hurt the twins while they were in the house. Velutha dies, and Ammu heart- broken, is forced to send her son back to his father and is then banished from the family home. The novel picks up twenty three years later when the now silent Estha returns to Ayemenem, Rahel who has not seen her brother since they were separated, returns home to Kerala, as well, where the two are united.

Playing with the Language

There are number of instances in the novel where Roy plays with the language, attempting to interrogate and remake the language of the colonizer. For example, in the case of Rahel and Estha’s childhood experience with English, Baby Kochamma, their aunt, compels them to use English, a language that is alien to them with the result that the extent to which they wrecked, molded and misused the English lexicography and grammar, inadvertently opened up a vista which presented to them whole new ways of giving expression to their thoughts and vent to their emotions. The young twins Rahel and Estha try to process English through Malayalam words along with their odd way of imagining things. After Sophie Mol’s funeral, for instance, Rahel describes the words on her tombstone “A SUNBEAM LENT TO US TOO BRIEFLY,” and then adds, “Ammu explained later that Too Briefly meant For Too Short a While” (Roy p.9). When Chacko describes his father Pappachi as an “*Anglophile*”, the narrator tells us that “he made Rahel and Estha look up *Anglophile* in *the Reader’s Digest Great Encyclopedic Dictionary*. It said: “*Person well- disposed to the English*. Then Estha and Rahel had to look up *disposed*. It said

(1) *Place suitably in particular order*

(2) *Bring mind into certain state*

(3) *Do what one will with, get off one’s hands, stow away, demolish, finish, settle, and consume (food), kill, and sell (Roy pp. 51-52)*

Rahel and Estha love to speak English forwards, backwards, and in different combinations, a practice that transmutes the most ordinary English words into exotic gibberish. The children often split words, fracture sentence structures, and subvert linear arrangements. Sometimes

Roy's narrative vividly captures the "misreading" that shows a child's interpretive efforts when fear and anguish intervene.

If you ever, Ammu said, "and I mean this, EVER, ever again disobey me in Public, I will in Public, I will see to it that you are sent away to somewhere where you will jolly well learn to behave. Is that clear?"

When Ammu was really angry, she said Jolly Well. Jolly Well was a deeply well with larfing dead people in it. (Roy 141)

Here, Roy captures the voices of childhood in a very poignant way by taking liberty with different aspects of the English language.

Richard Lane notes that the writer's focalization on Rahel and Estha gives the reader "access to the children's minds, making apparent the often incomprehensible and threatening adult world" (Lane 99). One can notice that Rahel's thoughts are disoriented and regressive. She tries to avoid meeting Sophie Mol and refuses to indulge in any type of conversation. Baby Kochamma and Chacko are Anglophilic and English educated and they symbolize the colonized subjects. They represent what Lois Tyson calls the "colonized persons who did not resist colonial subjugation because they were taught to believe in British superiority and therefore, in their own inferiority" (Tyson 42). According to Homi Bhabha, in the discourse of colonialism, the objective is "to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction... "Colonial discourse produces the colonized reality which is at once an 'other' yet entirely knowable and visible" (1994:70). Thus, Baby Kochamma and Chacko enforce a colonial code of behavior on the twins and they are responsible for making the situation very confusing and frustrating for the children who are put on the horns of a cultural dilemma but they attempt to make up the situation through the language they know.

As the novel progresses, one can notice different types of departures from Standard English. Words are split, sentences are fractured, subvert linear arrangements are construed, thereby showing acquisition of and experimentation with language. For example, Roy writes that Rahul "walked to the window and opened it. For a Breath of Fresh Air" (Roy 29). The appearance of capitals in phrases like this one makes the phrase to stand out, more or less like a proper noun.

Similarly, in the case of the twins, Roy uses capitalization, sentence fragments and structure and this style of playing with the language allows the reader to understand the mind of the children.

When the twins asked what cufflinks were for- “To link cuffs together, ‘ Ammu told them- they were thrilled by this morsel of logic in what has so far seemed an illogical language. Cuff+link = cufflink. This to them, rivaled the precision and logic of mathematics. Cufflinks gave them inordinate (if exaggerated) satisfaction, and a real affection for the English language. (Roy 51)

In many cases, the capitals appear during the children’s conversations. This distances the children from the familiar but sometimes silly or arbitrary use of English speaking adults in the family. The twins recall that “Miss Mitten---said that she was a Little Disappointed in them” (Roy 59).

All through the novel the twins play with the language as a way of getting to understand the world around them. They read things backwards – NAIDNI YUB, NAIDNI EB (Roy 58) and “showed Miss Mitten how it was possible to read both Malayalam and Madam I’m Adam backwards as well as forwards” (Roy 60). They also use logical reasoning to explain the events that take place around them (Roy 58, 149). Whenever the kids read backwards Baby Kochamma is irritated and in effect the children are subverting her imposition of rules regarding the use of English.

In fact, the fragmented structure of the novel is one of its most striking and challenging features. It is interesting to note that the narrative time does not correspond with chronological time. The writer often uses flashback and flash forwards to tell the story out of sequence in a non-linear manner. Fragments bring forth pauses with the result that the novel flows with a rhythm, like natural speech without any restrictions, and so, almost like a stream of consciousness narrative. The reader can cite a number of examples from the novel where the fragmented structure is employed to depict the theme:

- “He began to look wiser than he really was. Like a fisherman in a city. With sea secrets in him” (Roy 20)
- “He held her as though she was a gift. Given to him in love. Something still and small. Unbearably precious” (Roy 20)

- “Rahel gave up her job at the gas station and left America gladly. To return to Ayemenem. To Estha in the rain. “ (Roy 21)
- She occasionally wrote to Chacko and Mammachi, but never returned to Ayemenem. Not when Mammachi died. Not when Chacko immigrated to Canada. “ (Roy 19)
- That it really began in the days when the Love Laws were made. The laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much.” (Roy 33)

This style and typical use of language not only gives a rhythmic beauty to the novel but also ensures that the narration becomes more real as the reader gets an opportunity to see the mind of the characters.

Cynthia Driesen observes that Rahel and Estha also sometimes break words “just to savor the enjoyment of the process of its disintegration” (Driesen 368). In the scene where they are attending the funeral of their cousin Sophie Mol, instead of being serious during the occasion, Rahel is playing with the words in her head, and gazing around the room, looking at the ceiling. The children hear the word nictitating and find amusement in pulling it apart:

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ing (Roy 180)

To quote Driesen again,

“The clarity of the child’s eye contrasts with and subverts the blinkered insensitivity of the adult world” (Driesen 369).

Form and content are interconnected. As Roy explains:

“The structure was the most challenging part of writing the book. It begins at the end and ends in the middle--- if it had been a straight, linear narrative, it would have meant something altogether

different. Each ordinary moment becomes more heightened, more poignant because it is viewed through the complex lens of both past and present. “ (QTD in TGST Reader’s Guide, 328-29)

Roy also uses strange pronunciation, rhyming, and similarities of sound on behalf of her characters. For instance, Rahel is shown to be dreading her “Afternoon Gnapp”. This wrong spelling and the nonstandard capitalization illustrate the disconnection between word and sound in the child’s mind. In another instance, “Chacko told Rahel and Estha that Ammu had no Locus Stand I.” This is, ironically, the children’s effort to render in English phrase of the Latin legal expression, *locus standi*

Roy also plays with construction of English words like:

- “Baby Kochamma screamed and hit the air with her hymnbook. The singing stopped for a “Whatsit? Whathappened?” and for a Furrywhirring and a Sariflapping” (Roy 8)
- “She heard the softsounds of the red mud and the hardsounds of the orange laterite that spoiled the shining coffin polish. She heard the dullthudding through the polished coffin wood, through the satin coffin lining” (Roy 77)
- “A shrillwhistle blew” (Roy 77)

Sometimes, Roy also uses rhyming and fragments together: “Not old. Not young. But a viable die-able age” (Roy 5) or look at Roy’s use of sound and capital letters together: “her funeral killed her. *Dus to dus to dus to dus to dus*. On her tombstone it is written A SUNBEAM LENT To Us Too BRIEFLY. Ammu later explains that Too Briefly meant For Too Short a While” (Roy 9). All these strange usages put the reader’s own language at a distance.

The elders are particular that the twins must speak English and that they should not read backwards. It is ironical that while Chacko bemoans the mental colonization of India and labels the family as Anglophiles, he drives all of them to watch *The Sound of Music*, a famous English movie. In fact the whole family treats English with great honor and respect and considers it as a symbol of status. Chacko and Baby Kochamma are aware of their colonization, but choose to accept it willingly. In this connection, Ene- Reet Soovik opines “Roy’s novel adopts the perspective that projects the English as the most visible and most desired cultural and racial other for these characters. At the same time, the futility of the self-destructive core of the attempt to become as English as possible is acknowledged as well” (Soovik 17). One can see the enthusiasm of Baby Kochamma at the airport quoting Shakespeare to impress Margaret

Kochamma; then she asks the pre-teen Sophie Mol “D’you know who Ariel was in *The Tempest*? (Roy 138) as though knowledge of a Shakespearean play is a prerequisite for young English children. Similarly, Baby Kochamma’s constant insistence on speaking English, her obsession with all that is English and her regret of not having married the Roman Catholic Father Muligan serve to prove her slavish superior feeling about all that is western. As Roy has rightly pointed out in the novel, they were “trapped outside their own history and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swept away”. (Roy 51). The only way they understand their alienation from their origins was through deconstructing the colonial language. Roy’s playing with the language also mimics the colonialism and the writer has used it as a means of rebelling against those colonial constraints of language.

Hybridization of Language

Roy’s use of language in the novel is also a sort of hybridization wherein Malayalam is incorporated into English text. Though it is not a very smooth hybridization, it seeks to create a new way of expressing language. Elaine Stratford rightly points out, “language is critical to how we view ourselves, each other, and the world; in a very real sense, language speaks us” (cited in Patel 2008:230). See how Kuttappen, Velutha’s brother speaks to the twins thus- “This river of ours--- [pretends to be] a little old churchgoing ammoomma (grandmother), quiet and clean---idi appams [a Kerala dish] for breakfast, kanji [porridge] and meen [fish] for lunch. Minding her own business” (Roy 1998:201). There are many other Malayalam words like “Ickilie Icklie” (tickling), Ayyo kashtam (how terrible), “Thuran Poyi (went to defecate), “Kushumbi” (Jealous girl) etc. so liberally. Using Malayalam words intermittently, Roy retains the characters’ native language –Malayalam and shows how important they are to them. In short, this effort creates a hybrid language, a mixture of Malayalam and English “(Manglish!) while introducing a ‘notched form of the colonial English’

In an interview with Reena Jana in 1997, Roy comments: “How can one define India? There is no one language, there is no one culture. There is no one religion; there is no one way of life. There is absolutely no way one could draw a line around it and say, “This is India’ or, “This is what it means to be Indian,” What Roy is advocating is the recognition and acceptance of the inherent hybridity of Indian culture.

In the final analysis, one can see that Roy's use of language is a compromise with English, a hybridization wherein Malayalam is incorporated into English text. The use of language in the novel allows the reader to get inside the minds of the twins and in turn, it helps in understanding the impact of the terrible events of 1969 especially regarding Velutha and Sophie Mol's deaths.

All through the novel it is Rahel and Estha who resist this imposition, and oppose the use of proper English with the knowledge that it is an indirect way of acquiring a different ideology. Thus, by appropriating the language Roy leads the reader not only to complex characters and themes but also real implications regarding the use of the English language outside the text. This kind of experimentation creates a post-colonial language that questions, deconstructs and subverts the dominant English language. Roy's novel brings to life the voice of those people that grew up being subject to the influence of both English and Malayalam. Although, English was the result of colonial rule in India, it, in fact, turned out to be the best way to establish its hybrid identity.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, *The God of Small Things* is an example to show how postcolonial writers can blend two major cultural and linguistic influences- showing the reader connections that Indians make between their native language and their adoptive one- to depict a cohesive blend of cultures and languages. The choices the writer makes in terms of what language to use and how to use it influences the reaction of the readers both locally and globally. As Salman Rushdie observes, "to conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free" (QTD in Talib 102)

The "deviations" resulting from this new type of writing are to be considered as modifications or alterations made to the English language to make it more suitable for its new roles as a multicultural medium. However, as Ferguson points out, "there are cases where control of the future passes to non-native speakers. This process is beginning in English ---but the passing of control is increasingly evident (Ferguson x) [with the increasing acceptance of novels like *The God of Small Things*] globally. This passing of control turns the tables on the native speakers. This implies that in order to communicate effectively with non-native speakers, (who paradoxically constitute the majority of the native speakers of English) native speakers have to

broaden their linguistic and cultural competence. To quote the critic C. Nelson, “The native speaker has long been on the inside looking out, and wary of admitting outsiders to the ‘fellowship’ of the legitimate users of the language. As the non-native varieties of English grow in importance and productivity, it is the native variety user who may now find himself to be the outsider, the one who has to resort to looking unfamiliar items up in the glossary provided by a thoughtful writer (1985:245) [like Arundhati Roy]. It looks as though the time has come for the “empire to speak back”.

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