

Control and Empowerment through English in Salman Rushdie's Writings

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Abstract

This article explores the double-edged power relationship between the English language, imposed and exercised as the language of the administration in the time of the British Empire on the South-Asian subcontinent, and the way it has been appropriated and re-shaped creatively in postcolonial times by one of its best-known writers, Salman Rushdie. Rushdie fully believes in mastering English and gaining freedom through it, placing himself to some extent in opposition to other authors, such as Gandhi or the Kenyan Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Moreover, in his novels, English itself is a character and/ or a marker of class, gender, race, ethnicity, social group, while it differentiates the characters' roles on the axis coloniser-colonised.

Keywords: *postcolonialism; power; empowerment; decolonization*

Introduction: Postcolonial Literature and the Role of English

The English language was used by the British Empire as an instrument of power in the South-Asian subcontinent to control, contain and dominate the people in the colonised territories. Through its imposition in administration, culture and education, the British Empire managed the people and provinces and established its position of power. Thus, English was used to impose and validate this position through its hegemonic status over all the other languages and dialects in the South-Asian subcontinent.

The discussion on the role of English in this context and its usage in Salman Rushdie's writings is done from a postcolonial critical perspective. In his book on literary and cultural theory *Beginning Theory. An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, Peter Barry noted four main characteristics of postcolonial criticism: an awareness of representations of the non-European as exotic or immoral 'Other'; a preoccupation with language as an

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instrument of power; emphasis on double, hybrid or unstable identity; and a stress on cross-cultural interactions. (Barry, 2007: 187-189) Therefore, language and its instrumentalization are among the most important elements used to describe the power relationships in the colonial/postcolonial context. Also, it is crucial to look at ways in which language has been used in the decolonisation process, by disrupting the power axis and by breaking the centre/periphery dichotomy. In this respect, Salman Rushdie is a worthy representative.

1. Imposition of English. Control and Power²

In colonial times, one of the main instruments of exercising imperial power and control was through the English language. English was imposed as the language of administration (through which the Empire could conduct its business in the provinces), the language of culture (thus imagining it in the language of the colonisers and discarding any type of alternative local interpretations), and the language of education (which allowed for the control of future generations). English was established as a power instrument and a part of the oppression mechanism, as acknowledged by Ashcroft et al, through some main documents: *The Charter Act* (1813), *The History of British India* (John Mill, 1817), *The New Education Policy* (1835), *Minute on Indian Education* (Thomas Babington Macauley, 1835), *Education's Dispatch* (Sir Charles Wood, 1854):

"One of the main features of imperial oppression is control over language. The imperial education system installs a 'standard' version of the metropolitan language as the norm, and marginalizes all 'variants' as impurities (...) Language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of 'truth', 'order', and 'reality' become established." (Ashcroft et al, 2002: 7-8)

In this context, it is worth mentioning the concept of "colonial alienation", defined by Kenyan theorist and writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o in his book *Decolonising the Mind. The Politics of Language in African Literature*

² I previously dealt with the imposition of English and its controlling and supervising character in two books: *Violated Bodies. A Cross-Cultural Reading of the English-Language Fiction by Writers of South-Asian Origin* (2009), p. 49-80, and *Salman Rushdie and Multiple Identities* (2013), p. 9-24.

(1986). According to him, language carries culture and values, that the colonised take from the value system of the coloniser and thus place themselves outside their own system of reference. The locals make an intellectual effort to learn in the language of the colonisers, thus distancing themselves emotionally from their own native language – and thus the language of education is different from the language of local culture. (11) Moreover, “colonial alienation” is emphasised in the case of writers who use the language of the colonisers. (28)

The direct effect of this policy is the creation of a class of “mimic men”, described in the novel with the same title by V.S.Naipaul (1967). In fact, their creation had been already envisaged by Macauley, who welcomed them as intermediaries between the colonisers and the colonised, as “a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect”, who should be fit vehicles for “conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population.” (Macauley) English was supposed to be the discriminatory element between groups of people: on the one hand, the moral, logical, rational and, on the other hand, the immoral, illogical and irrational.

However, the colonised were regarded as the victims who could be saved in some Christian logic: although childish and backward, they were considered potentially redeemable through Western-type systems of thinking, available via the English language. Of course, in the process, the emphasis was on the English, who suffered the burden of saving the natives from themselves. The effect was of course a situation of subordination for the colonised on this power axis, a position reflected in Gandhi’s words as slavery: “To give millions a knowledge of English is to enslave them. The foundation that Macaulay laid of education has enslaved us.” (Gandhi, 2010: 73)

1.1. The Centre-Periphery Axis

In the colonisation process, a number of idioms were created, which enlarged the gap between different groups of the population and contributed to the establishment of a hegemonic relationship between English and english(es). The colonial logic was inscribed on the axis centre (the imperial metropolis) – periphery (the colonial space), and language followed suit:

"In practice the history of this distinction between English and english has been between the claims of a powerful 'centre' and a multitude of intersecting usages designated as 'peripheries'. The language of these 'peripheries' was shaped by an oppressive discourse of power." (Ashcroft et al, 2002: 8)

English with all its varied idioms started, thus, being used as some sort of *lingua franca* and integrated in the local cultures. According to Arundhati Roy, these have persisted to the present-day, as

"There are more people in India that speak English than there are in England. And the only common language that we have throughout India is English. And it's odd that English is a language that, for somebody like me, is a choice that is made for me before I'm old enough to choose. It is the only language that you can speak if you want to get a good job or you want to go to a university. All the big newspapers are in English. And then every one of us will speak at least two or three - I speak three - languages. And when we communicate - let's say I'm with a group of friends - our conversation is completely anarchic because it's in any language that you choose." (Arundhati Roy's Personal website)

We need to acknowledge the role of English as a *lingua franca* in postcolonial times for the higher classes of educated people, the equivalent of the former mimic men of the colonial times. For them, English is a sign of distinction even now between themselves and the lower classes, or castes, the rest of the population. Although English usage is helpful for those in search of good jobs, for literate people, for educated people. Roy mentions the parallel - and simultaneous even - usage of local idioms in everyday speech.

For Salman Rushdie, the use of English is also mixed with that of several local languages, but he starts from a particular situation ("my family") to enlarge it to "everyone around me" and finally to generalize it to "most people in India", as he indicates in an interview for the *Salon Magazine* in 1997:

"I think it had to do with the fact that, when I was growing up, everyone around me was fond of fooling around with words. It was certainly common in my family, but I think it is typical of Bombay, and maybe of India, that there is a sense of play in the way people use language. Most people in India are multilingual, and if you listen to the urban speech patterns there you'll find it's quite characteristic that a sentence will begin in one language, go through a second language and end in a third. It's the

very playful, very natural result of juggling languages. You are always reaching for the most appropriate phrase.” (Reena)

Rushdie distinguished between urban/rural in terms of languages, which is another type of hierarchy, including class (and caste, as we refer to India) to a certain extent.

English was, thus, placed by the colonisers on this power axis in order to impose their own cultural and civilisational vision of the world. It was imposed in order to exercise administrative power and to disseminate knowledge (in the Foucauldian sense) top-down. In the process, English was appropriated by a group of people, an in-between hybrid class, who combined it with local idioms to their own benefit.

2. English and Decolonisation

In the decolonisation process, there are two main trends regarding the use of English. One emphasizes the need to use a local language and to give up the use of English altogether. Thus, the balance of power would be reestablished and the linguistic and cultural practices of the local populations, broken during colonisation, or at least altered by it, can be resumed. Gandhi is a clear supporter of this, and he (optimistically, in retrospect) spoke of establishing a universal language for the Indian subcontinent. He went so far as to propose two common alphabets for this chosen common language (Hindi) in order to be more inclusive for the diversity of the populations:

“A universal language for Indians should be Hindi, with the option of writing in Persian or Nagari characters. In order that the Hindus and the Mahomedans may have closer relations, it is necessary to know both the characters. And if we can do this, we can drive English out of the field in a short time. (Gandhi, 2010: 75)

The Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o also extensively wrote on decolonisation in Africa and the role of English in this process. His essay “On the Abolition of the English Department” (first edition 1972) and his book *Decolonising the Mind. The Politics of Language in African Literature* (first edition 1981) present his ideas on placing African culture and literature in the centre of study for African students. He rejects the “assumption that the English tradition and the emergence of the modern west is the central root of our consciousness and cultural heritage.” (Thiong’o, 1972: 439) A multi-disciplinary view is favoured, as African oral tradition includes many

fields: literature, music, linguistics, sociology, anthropology, history, psychology, religion, philosophy. (Thiong'o, 1972: 440-441)

Moreover, he connects language with a people's self-definition and the relationship with others:

"The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe". (Thiong'o, 1981: 4)

Therefore, language is of utmost importance when expressing one's ideas and thoughts, as it is central to the way people imagine themselves and their role in the world.

The second trend emphasizes the use of English by the *subalterns* who have found their voice as a language of culture, in spite of the fact that in the context of postcolonial criticism this seems to be taboo, as it is perceived as politically incorrect. Salman Rushdie is a supporter of this trend, as he explains in the above-mentioned interview:

"It's one of those things: one's not allowed to admit that it's true in India [that the bulk of good Indian literature since Partition has been written in English]. It's politically incorrect. Particularly in that there's quite a lot of envy aimed at writers in English because they make more money, they get published around the world, et cetera. (...) Even leaving aside the Indian writers living in the rest of the world, the fact is that the novel-reading class in India has all been educated in English and they all speak English well. It means that Indian writers in English escape the trap of regionalism inside India. Whereas a Bengali writer has difficulty being read in South India unless the work has been translated, and not so well probably, an English language writer from Bengal can be read everywhere." (Reena)

One of Rushdie's arguments is that – everything aside – most of Indian literature has been written in English, as most of the Indian writers live in other English-speaking countries and outside the South-Asian subcontinent. English continues to work, in Rushdie's interpretation, as a *lingua franca* of culture, as it facilitates the global circulation of their writing and the escape from the regionalization presupposed by the usage of a local idiom.

This is a more practical approach to the use of English in a cultural context and it underlines the global character of this language nowadays, as opposed to, or including, its past negative connotations. It has become, thus, acceptable to write in English in the postcolonial context, considering the global status of English and despite its colonial baggage. Decolonisation

includes a change in the hierarchical role of English and its acceptance as a simple cultural vehicle.

3. English and the Indian Writer

In this sense, English becomes an element of identity for the writers of the South-Asian subcontinent. Salman Rushdie launches a number of questions which he answers through his novels, essays, interviews and other writings. These questions have to do with the multiple and hybrid identity of writers in the era of globalisation and their place in the world today:

“To be an Indian writer in this society is to face, every day, problems of definition. What does it mean to be ‘Indian’ outside India? How can culture be preserved without becoming ossified? How should we discuss the need for change within ourselves and our community without seeming to play into the hands of our racial enemies? What are the consequences, both spiritual and practical, of refusing to make any concessions to Western ideas and practices? What are the consequences of embracing those ideas and practices and turning away from the ones that came here with us? Those questions are all a single, existential question: How are we to live in the world?” (Rushdie, 1991:18)

3.1. *The Transnational Space of Literature in English*

The approach which is most applicable to postcolonial literatures is the one developed by Bill Ashcroft in his article “Transnation” (2009): “Transnation is the fluid, migrating outside of the state that begins within the nation. This ‘outside’ is geographical, cultural and conceptual...” (Ashcroft, 2009: 73) Globalisation, according to Ashcroft, widened the attack on the nation, and international corporations, the dislocated labour market. The concept of the transnation explains how the economic crises impacted nation-states and national governments as vertical constructs, as well as nations as cultural phenomena and horizontal constructs. India and China are the mega-cultures which affect our world, and this leads to culture escaping the boundaries of the nation state and operating beyond political constrictions.

It is in this very space of the transnation that postcolonial literature can be understood, as it disrupts the axis centre and periphery, and is

inhabited by travelling people – such as Salman Rushdie - who find themselves between nations and adopt English as a way of articulating their cultures. In the process, spatial and temporal borders become fluid and dissolve, allowing for postcolonial literatures to co-exist:

“Just as the transnation can no longer be conceived of as lying beyond the borders of the nation but also of extending within, so a postcolonial reading shows us that the utopian dimension of its literatures is not simply located in its capacity to cross borders, or even to imagine a borderless future, but in its capacity to dissolve the boundary between past and future through acts of memory that paradoxically imagine a different world.” (Ashcroft, 2009: 84)

In fact, Ashcroft et al. had already remarked the innovative character of postcolonial literature in English, due mostly to the creative mix of languages and idioms:

“Yet they [postcolonial writings] have been the site of some of the most exciting and innovative literatures of the modern period and this has, at least in part, been the result of the energies uncovered by the political tension between the idea of a normative code and a variety of regional usages.” (Ashcroft et al, 2002: 8)

From the point of view of the language they are written into, postcolonial writings find themselves at the intersection between the norm imposed by English language usage and the creativity enhanced by the local and regional idioms present in many ways in them.

3.2. *Rushdie and Empowerment*

Salman Rushdie takes a step forward in interpreting the use of English in his writings; he underlines the re-appropriation of language and its creative usage, which can eventually lead to completing the decolonisation process and setting the writers free from any of the ties imposed under colonisation: “To conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free.” (Rushdie, 1991: 17)

One way of doing that is using cultural references as spices in his novels, in the same way as some Jewish American writers use local dialects, that nobody understands, except from people who speak that specific idiom. As Rushdie explains in the same interview, the combination of English and local idioms is similar to cooking, where one uses the basic ingredients (English) and flavours (local idioms):

"I use them [culturally specific references] as flavouring. I mean, I can read books from America and I don't always get the slang. American writers always assume that the whole world speaks American, but actually the whole world does not speak American. And American Jewish writers put lots of Yiddish in their books and sometimes I don't know what they're saying. I've read books by writers like Philip Roth with people getting hit in the kishkes and I think, "What?!" (Reena)

It is perhaps worthwhile to mention that other writers of the South-Asian subcontinent do the same. For example, Arundhati Roy uses metaphors from her own profession, that of an architect, to explain her usage of English:

"It [writing]'s about design to me. I'm trained as an architect; writing is like architecture. In buildings, there are design motifs that occur again and again, that repeat -- patterns, curves. These motifs help us feel comfortable in a physical space. And the same works in writing, I've found. For me, the way words, punctuation and paragraphs fall on the page is important as well -- the graphic design of the language. That was why the words and thoughts of Estha and Rahel, the twins, were so playful on the page ... I was being creative with their design. Words were broken apart, and then sometimes fused together. "Later" became "Lay. Ter." "An owl" became "A Nowl." "Sour metal smell" became "sourmetal smell." Repetition I love, and used because it made me feel safe. Repeated words and phrases have a rocking feeling, like a lullaby. They help take away the shock of the plot -- death, lives destroyed or the horror of the settings -- a crazy, chaotic, emotional house, the sinister movie theatre." (Home page)

In the same vein, Anita Desai bases her writing on the European literary tradition she is familiar with: canonical writers, English and Western European (French), but also Eastern Europeans, i.e. Russian, whose texts she studied in school. She notices a separation between the work of these writers and her own realities, which lead to a struggle to use English so as to fit the type of orality she means to include in her novels:

"My reading was so European: Woolf, DH Lawrence, Proust, Camus, Dostoyevsky, Chekhov, it had so little to do with the life I led. So I worked hard to bend the English language to bring in the sounds and tempo and rhythms of spoken languages around me, which are part of my world too. With English you can, it's so flexible and elastic, but you have to sharpen your ears, and not depend so much on reading. (...) You're always having

to select, to acknowledge your limits; you write only about those parts of life that have been affected by English.” (Jaggi)

Rushdie has a similar view regarding the use of English in his novels and generally in novels by South-Asian writers. He makes the difference between standard language and the vernacular. There are many varieties of English (or “englishes”, in Ashcroft’s words), and decolonisation means placing them on an equal foot with classical language. His innovation in terms of language, in his own words, has to do with combining both, with the result a creative and artistic use of English. So, for Rushdie, English is not just a vehicle for the transmission of ideas which makes them more easily understood, but also a modality of doing that in style:

*“When I was writing *Midnight’s Children*, I was really trying to say that the way in which English is used in India has diverged significantly from standard English. That India has made its own English the way America and Ireland and the Caribbean and Australia made their own English. But even though this is the way everybody speaks in India, nobody had the confidence, when I started writing, to use it as a literary language. When they settled down to write, they would do it in a kind of classical Forsterian English that had nothing to do with the way they were speaking.” (Reena)*

English is also a way of exercising power, as “Language is courage: the ability to conceive a thought, to speak it, and by doing so to make it true.” (Rushdie, 1989: 290) He who has control over language, also has control over thought, and ultimately over action. For the one who names something (an idea, a concept, a notion), also controls that thing, as well as the others who use it. Therefore, the British Empire, imposing English, exercise control over the notions, concepts, ideas named in English for the first time.

Language is subdivided and grouped in specialized jargons, but nevertheless this is indicative of a power relation among its users. Also, control over language means control of thought and action and ultimately over their roles in society. It is “perfect control of the languages that mattered: sociological, socialistic, black-radical, anti-anti-anti-racist, demagogic, oratorical, sermonic: the vocabularies of power ... But ... his envy of Hanif was as much as anything rooted in the other’s greater control of the languages of desire” (290) Language includes markers of ethnicity,

gender, age, class and social group, and even appears as a character in the novel.

Another character in *The Satanic Verses* (Antoinette Roberts, Dr. Simba's mother) combines the vernacular and the standard language in her speech:

"She wanted to talk about her son's day in court, at the committal proceedings, and she was quite a performer. Hers was what Chamcha thought of as an educated voice; she spoke in the BBC accents of one who learnt her English diction from the World Service, but there was gospel in there, too, and hellfire sermonizing." (Rushdie, 1989: 428)

The versatility with which she is capable of speaking English, in the elevated received pronunciation of the higher classes and of the BBC, mixed with the lower place of the *english* of her ancestors show her capacity of adapting and mimicking described above. Antoinette is the perfect example of the *subaltern* gaining a voice and using that voice creatively to their own benefit.

In another episode in the same novel, language is viewed as the one that distinguishes the English as a superior nation: *"Ours is a Copious Language,/ A Language Trying to Strangers;/ Ours is the Favoured Nation,/ Blest, and Safe from Dangers..."* (Rushdie, 1989: 438) This ironic poem reminds the readers of the patriotic ones learned in school in English by all students of the Empire alike, including the colonised subjects.

In stark contrast to this, is the rap song of an immigrant at a witchcraft session where the effigy of Margaret Thatcher, the UK Prime Minister at the time, is symbolically burnt in the microwave: *"Now-mi-feel-indignation-when-dem-talk-immigration-when-dem-make-insinuation-we-no-part-a-de-nation-an-mi-make-proclamation-a-de-true-situation-how-we-make-contribution-since-de-Rome-Occupation"*. (Rushdie, 1989: 301) The *english* used is, again, a local adaptation of the high English imposed in the colonies. In both poems the definition of the nation is placed in connection with language: the chosen nation is contrasted with the insinuation that immigrants are not part of the nation. Of course, Rushdie's main definition question remains: *"How are we to live in the world?"* (Rushdie, 1991:18)

A possible answer regarding the use of English in order to define themselves and to bring decolonisation to an end is appropriating it and together with it the whole history of colonisation. Rushdie presents this in a highly metaphorical manner: *"how to let it be our freedom, how to repossess its poisoned wells, how to master the rivers of words of time of*

blood.” (Rushdie 1989: 290) It is through the knowledge and proper usage of English that the colonised free themselves and reverse the axis of power. In this way, in Rushdie’s vision, they are able to re-appropriate their history and their culture and, if not to reverse, at least to regain control of their past.

Conclusion

In conclusion, empowerment through language is done in the context of globalisation and glocalisation, with the new importance given to local communities and histories in the larger world space. Thus, the axis centre-periphery, which made sense in the colonial paradigm, is disrupted and fragmented into several centres and multiple peripheries, in the same way as the power relationship is severed and reversed. In the space of the *transnation*, the migrant authors voluntarily adopt English as a flexible way of articulating their cultures and promoting them to the world at large.

In the postcolonial paradigm, English and *englishes*, i.e. its many idioms and varieties, become a democratic instrument of exercising local power. Re-appropriating the language and using it creatively, in other words, empowerment through language, is, according to Rushdie, not only possible, but highly desirable and completes the process of decolonisation. Gaining freedom for the former colonised communities and peoples is done, ironically, through the imposed language of the colonisers in a reversed power axis.

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