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Indian Lexicon and Child's Lingo: Vernacularization/ Appropriation of Colonial English in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract: Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* is a postcolonial Indian English novel which attempts to decolonise the superiority of using the English language by applying various subversive methods deriving from indigenous discourses. In the novel, there are many words taken from Hindi, Urdu, and Malayalam and any other regional languages in their original form and or/untranslated version into English. The application of different languages' words by Roy in her novel makes her English 'chutnified English' (?) which violates the standard grammar of the English language. Such implications of the language strategy in the novel compel the readers to ponder over the underlying languages of the text. Tangential to this strategy is the act of the glossing, where within the flow of the narrative a parenthetical or appositional translation intrudes and disrupts. The paper attempts to study the postcolonial representation of language, particularly the use of English, in the Indian vernacular context.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Abrogation, Subversion, Vernacular

Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* projects textual strategy to subvert or challenge the imposed colonial English by abrogating and appropriating it in India's vernacular context. The language, through which Roy fictionalizes Indian socio-cultural ambiance, especially the society of Kerala, is actually a reinvention of English infused with Malayalam. Roy's vernacular reinvention of English subverts the standard metropolitan English. This is, therefore, a postcolonial project to appropriate English to express Indian sensibility

and thus leading the way for Vernacularization of English as Indians use it. Roy's use of appropriated English includes words, phrases, coinages of the new words, syntactic structures, use of prefixes and suffixes and themes, which have been projected in a way to overcome the superiority of the imposed imperial English.

In the novel *The God of Small Things*, Roy's experiment of English challenges the codified norms of 'accepted and correct usage' of colonial English indicating it as Ashcraft has stated: "language is a material practice and as such is determined by the complex weave of social conditions and experience" (41). There is no doubt that Roy writes in the language of the colonizers but her writings abrogate the privilege centrality of English by using English to signify the difference. Therefore, Roy subverts English, particularly the way in which English constructs and structures its discourse in the Third World. The selection committee of judges meant to confer the Booker prize in 1997 also stated how Roy abrogates and appropriates the Standard English "what judges most admired . . . was, rather her verbal exuberance: almost alone among the 106 entries, Roy has her own voices her own signature" (Cowley 1). Roy's tactful subversion of English gives birth to the original idiom that expresses what Karamcheti terms "a particular way of being in the world or cultural experience" (62). The process of abrogation results in appropriation. Roy uses the variant strategies of appropriation to signify the linguistic and cultural variance. The textual strategies to challenge the privilege centrality of colonial English which she adopts are the repetition of significant tropes, the implication of spirals like narrative, the privileging of similes and metonymies to metaphors, the use of cultural specific imagery and children's lingo. She also uses the fragmented syntax, syntactic variance, coy mis-spellings, idiosyncratic punctuation and paragraphing, untranslated words, etc. It can be observed that Roy's novel is written out of the tension between abrogation of the received English which speaks from the center, and the act of appropriation which brings it under the influence of vernacular tongue, the complexities of the speech habits which characterize the local language.

This paper attempts to read and analyze the notions of postcolonial language with reference to vernacularization of English in the Indian context. The story of the novel is narrated from the perspective of the child protagonist, Rahel, and it tells the story of her brother, Estha and mother, Ammu, and latter's return back to her parents' home after her

divorce. Ammu's illicit relationship with Velutha, who by profession is a carpenter and belongs to the lower section of the society, is also revealed in the story. At the end of the novel, Velutha is killed by the police as Rahel's family blames him of kidnapping and killing her uncle Chacko's daughter Sophie Mol. They punish him for violating the hierarchical norms of the society which decides each individual's place in the hierarchically codified social system. Ammu, who decides to protest against the false case filed against Velutha, is subjected to humiliation and insult and finally dies with a broken heart. The tragedy leaves Estha scarred for life as he retreats into silence. The novel, however, ends at a hopelessly romantic note, with an almost lyrical description of a night of passion between Ammu and Velutha.

The political motive behind the implication of English language in colonized India by Lord Macaulay is reflected in the relationship between that Benaan John Ape Pappachi Rahel and Estha's grandfather with the notion of English. As Chacko, the uncle of Rahel and Estha reflects:

The correct word for people like Pappachi was *Anglophile*. He then made Rahel and Estha look up *Anglophile* in the *Reader's Digest Great Encyclopaedic 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 the mind into a certain state.
- (3) Do what one will with, get off one's hands, stowaway, demolish, Finish, settle, consume (food), kill, sell.

Chacko said that in Pappachi's case it meant (2) *Bring the mind into a certain state*. Which, Chacko said, meant that Pappachi's mind had been *brought? into a state* which made him like the English. (52)

The above-quoted lines from the novel signify the second definition of the word 'dispose of' that is applied for the Pappachi. In this reference, it is obvious to reflect how colonial authority has formulated to manage and place "suitably in order a colonial subject while demolishing ... finishing" any vestige of his indigenous identity" (3). And Chacko expresses the dubiousness over the projection of this colonial project that they were, "pointed in the wrong direction, trapped outside their own history, and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swept away" (52). This expression indicates how the English

have been decolonized or abrogated especially by those who are educated by the colonial education system. However, Ammu's reaction to Pappachi was insignificant and expresses the antagonism felt by those who assisted with the colonial authorities. Ammu said, "Pappachi was an incurable British CCP which was short for *chhi-chhi poach* and in Hindi meant shit-wiper" (51).

Using of untranslated words in the novel like *chhi-chhi poach* is meant basically to challenge the Eurocentric's assumption of English. Roy, by using untranslated words or regional words in the novel, creates new kinds of syntactic structure which is new English. This leads to the way for the appropriation and challenging the assumed and correct English. The implication of Hindi terms in the syntactical structure of the English abrogates the importance credited to anglophile and appropriates that use of regional words which act as the textual instrument to subvert.

There is another aspect of challenging the colonial English, i.e. by having mastery over it. Roy, in the novel, has presented the characters that are well educated in the English language and can speak and transcribe English like the colonizers. This tradition is continued in the *History House* where after Pappachi, Baby Kochamma resides who appears to absorb with this continuing tradition. For instance, when Margaret and Sophie Mol, the ex-wife, and daughter of Chacko, are expected to come from England, she instructs the twins how to deal with their English Aunt and her daughter in the English language. This way of tutoring coming generation indicates that how English will be appropriately learned and spoken:

The whole week Baby Kochamma eavesdropped relentlessly on the twins' private conversations and whenever she caught them speaking Malayalam, she levied a small fine which was deducted at source... She made them write lines—'impositions' she called them . . .
. *I will always speak in English, I will always speak in English.* A hundred times each. (36)

The notion of mimicking the imposed colonial language is perceptible in Pappachi and Baby Kochamma's efforts to speak and write R.P. On the other hand, their strong reaction for the use of vernacular language which shows the desire to leave behind the 'otherness' and become a part of the Westernized hegemonic class. The following passage also demonstrates her obsession with speaking the master's tongue. "She

made them practice an English car song for the way back. They had to form the words properly, and be particularly careful about their pronunciation" (36).

Roy also subverts the dominant presence of the colonizer and the dominant class by parodying the word "pronunciation" in the text, "Prer NUN sea asylum" (36). The emphasis is to highlight PUN which symbolises "Nun" since Baby Kochamma used to be one, and now she executes her power over them and controls the way they speak English. This textual strategy also reflects Roy's intention that how English was spread in the subcontinent. Thus, humour also plays a significant part in subverting/challenging dominant discourse of colonialism about the correct use of English.

Similarly, Roy's use of children's language also challenges the dominance of the English language, which includes recurrent words games, pun, syntactic variance, coy mis-spellings, parallelisms, and alliterations. Here Roy's subversion of English is most evident. Roy manipulates the repetition of most important word games and images associated with the twins which constitute one of the major guiding ways of the semantic structure of the novel. Rahel and Estha challenge the strict imposition of the English by reading it backward to their grand-aunt Baby Kochamma's missionary friend from Australia, Miss Mitten:

They showed Miss Mitten how it was possible to read both *Malayalam* and *Madam I am Adam* backward as well as forwards. She wasn't amused and it turned out that she didn't even know what Malayalam was. They told her it was a language everyone spoke in Kerala. She said she had been under the impression that it was Keralese.... Miss Mitten complained to Baby Kochamma about Estha's rudeness, and about their reading backward. She told Baby Kochamma that she had seen Satan in their eyes. Natas in their eyes. (60)

Here, the point is that Miss Mitten's ignorance of the language uttered in Kerala indicates the indifference of the dominant side for language and traditions of the state, wherein all that matters is the fact that everybody speaks English. Miss Mitten's comparison of Rahel and Estha's eyes to the Satan is opposite of what is good and pure which reaffirms her "superior" position on the basis of this scopic and fixed gaze, which in Bhabhian term can be understood as the "ideological construction of otherness"(60). According to Bhabha, "Fixity as the sign of the

cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation; it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy, and daemonic repetition”(94). Writing of Satan like ‘natas’ produces a mirror image of the word which inverts the spelling and all that it implies, subverting, in this way, the negative connotation related with the term. In this way, Roy challenges the legacy of the colonial era, which classified anyone behaved differently, as either savage or evil.

It can be asserted that Rahel and Estha's word games have the power to interrogate the imposed colonial English in the one way and formulate the other English which is self-created English of the colonized. The repetition of the word games which Rahel and Estha play is the assertion of this conception. “Once spent the whole day saying”

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ing.(179-80)

Roy also inserts Malayalam words in the novel with Urdu and Hindi words occasionally. Roy transliterates the vernacular within the novel and does not provide footnote and other devices to explain the meaning of the words and phrases which is also a new kind of using and writing English.

Long after he grew up and became a priest, Reverend Ipe continued to be known as *PunnyanKunju* - - Little Blessed One (23)

‘*Aiyo*, RahelMol!’ Comrade K.N.M. Pillai said, recognizing her instantly. ‘*Orkunilley?* Comrade Uncle?’

‘*Oower,*’ Rahel said.

Did she remember him? She did indeed. (128)

‘Big Man the Laltain sahib, Small Man the Mombatti’, an old Bihari coolie, who met Estha’s school excursion party at the railway station (unfailingly, year after year), used to say of dreams. Big Man the Lantern. Small man the Tallow-stick. (89)

In the first instance, we can see how Roy inserts Malayalam and in the third she uses Hindi when the speaker is from the Bihar. Here, the argument is that how vernacular languages used in the novel with English function to challenge the dominant discourse of the English language. The insertion of the regional languages in the novel asserts that this is a textual strategy to formulate a new kind of the language which is free from the dominant rule of the correct or standardized English of the colonizer.

There are some phrases in the novel which have been used without translation. In the following passage, for instance, Roy uses Malayalam to talk about food:

And there they were, the Foreign Returnees, in wash'n'wear suits and rainbow sunglasses. With an end to grinding poverty in their Aristocrat suitcases ...With a hunger for kappa and meenvevichathu that they hadn't eaten for so long. (140)

Roy uses this kind of hybrid language to indicate that the foreign returnees have a strong desire to establish a bond with their relatives and community. Thus, she tries to prove that Malayalam and English are an integral part of Kerala's life which does not show the superiority of one over the other. Roy's use of Malayalam, Hindi and Urdu words and phrases in the novel are officially recognized languages by the government of India. The novel illustrates the ease with which speakers of one or more languages mix or switch to linguistic codes. Apparently, Roy does not credit more prominence to the vernacular languages but use them randomly. For example, there is no specific linguistic code for Velutha or the other oppressed characters in the novel. In fact, in the implication of English and vernacular, there is a common phenomenon, i.e. that characters shift from one language to another in the same sentence. Roy has created in the novel new words and adjectives to narrate certain scenes:

Heaven opened and the water hammered down reviving the reluctant old well, green mossing the pigless pigsty, carpet bombing still, ... the grass looked wet green and pleased. ... Further away, in the wind and rain, on the banks of the river, in the sudden thunder darkness of the day, Estha walking. (10)

Roy has invented a green and moss together to highlight a new use of adjective which is connotative to express the local ambiance of Kerala.

The author chooses to create these new words since the adjectives in their original form are not able to express adequately the way the rains change the landscape. Moreover, the monsoons have always had a special meaning for those living in Indian Subcontinent as it brings the much-needed relief from the harsh summer. One can, then, argue that the need to invent new adjectives to describe the effect of the torrential rains shows the inadequacy of a language that belongs to a different country, society, and culture. As WaThiong'o has pointed out:

Language as communication and as culture is then products of each other. Communication creates culture: culture is a means of communication. Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. How people perceive themselves effects how they look in their culture, at their politics and at the social production of wealth, at their entire relationship to nature and to other beings. Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world. (290)

The author also regionalizes English by using suffixes and other markers which demonstrate very clearly that the story is set in Kerala. For instance, she uses the words 'Mol' and 'Mon' which means girl and boy respectively. Hence, Sophie, Chacko's daughter with Margaret, becomes 'Sophie Mol', just as Estha becomes Estha Mon. Mol and Mon can also mean 'son' and 'daughter' and are used when the speaker is close to the persons concerned or tries to imply an intimacy as Comrade Pillai attempts to do when he addresses Rahel as 'RahelMol'. Similarly, the twins' Grand Aunt NavomiIpe is referred to as Baby 'Kochamma' as is Chacko's wife Margaret; 'Kochamma' is not a name but rather an honorific title given to women. In the same way, Shoshamma Ipe, the children's grandmother, is addressed as 'Mammachi', or Grandmother and their Grandfather Benaan John Ipe is known as Pappachi. By using these distinctive suffixes and names, the author places the narrative in Kerala and, in this way, she regionalizes the language, thereby breaking the notion of 'universality' associated with the colonizer's tongue, while subverting the status of English as the de facto 'national' language of India. It is possible to argue that, in this manner; she converts English

into a regional language and levels the playing field to some extent. By using Malayalam, Roy also establishes kinship with readers from Kerala who can place the narrative within the meta-text of culture and society they are familiar with. She also keeps alive the subtle nuances hidden within terms of address and endearment rooted in Kerala which can only be expressed by using the vernacular. In this way, Roy makes the vernacular languages co-present with English on the national scene and constructs a multilingual and linguistically hybrid text nation. This strategy helps situate the work within the socio-cultural milieu. As it can be asserted in this context,

Nativism is not necessarily a new theory or dogma, nor is it a set of clearly spelled out beliefs or principles. It is rather an attitude, movement, or outlook. It is difficult to extract any definite set of evaluative criteria from it, but it helps situate a work of art in such a manner that its cultural affiliations are revealed. Thus, Nativism emphasizes the locus of work and enables a critic to place it vis a vis a particular society or country. (Paranjape xii-xiii)

One can then say that Roy's work brings out this positive aspect of Nativism which gives a particular literary *opus* its identity, a novel written in English but firmly entrenched in Kerala, India.

In the following passage, for example, we see how Roy uses capital letters: "The Loss of Sophie Mol stepped softly around the Ayemenem House like a quiet thing in socks" (15).

The use of the capital 'L', for instance, highlights the event which had such tragic consequences for Rahel's family. By not conforming to the rules of English grammar, Roy subtly disorders the 'order' inherent in the language thereby subverting not only the colonizer's tongue but also the standard Indian English which is still associated with power and prestige in post-Independence India. In fact, this has created a fissure within postcolonial India and divided it into two parts; one which brings out the colonial attitude of disdain toward the vernacular which lives in a world removed from the one inhabited by those who do not have the requisite public school educational background.

Roy's *The God of Small Things* is the excellent example of the Western and Indian aesthetic notion of English language that is clear from Roy's tactful articulation of English in the Indian context. Roy, through her use of children's language in the novel, makes English "bear

the burden" of the postcolonial experience. By mocking, playing and experimenting in the formulation of English, Roy subverts or abrogates its rules and standard and appropriates its syntactic structure to subvert its privilege centrality of English. The author, therefore, exploits the flexibility and adaptability of the English language to make it signify the cultural variance and expresses a definite way of being in the world.

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