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EXPERIMENTS WITH LANGUAGE IN RUSHDIE'S *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN* :  
A CRITICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Salman Rushdie, who has left great contribution in Indian fiction in English, has penned his novels in a language that attracts more probing critical attention. This paper, however, is woven around the functionality of Rushdie's language in *Midnight's Children* only. He addresses the issue of narratorial complex that incorporates only vocabulary and syntax. Rushdie rejected correct English i.e. the "classical" which for him means "colonial." Experimenting at the lexical level, he instills a considerable number of Hindi, Urdu and Hindustani lexical items into his English, e.g.: 'angrez,' 'baba,' 'baap- re- baap.' The linguist sitting in Rushdie produces the effect of onomatopoeia with sounds typically Indian, for example, 'wham bamshot,' 'doomboombadom,' 'Thaiii! Thaiii! 'khrikk-khrikk,' 'dharrraamm,' etc. He rejected the notion of the purity or centrality of English by introducing novel forms of existing English words as well as of Indian lexical items through audaciously creative hybridization just as 'mediocrely,' 'dislikeable,' 'alienness,' 'writery,' 'doctori' 'Bombayness,' 'chutnification. This orientation of language enables the novelist to see and express his experience of a hybridized and complex cultural reality lending it an impact of immediacy, to help capture the natural rhythms of Indian speech habits and of the basic tenor of sub-continental life. This "chutnification" of language shows how Rushdie takes pain in depicting his experience with great earnestness, using all the resources he can wield. Rushdie's seeds of certain words, phrases and expressions sown in the novel raises him to the higher plane of master linguist.

Key Words- Contribution ,incorporate, linguist, lexical & orientation.

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Much ink has been wasted by various critics on Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. Various facets of his art have been critically scrutinized. Ashutosh Banerjee, for example, studies the narrative technique; Ron Shepherd and M.L Pandit see fantasy; R.S Pathak describes Rushdie's portrayal of the bond between history and the individual; Neil Ten Kortenaar observes it as an allegory of history; and Goonetilleke finds the use of myth in the novel. Rushdie's intertextual strategies have been the centre of critical inquiry for many critics. Nancy E. Batty, for instance, sees its affinities with the *Tales of Arabian Nights*, while Robert Alter brings a

comparison between *Midnight's Children* and Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. The aspect that has not as yet been the focal point of researchers is the language of the novel. This paper endeavours to address the issue of narratorial complex that incorporates only vocabulary and syntax.

R.K Narayan, Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand produced their novels in pure English, which is another name for imperial English, the English of the 'centre.' Anita Desai and Arun Joshi did not bring any basic change in fundamental tenets that make up the purity of British English. Thereafter in the garden of Indian fiction in English, blossomed flowers of young novelists –mostly born around 1947 –who came to indigenize the medium of writing, to give a well-illustrated vision of the highly complex, multilingual and multicultural Indian society. Salman Rushdie, who has left great contribution in Indian fiction in English, has penned his novels in a language that attracts more probing critical attention. This paper, however, is woven around the functionality of Rushdie's language in *Midnight's Children* only. In order to project the *weltanschauung* of Indian culture authentically with English as medium of writing, he has "to break up the language and put it back together/in a different way to destroy the natural rhythms of the English language... [and,] to dislocate the English and let other things into it" (Goonetilleke,43). Rushdie does not find the task of dislocating the English language much of problem. In an interview he clearly postulates: "The English language is, I think, less of problem than people make it out to be." He gently blames the 'earlier generation of writers' "who were basically just about adult at the time of independence, who were very heavily influenced by the English, the classical English writing." He maintains that "that was their information, and I think that there instinct was to write in that way. But I think also "he maintains, "that by now English is very domesticated in India." Rushdie desires that "Indian writers will become much freer with the English language... use it more and more ... unproblematically and without that kind of echo of colony [...] [and] use it with more verve, more confidence, more ease, and with more Indianess" (Vijay Kumar, 223). And *Midnight's Children* enthusiastically illustrates Rushdie's strategy.

Rushdie rejected correct English i.e the "classical" which for him means "colonial." Experimenting at the lexical level, he instills a considerable number of Hindi, Urdu and Hindustani lexical items into his English, e.g.: 'angrez,' 'baba,' 'baap- re- baap,' 'budhha,' 'badmash,' 'bas,' 'bhai-bhai,' 'barfi,' 'bhelpuri,' 'chi-chi,' 'chutney,' 'dhoban,' 'ekdum,' 'feringhee,' 'fauj,' 'garam masala,' 'goondas,' 'gur,' 'gulabjamuns,' 'gora,' 'habshee,' 'hai hai,' 'itr,' 'jailkhana,' 'jalebis,' 'kahin,' 'nasbandi,' 'ooper neechay,' 'pyar kiya to darna kya,' 'phut - e - phut,' 'rakshasa,' 'rasgullas,' 'sab kuch,' 'sarpanch,' 'yaar,' 'zenana,' etc. Rushdie's language at the lexical level is marked by the sudden intrusions of esoteric Latin and classical Arabic, e.g.: 'mucuna pruritis,' 'feronia elephanticus,' 'sunt lacrimac rerum,' 'kan ma kan,' 'fi qadim azzaman,' 'tilk al-gharaniq al,' 'ula wa inna shafa,' 'ata-hunnala-tuetaja,' etc. He presses a bunch of English words related to a particular grammatical category occurring together without either punctuating or conjugating them so that they form a simulacrum of complex compounds of noun e.g., 'number rape greed war,' 'animal peasants brutes,' 'mother sister lover sibyl friends,' etc.; of verbs e.g., 'yelling jabbering arguing giggling,' 'chased arrested dragged,' 'kick stamp trample,' etc.; of Noun Phrases having adjectives or classifiers e.g., 'rotting coconuts abandoned cigarette packets pony turds non-compounds the items all belong to a related set. Phrases are made to frequently run together e.g., 'over and over,' 'updownup,' 'birthanddeath,' 'what do you mean how can you say that,' 'get out of it silly old mootsthesoddingbeach,' 'blackasnight,' 'nearlynine,' 'nearlynineyearold,' 'almostseven,' 'godknowswhat,' 'dirtyfilthy,' etc.

The linguist sitting in Rushdie produces the effect of onomatopoeia with sounds typically Indian, for example., wham bamshot,' 'doomboombadom,' Thiiii! Thiiii! 'khrikk-khrikk,' 'dharraaammm,' etc. He rejected the notion of the purity or centrality of English by introducing novel forms of existing English words as well as of indian lexical items through audaciously creative hybridization just as 'mediocrely,' 'dislikeable,' 'alienness,' 'writery,' 'doctori,' 'suicidally,' 'unbeautiful,' 'sonship,' 'memoryless,' 'historyless,' 'dupatta-less,' 'Bombayness,' 'chutnification,'; by accommodating outrageously clipped sentences that are made to function as a classifier e.g., 'long-ago-letter,' 'once-upon-a-time wife,' 'long-ago desire,' 'by-now-constant itch,' 'film-poster-trolley pushers,' 'long-time-no-see-smile,' etc.; by transforming clipped sentences into nouns e.g., 'excuse-mes,' 'next-attractions,' 'coming-soons,' 'what-happened-nextism,' etc.; by forging new compound

words through the remolding of English phrasal verbs e.g., 'a looker-after'; by reshaping English idioms e.g., 'to put the cart before the bullock'; by transplanting Indian concepts into equivalent English expressions e.g., 'our little piece-of-the-moon,' 'four hundred and twenty, the number of trickery and fraud,' 'whatnextism,' etc.; by including Indian slang words e.g., 'funtoosh,' 'goo,' etc.; by creating new slang words e.g., 'other pencil' for male sex organ as in Padma's words to Saleem Sinai "Now that the writery is done let's see if we can make your other pencil work!" (Midnight,39), or 'cucumber' to refer to the same object as in the phrase "the useless cucumber hidden in my pants" (141), or 'soo-soos' as in "now I saw him and Cyrus behind a bush, doing such funny rubbing things with their soo-soos!" (18), or 'spittoon' to refer to the female sex organ as in Saleem's candid admission "despite everything she tries, I cannot hit her spittoon" (39); by using misspelling e.g., 'straaange,' 'ess,' etc.; by giving place to those Indian forms of English words which are traditionally looked upon as incorrect e.g., 'informations,' 'mens,' 'lifeliness,' etc.; by showing habitual linguistic mannerisms that distinguish characters e.g., 'rah rah wrong,' hiss hiss history,' 'cow corpses,' 'ist ist istiff,' etc. and by deploying nonsense back-up words which is a typically Indian language habit e.g., 'writing-shiting,' 'writery-shitery,' 'club-shub,' 'joke shoke,' 'pumperry-shumperry,' etc.

We must not forget that it is not mere gimmickry but part of Rushdie's deliberate anti-colonial strategy. By using language "unproblematically" Rushdie, on the one hand, increases the procedure of abrogating and replacing the English language and, on the other hand, forges a multilingual medium to capture the 'polyglossic' and multicultural reality of India. Since language is a primary means of defining the self, Rushdie, as an avowedly anti-colonial writer, captures the language of the centre and replaces it in a discourse fully adapted to Indian cultural milieu. By shaping the colonial English to the new, inventive, need based usage, he challenges the idea of the illusory standard of normative or 'correct' usage. He forces the language of the centre to bear the burden of communicating the cultural experience of the periphery. As Raja Rao says in *Kanthapura*, that it is to "convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own" (EWB, 39). Thus, Rushdie's re-lexification of the English language through his innovative, imaginative use is a step in the process of the dismantling of the imperialist centralism as established through the privileged centrality of the English language. He endeavours to promote the peripheral to the status of privileged centrality.

This orientation of language enables the novelist to see and express his experience of a hybridized and complex cultural reality lending it an impact of immediacy, to help capture the natural rhythms of Indian speech habits and of the basic tenor of sub-continental life. This "chutnification" of language shows how Rushdie takes pain in depicting his experience with great earnestness, using all the resources he can wield. When, for example, Padma admonishes Saleem for his 'writery- shitery' and urges him to be attentive to more basic activity by saying "eat na, food is spoiling" or when the boy Saleem goes spying on his mother to a "real rutputti joined" which advertises its "lovely lassi, Fantabulous Faluda and Bhelpuri Bombay Fashion," Rushdie seems to use all the linguistic paraphernalia in order to evoke the plurality of urban India for which no single language can do. The very cobweb of life on Indian sub-continent, particularly in the urban areas, is multilingual. The young generation who speak English as a second language usually blend it with the vocabulary items taken from many other Indian languages, particularly Hindi, urdu and the speaker's mother tongue. In other words, they treat English as any everyday peer –group language and therefore use it in creative, though playful and impure ways. They do it constantly on college campuses, coffee houses, playgrounds and other places where they meet. Rushdie weaves this multilingual rap and woof of life in India into his concern in *Midnight's Children* and negotiates it at different levels –ranging from Naseem Aziz's resistance ("if God meant people to speak many tongues [...] why did he put only one in our heads?" (48) to the Pakistani soldiers' incomprehension of the Mukti Bahini's song "Amar Sonar Bangla" which "protected [them] from the insidious subversion of the lyric, although their feet did inadvertently tap to the tune" (424).

Meenakshi Mukherjee is right when she says that language, "may be seen as a metaphor for the rich profusion of India's multiple culture which is more an asset than a problem except when state policy decides to demarcate the differences" (19). Rushdie refers to redraw India's map in 1956 in which the boundaries of states "were not formed by rivers, or mountains, or any natural features of the terrain; they were instead walls

of words. Language divided us [...]" (225). Scanning from this point of view, Rushdie's multilingual medium in the novel may be considered a plea for resisting the artificial divisions of Indian democracy and for embracing fluidity and multiplicity.

However, Rushdie's vocabulary in *Midnight's Children* is not as strong and strategically without fault. While using the technique of "selective lexical fidelity" (EWB 64) which is evident in his daring to leave some Hindi, Urdu and Hindustani words unglossed in the text, he cannot consistently uphold his position. There are many words and expressions taken from Indian languages which he instinctively and immediately translate in English e.g., "dugdugi drum," "diya/lemp," "hey pahlwan, hey little wrestler," "hey, bahaenchud! Hey, little sister-sleeper," "chand-ka-tukra, [...] affectionate piece- of- moon," "formality [...] takaluff," "Jehad, Padma! Holy war!," "chhi-chhi! Filthy," "Ravana, the ten headed monster," "Rama, the hero of Ramayana," "the Devil, the Great Beast, Shaitan himself," "pagalzagal, crazy Zagallo," "chamcha (literally a spoon but idiomatically a flatterer)," etc. Rushdie himself once said: "to do footnotes or to do notes at the end was a kind of defeat. The story has to tell itself, it mustn't rely on the explanation. If it needs footnotes, it's a failure" (Vijay Kumar 217). In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie, it is true, has not used 'footnotes' or 'endnotes' as such. But the purpose of 'footnote' is served by his parenthetical explications which foreground the continual reality of cultural distance.

These authorial intrusions, in fact show double weakness: first, they helplessly accord a superior status to the translated words and therefore to the language translated into over original ones; and secondly, they expose the writer's failure to completely trust the native words as having power enough to bear the burden of effectively conveying experience. It is this tacit acknowledgement of the unreliability of words and expressions borrowed from marginal Indian languages which frequently leads the writer to explicate Indian concepts. This vulnerability in Rushdie's strategy of making his writing multilingual, thus, reflects his unconscious admission of and surrender to the sense of superiority of the language of the master. One wonders whether it does not tend to make his language more neo-colonial than anti-colonial.

This impression becomes sound when we come to Rushdie's syntax in *Midnight's Children*. Rushdie's operation at the level of syntax is far less audacious and militant than it is at the lexical level. He shows a distinctive inventiveness and boldness in the use of punctuations, particularly dots, hyphens, exclamatory signs and interrogative marks; effecting sudden changes of person as in "Saleem Sinai came to terms with himself. I will not say he was not sad; refusing to censor my past [...]" (378) or in "After this, the boy soldiers waited for the man –dog to die; but I was the stronger than the snake–poison" (436); executing abrupt changes of tense within a single verbal group e.g., "I cannot will not say how [...]," "night is falling has falling," "we were all shall be the gods you never had," etc.; making four or five sentences run together without separating them by stops or other punctuation marks as in "No colours except green and black the walls are green and the sky is black (there is no roof) the stars are green and the window is green but her hair is black as black" (249); abrupt switching from reported to direct speech or *vice versa*, at times doing away with the grammatical means that distinguish one from the other as the following passage :

[...] that's my father thinking, MY FATHER, now he's looking at me all funny What's the matter son don't you feel well Yes fine Abba fine, must go now GOT TO GET AWAY homework to do, Abba, and out, run away before he sees the clue on your face (my father always said that when I was lying there was a red light flashing on my forehead) [...]. He's butting into my thoughts, hey phaelwan, hey little wrestler, what's dragging your face down, it looks longer than a bad movie, you want channa? Pakoras? What? And me shaking my head, NO, nothing, Hanif mamu, so that he relaxes, turns away, starts yelling Ohe come on Dara, that's the ticket, give me hell, Dara yara! (202-03)

But these have hardly anything to do with the plan of de-colonising English language. The English scream-of-consciousness novelists, particularly Joyce and Woolf, for example, very often resorted to syntactic experimentations of this type. Indeed, Rushdie hardly effects any significant departure or deviation from the fundamental syntactic principles of British English. And since syntax is more elemental level of language than lexis, Rushdie cannot be said to have achieved any remarkable feat of re-placing the English language in *Midnight's Children*. Since the basic Subject-Verb-Object/Complement syntactic pattern of British English is

followed more or less uniformly throughout the novel, Rushdie's language here remains fundamentally classical English. The only typically Indian syntactic features that may be said to have been exploited by the novelist in the text are the plethora of relative clauses heaped upon one another and the frequent breakings off in the middle of sentences. While the former feature is related to the writer's narrational strategy of recapitulating all that was related earlier, the latter feature is exploited to create an atmosphere of gossip and fun in the telling of the tale.

But, the very fact that a writer who is so blatantly defiant in his use of language at the lexical level is so disappointingly tame in his handling of syntax points to the elemental unalterability of English, or, for that matter, any language in the world. Ironically, even at the level of lexis whatever indigenisation a post-colonial writer encodes in his writing can be decoded by a native English speaker only after he translates the experimented items into the equivalents of his language. For instance, Rushdie may deliberately misspell the word 'listen' as 'lissen,' but a British reader will not understand the word before translating it back into 'listen.' This applies equally invariably to all other lexical innovations. This unavoidable reality of the process of the human act of decoding language in fact tends to thwart the very purpose behind all a post-colonial writer's effort at de-colonising a language. The greatest irony underlying the situation is that the extent of Rushdie's success in abrogating British English –his dragging of the marginal to the central –has to be examined in an English which is more or less classical and pure.

This is not to argue that Rushdie's language in *Midnight's Children* lacks in functionality. On the contrary, it operates with its own aesthetic dynamics which assumes a richly complex edge within the narratorial framework of the novel. A few examples should be enough to establish the point. Rushdie's language at the very opening of the novel functions in a self-expository manner, serving as a brilliant introduction to the work and indicating the novelist's thematic and technical preoccupations:

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 August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1947. And the time? The time matters, too. Well men: at night. No, it's important to be more [...]. On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. Clock –hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came. Oh, spell it out: at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence, I trumbled forth into the world. There were gasps. And, outside the window, fireworks and crowd. A few seconds later, my father broke his big toe; but his accident was a mere trifle when set beside what had befallen me in the benighted moment, because thanks to the occult tyrannies of those blandly saluting clocks I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country.(3)

The novel in other words, begins in an autobiographical vein ("I was born in the city of Bombay"). This is followed by the phraseology of a fairy tale ("once upon a time," an expression that occurs repeatedly in the novel and assumes the proportion and takes on the effect of a leitmotif), suggesting the mode of fantasy. But this is rejected in favour of a recording of an actual historical year, date, and time, suggesting the novelist's sense of responsibility to history. The insertion of the image of "clock-hands joining palms" brings out Rushdie's brilliant metaphor imagination and thinly veils his vulnerability to the thought of partition. His father breaking "his big toe" right at the fatal hour of Saleem's birth and India's attaining independence (which obviously means the birth of nation too) foreshadows how cataclysmic the two births are going to prove. The phrases "handcuffed to history" and "my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country" reveal the basic narrative strategy the writer is going to adopt in the novel –the synchronization of the history of an individual with that of a nation. And it is significant that the language of this passage is repeated, almost verbatim, in the passage later in the book where Saleem's description of his son's birth duplicates his description of his own:

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 25<sup>th</sup>, 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-hand joined palms. Oh, spell it out, spell it out: at the precise instant of India's

arrival at Emergency, he emerged. There were gasps; and, across the country, silences and fears. And owing to the occult trannies of that benighted hour, he was mysteriously handcuffed to history, his destinies indissolubly chained to those of his country. (MC 500)

Repetition, in fact, is an unmistakable feature of Rushdie's language in *Midnight's Children*. Certain words keep on recurring throughout the novel e.g., 'recurrence,' 'form,' 'shape,' 'fragment,' 'broken,' 'cracks,' 'pieces,' 'centre-parting,' 'spittoon,' 'black,' 'white,' 'optimism,' 'nose,' 'knees,' 'snake,' 'ladder,' 'chutney,' etc., and sometimes even a whole sentence is repeated e.g., "what can't be cured must be endured," "there is no escape from form/recurrence," etc. These recurrent words, phrases and sentences are viscerally related to the novel's theme and technique. For example, 'spittoon' functions in the book as a receptacle of memory which holds variegated events together. 'Chutney' with its primary association with Mary Pereira seems to form the novel's thematic axis since it is her change of birth-tag which is at the centre of all that happens in the book. Also, if 'black' and 'snake' conjure up images of evil, 'white' and 'ladder' provide a potent antithesis to these by implying good; and, taken together they figure the inclusiveness which characterises the basic tenor of Indian philosophy.

Again, 'centre-parting,' 'cracks,' 'fragments,' 'pieces,' 'broken' –all these form the bulk of the vocabulary descriptive of partition, which is one of the major thematic concerns of the work. Quite contrary to this group of words, however, there is another group having of such words as 'form,' 'shape,' and 'recurrence,' which conveys the idea of an attempt to define a symmetry amidst the formlessness and fragmentation all-around. Indeed, the historical forces or political events as depicted in the novel from India's partition to Indira Gandhi's proclamation of the Emergency as well as the different layers of the story told in it, all exude a sense of disintegration, of centrifugality. Yet, throughout the novel, the narrator strives to impose on these disintegrating phenomena a pattern of centripetality by using various devices, the most effectively functional of which is the recurrent iteration of certain key words, phrases, expressions and sentences which are thus made to form a complex pattern of leitmotifs that really hold the novel together. The recursive property of Rushdie's language in *Midnight's Children*, thus, may be said to be an expression of "a sort of national longing of our deep belief that forms lie hidden within reality; that meaning reveals itself only in flashes" (359).

The presentation of Rushdie's language in *Midnight's Children* depicts an amalgamation, or, to use Rushdie's own neologism, 'chutnification' of various narrational registers which are happily assimilated. For instance, the book embodies spiralling, involved, epic interrogative as evident. Rushdie's novel also has filmy language as: "zooming out slowly into long-shot [...]. Merrily it rolls along, rolls along, roll along [...] (fade-out)" (283), or "I permit myself to insert a Bombay-talkies-style close-up –a calender 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 shots of burning buses [...]" (414).

To sum up, Rushdie's seeds of certain words, phrases and expressions sown in the novel e.g., "the feasibility of the chutnification of history" (548), "synchronistic birth," "a countdown for building suspense," etc. raises him to the higher plane of master linguist. Rushdie's critical analytical phraseology serves as a vehicle of a self-conscious, self-reflexive, metafictional method of writing. Hence, it is these multidimensional facets of his language that establish the novel a great literary work of art in the annals of Indian English fiction.

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