



EXPERIMENTS AND EXPRESSION: THE CONCEPT OF INDIAN WRITING IN ENGLISH BY SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN WRITERS

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As the problems of writing in English have changed over time, so too are the solutions so ingeniously devised by the authors. Literal translations may be neither adequate nor appropriate, and new linguistic experiments have become the order of the day.

Mukherjee identified three areas of linguistic experimentation tried by South Asian novelists, although she had her reservations as to the varying degrees of their success.

Experimenting with Diction

One of the most widely tried literary experiments by South Asian women writers is experiments with diction, and this is a many-pronged experiment. It may include direct and literal translations of words, proverbs and clichés, which may either be glaringly obvious and even disruptive to the reading process, or which may be subtly interwoven into the rest of the text. Literal translation however, is seldom the best solution, and most contemporary novelists choose to leave only single words untranslated, words which they either cannot or choose not to translate. Generally speaking, most South Asian women writers identify these experiments for the benefit of their readers by italicizing the relevant words. Some may choose not to do so, perhaps preferring to insert foreign words in the English text without drawing too much attention to the insertion, both for the purpose of reflecting their natural mode of thought and expression, and for a closer intertwining of their culture into the English language. Some authors provide translation lists at the back of their novels, which others, again perhaps deliberately, do not.

Words which are most commonly left untranslated are nouns, and more seldom, verbs. The untranslated nouns most popularly included in South Asian women's writings fall into a number of categories. Names of South Asian dishes or foods or fruits are commonly left in their original language, either because this imparts the cultural flavor more successfully, or perhaps there is no English equivalent. For example, one often comes across words



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like paan (betel leaves wrapping lime and nuts, which are then chewed), halwa (dessert made of grated carrot and milk and sugar), ghee (clarified butter), dhal (dish cooked with lentils).

Apart from names of foods and dishes, ties of kinship are often left in their vernacular also, perhaps for the sake of authenticity in dialogue, and again, perhaps to convey a South Asian approach to kinship and other relationships (for even non-blood related South Asians may well address each other as kin). Examples of these include didi (older sister), bhaiya (brother), bahu (daughter-in-law), chacha (paternal uncle).

However, it must be noted that such terms differ tremendously from language to language and from region to region in South Asia. Names of items of clothing are also commonly left untranslated. Examples of such would be sari (length of cloth worn wrapped around the body in specific ways), shalwar kameez (combination of tunic and pants), dupatta (long, scarf-like item), and even accessories like bindi (the coloured round dot in the centre of the foreheads of women), kumkum (the red powder sprinkled by married women in the parting of their hair), mangalsutra (a string of black beads worn by married women).

Other words left untranslated are exclamations, and in this case, it is most likely that they are included in their original form for the sake of authenticity; especially in dialogues (because in moments of crisis and high emotion, it has been observed that many fluent but non-native English speakers are likely to revert to their mother tongues). Exclamations may include those ranging from pride to horror; shabaash (congratulations, well done), bas (enough, finished), hai ram (with religious reference and most commonly used to express surprise or shock), chichi (a chiding which is not directly translatable but the sentiment "for shame!" comes close to this). Conversation fillers which may either contain a whole array of possible meanings, or no particular meaning at all, are also deliberately included on many occasions; words like accha (okay), arrey (oh! no, shame).

Apart from names of dishes and foods, items of clothing, ties of kinship, and exclamations, there are a number of other miscellaneous words left in the vernacular which are quite liberally besprinkled in South Asian women's novels. The word Puja is one which makes a frequent appearance, perhaps because it not only translates as "prayer", but it involves a certain set of rituals carried out in the process of the praying.

Another such word is Besharam, which could be roughly translated as "shameless" or "without modesty", but which actually appears to be a word which encapsulates many cultural expectations and stereotypes and connotations. Used sparingly and appropriately, all these categories of words left in the vernacular which are



included in literature written in English are justifiable and even desirable. The criteria in judging the successful inclusion of these words would be relevance and clarity. Besides inclusion of words foreign to English(1), another linguistic experiment tried by many authors is the distortion(2) of or alteration or addition to English words. This, again, falls into several categories. The misspelling of English words is one form of alteration. An example of this would be saar for "sir", which may be deliberately misspelled either to indicate the approximate sound of the mis-pronunciation of the word, or to indicate illiteracy, class, education levels, or regional dialectic influences. Often, misspelling is a successful device because in context, comprehension is seldom disrupted or threatened, and very often, a humorous note is added: "Excellent discipline, sooparb manners."(3)

Another form of alteration is in adding to words, for example, gad-bad, politics scholitics, which is immensely common in bhasha. The latter two examples where the addition is an invented word made to rhyme with the English one is more often than not used to express contempt, disparagement, and discouragement, though sometimes it can be used in a playful vein. The alteration of English words also signals the possibility that these may be the English words which are included in vernacular speech.

One author who has revolutionized the use of the English language and made some of the most innovative and numerous of linguistic experiments, is Arundhati Roy. Her linguistic experiments are novel and largely successful; successful because they manage to infuse the English words with a South Asian (and perhaps Malayali) set of connotations without distorting the English language. The rest of this subsection will therefore focus on illustrating some of Roy's novel and *potent linguistic experiments*. Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* is full of capitalized words, and even phrases. "Crawling Backward Days", for instance, is Roy's invention of another way of referring to the days when the caste system was legal and Untouchables suffered a certain set of social indignities. "Love Laws" is another such example, " ... Love Laws laid down who should be loved. And how! And how much."(4) Roy does not capitalize without attaching explanations and meanings, but once having capitalized and explained, she then uses these words or phrases again and again, thereby compiling a vocabulary of her own, creating a set of definitions pertinent only to her writing. The capitalizing of words, which by Roy's usage almost amounts to sloganeering, enables Roy to encapsulate very complex cultural connotations in a compact manner, which makes for a very rich and unusual usage of the English language.

Not only does Roy capitalize as a set of referrals, she also does so to illustrate the workings of the minds of the twins, the protagonists in her novel. "If you ever ... disobey me in Public, I will see to it that you are sent away ...



"(5) This chastising of the twins by their mother indicates to the children that "Public" is not only referring to the opposite of private, but refers to certain situations. "When Ammu was really angry, she said Jolly Well."(6) Equally, the capitalization of the words "Jolly Well" indicates the perception of the twins of a certain mood of their mother's, a certain mental state which is signaled and conveyed by her use of those certain words.

Roy does not limit her system of referrals to known words. She creates new phrases through the telling of little side tales, tales which feed into the mosaic of background or emotional inheritance of her protagonists, and the consciousness of which is seen to affect them in their lives. "Pappachi's Moth" is one clear example of this, summing up in two words the tale of frustration and grief of the protagonists' grandparent, which filters through with all types of negative connotations into the existence of the protagonists, "A cold moth with *unusually dense dorsal tufts* landed on Rahel' s heart. "(7)

One stylistic device which many authors employ, and which Roy exploits to perfection, is the combining of two or more English words to form a new word which taps into pre-existing codes or triggers a certain understanding. For example, "sour metal smell", is explained by Roy through the process of association of experience, "like the steel bus rails and the smell of the bus conductor's hands from holding them."(8) This is a method which works very effectively, both linking the reader from the a posteriori to the a priori, as well as conjuring up a whole set of associated memories.

Roy is an author almost playful in her use of English. Besides capitalising words, Roy also reads words backwards, "BE INDIAN, BUY INDIAN." "NAIDNI YUB, NAIDNI EB." She combines words like "bluegreyblue" to describe the colour of a person's eyes, and she separates words, "A wake. A live. Alert." Through the use of all these devices, Roy deconstructs and decodes English words to enable a new and culturally different perception of them. In this, Roy is amongst the most successful of South Asian novelists for her mastery of the English language to the extent of being able to make it serve her ends in expressing and depicting a South Asian set of values and realities. This is the process of reconciliation of two realities being carried out painlessly and with true elegance. Roy has much explaining to do in the course of her novel - which does not make for easy reading - but she blends the education of the reader into overall the construction of the novel without running the risk of losing the narrative thread. "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 in the page ...I was being creative with their design."(9)



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It would be useful to juxtapose Roy's linguistic experiments with those of another woman writer who also sought to express herself and her reality in a novel form. **Ntozake Shange** is an African American dramatist, who was very self-aware in her alteration of the Standard English. Instead of capitalizing words or phrases, she put names and other normally capitalized words in the lower-case, seeking the right to redefinition and re-identification. **Shange** experimented with the omission of *punctuation marks*, *intending* to upset the ordinary perception of readers, derail expectations, and thereby deconstruct."I cant count the number of times I have viscerally wanted to attack deform n maim the language I waz taught to hate myself in/ & yes/ in order to think n communicate the thoughts n feelings I want to think n communicate/ I haveta fix my tool to my needs/ I have to take it apart to the bone/ so that the malignancies/ fall away/ leaving us space to literally create our own image.

This quick glance at Shange's work indicates the myriad of ways in which cross-cultural writers of literature in English experiment with methods, forms, and stylistic devices, to reconcile their subjects with their mediums. South Asian women writers, however, are notably far less aggressive or confrontational than one such as Shange in their linguistic experiments and usage of English. Theirs is seldom a challenge to the mainstream literature; their tone is persuasive rather than defiant. Anger is not a tone commonly found in literature by South Asian women writers. In fact, this lack of anger is a significant characteristic of South Asian women's works in the context of Third World women writers.

References

1. It must also be noted that the English Language may intend to or already have incorporated some such words.
2. I use the word "distortion" without necessarily wishing to imply any misuse of the English language.
3. Taken from Anita Rau Badami's Tamarind Mem (London: Viking-Penguin, 1996) 22.
4. Arundhati Roy, The God of Small Things (London: Flamingo-HarperCollins, 1997) 177.
5. Roy 148.
6. Ibid.
7. Roy 112.



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