



Heteroglossia and Multicultural Uniformity in Rushdie's Novels

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Abstract

Salman Rushdie's novels bear significant stylistic and thematic tropes allowing his fiction to be studied under the critical assumptions of postcolonial and postmodern literary theories. *Midnight's Children*, *Shame* and *The Satanic Verses* reflect not only an anti-imperialist stance in before and after the colonial enterprise, but also a new form of hybridised identity for characters of both Indian and English origin, thus suggesting a new postcolonial culture. Dislocation of culture and identity through the process of hybridisation produces its own resistance towards changes in values, principles and beliefs. In this respect, Rushdie's novels portray postcolonial individuals attempting to resist cultural hybridisation by preserving their traditional and religious identities. However, their resistance is another form of hybridization through their multilingual discourse and the cultures of both the colonizer and the colonized begin to have a dialogic relationship in the colonial and postcolonial conditions depicted in Rushdie's texts. This article studies Rushdie's novels in terms of Bakhtinian heteroglossia and argues that the polyglottal nature of Rushdie's texts is a way of representing the multicultural condition created by the colonizer. This study questions further whether or not multiculturalism and heteroglossia contradictorily transform the postcolonial identities into a uniform identity.

Keywords: heteroglossia, multiculturalism, hybridity, identity

Salman Rushdie's novels have been identified and categorised within the multiple theories of post-colonial and postmodernist fiction. They reflect the multi-layered cultural condition caused by aggressive global capitalism. However, his novels cannot be entitled under a generalising heading like "novels of commodification" or "novels of the logic of globalisation", because the margins of the postmodern cultural condition are flexible and these margins are not possible to be defined as a singular and unified entity. Nevertheless, in Rushdie's novels, the narrative still reflects the postmodern fiction's susceptibility of trademarks, names of consumerist products and deterritorialization of cultures.

Midnight's Children, *The Satanic Verses*, and *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, in particular, reflect not only an anti-imperialist stance before and after the colonial enterprise, but also a new form of hybridised identity for characters of both Indian and English origin, thus suggesting a new postcolonial culture. Dislocation of culture and identity through the process of

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hybridisation produces its own resistance towards changes in values, principles and beliefs as well as polyglot. In this respect, Rushdie's novels portray postcolonial individuals who resist cultural hybridisation by preserving their traditional and religious identities. However, their resistance turns out to be yet another form of hybridization through their multilingual discourse and the cultures of both the colonizer and the colonized begin to have a dialogic relationship in the colonial and postcolonial conditions depicted in Rushdie's texts.

This article, therefore, aims to study Rushdie's novels in terms of Bakhtinian heteroglossia and argues that the polyglottal nature of Rushdie's texts is a way of representing the multicultural condition created by the colonizer. This study questions further whether or not multiculturalism and heteroglossia contradictorily transform the postcolonial identities into a uniform identity. Therefore, my purpose here is to study the multiculturalism and heteroglossia in Rushdie's novels from the perspective of reification and unification.

Multiculturalism celebrates the cultural condition that occurred as particularly the result of post-colonial migrations to the imperial centres of the former colonies in the aftermath of the independence. London, as the capital of the British Empire, has been the home to migrants from the former colonies since the disintegration of the Empire. Thus, it has turned into a city of cultural contrasts and a centre of a metropolitan identity which is an amalgam of all these contrasting cultures. This new cultural condition does not necessarily function as a reference to its colonial past, but also as the indication of London's unique culture generated by particularly the post-colonial migrants.

As migrants cannot identify themselves with the local culture, they begin to alienate themselves from the values of the new homeland. This is not only an alienation process from the values of their new homeland but also inevitably a temporal and a spatial distancing from the values of their homeland. This alienation leads them to rebel against their hybridised situation. Yet, the migrant has a crucial need within this process of alienation and rebellion: survival. They realise that the post-colonial world is a capitalist one that leads them to ambivalence as either to integrate into the new culture and reject their identities or to hold on to their own values. As a result of the need for survival, the post-colonial migrants begin to isolate themselves from the label of post-colonial identities attached to them and succumb to the values of the western capitalist world, turning their cultural products into commodities.

The process of reification stands out as the repulsion of identities and beliefs. The postcolonial discourse in Rushdie's novels reflects not only an anti-imperialist stance in the aftermath of the colonial enterprise, but also a new form of hybridised identity for the characters of both Indian and English origin, thus suggesting a new postcolonial culture. Within this intense reification, identities succumb to the models constructed by the market which totalizes and accumulates all individuals under a cultural uniformity. Literature of the postcolonial period, then, reflects Western products as the forms of cultural fetishism in order for postcolonial migrants to be more westernised, while it reflects the ethnic characteristics of the postcolonial individuals not only as the sources of their means of cultural preservation but also as their means of financial survival.

Food, for instance, functions as the intensifier of immigrants' cultural representation; it not only turns into a means of survival but also into the representation of the immigrants' cultural background, while it gets commoditized. Shaandaar Café in *The Satanic Verses* is run by a Bangladeshi family whose story helps us understand how cultural concepts are forced to change after migration. Muhammad and Hind Sufyan start running a café and guesthouse after migrating to London. In Bangladesh Muhammad, a man of culture, a cosmopolitan capable of quoting from the *Qur'an* as well as the military accounts of Julius Caesar, was the breadwinner of the house, as a teacher. However, due to his inability to cook, his wife Hind becomes the

breadwinner in London, while Muhammad waits on customers in the café. Having to leave his homeland due to his Communist ideals, he becomes a second-class citizen, and Hind's cooking becomes the basis for their restaurant. Their two daughters, Anahita and Mishal, exhibiting the situation of immigrants, are unaware of their homeland, Bangladesh, a place that their 'Dad and Mum keep banging on about,' which Mishal prefers to call 'Bungleditch.' (p. 259).

Thus, the metropolis becomes a melting pot of cultural contrasts and the marker of an identity which is an amalgam of these contrasting cultures. The multicultural condition in London does not only stem from the city's colonial past, but also from the objectification and commodification in global capitalism. Therefore, the introduction of global motives functions to modify the local habits and interests in his novels. The multicultural scene in *The Satanic Verses* provokes racist attacks on immigrants. The account of the race riots in Brixton is appalling. The Shaandaar Café becomes the target of an arson attack and both Muhammad and Hind Sufyan die. The theme of hybridity and migration is a challenge from the marginal provincial centre to the metropolitan imperialistic centre. However, even Hind's language and values undergo a change in the multicultural environment of London:

Everything she valued had been upset by the change; had in this process of translation, been lost:

Her language: obliged, now, to emit these alien sounds that made her tongue feel tired, was she not entitled to moan? Her familiar place: what matter that they had lived, in Dhaka, in a teacher's humble flat, and now, owing to entrepreneurial good sense, savings and skill with spices, occupied this four-storey terraced house? (p. 249)

As pointed out by Sukhdev Sandhu, London, for many immigrants, is not a place to refashion themselves, but a place to migrate and inhabit for financial reasons (p. 154). This process is taken further by Arif Dirlik and called as "global unity" created by trans-nationalisation of production (p. 349) which is obviously made easier in the aftermath of colonialism. Dirlik's assumption is that the world is homogenized both economically and culturally (p. 349). Arguing on globalization and commodification, Timothy Bewes asserts that "the concept of reification presupposes the assimilation of all cultures to a single culture" (p. 21). Multiculturalism is the commercialisation of even ethnicity, in which case, hybridity is commodified rather than being hybridised. Thus, commodification and reification disguise the postcolonial cultural scene.

When it comes to speaking of cultural fetishism, despite being analogous with the multiplicity of the global cultural representation in a local setting, Rushdie's characters appear to be similar to each other in that they all reflect hybridity. The post-colonial characters are all presented through their body ornamentation, mutilation or deformity. The post-colonial body turns into a performance of cultural fetishism. Judith Butler asserts that

What are being performed are the cultural norms that condition and limit the actor in the situation but also in play are the cultural norms of reception, which may or may not accord with the ones that are constituting a situation so that we actually have a retrospective of constitution of the performance through the norms of reception – and this can produce really interesting problems of cultural translation and cultural misunderstanding. And those problems are very productive. (p. 346)

Butler suggests that racial identity depends upon the representation of bodies, both in physical and performative terms. In this way, people outside of a certain race classification are Othered and must choose either to perform their societal racial norms or take on the potential problems of racial performativity. Rushdie's characters aim to conceal their otherness by using garments and objects that are culturally attributed to the west. For instance, *Midnight's Children's* William Methwold has a desire for the continuity of colonial customs in his house

even after it is owned by the Sinais. He asks them to keep everything as it is until colonial rule ends officially. Methwold "is named after the East India Company officer who in 1633 was the first to envision Bombay as a British stronghold" (Goonetilleke 25). This reference clearly indicates what ideological intentions are attributed to Methwold, which clearly reflects the imperial idea of colonialism:

'Lock, stock and barrel,' Methwold said, 'Those are my terms. A whim, Mr Sinai ... you'll permit a departing colonial his little game? We don't have much left to do, we British, except to play our games.' (p. 95)

The game played by the British starts the multiculturalism even before the independence. Rushdie offers a version of multiculturalism similar to the demands of performativity that change according to the societal needs. His search for authenticity rejects self-definition based solely on them. He demonstrates performativity in practice, creating a visualization of some of the tenets of the theory. His characters offer both a literary example of how performativity through the reification of cultural values and objects can work in conjunction with the search for identity. In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem's father Ahmad Sinai switches to Oxford drawl while speaking to Methwold, which indicates the construction of an Anglophile identity that would be reconstructed into a uniform identity that combines Englishness and Indianness. Ambreen Hai argues that "if language has [...] politically and materially formative power, then Rushdie's self-conscious postcolonial goal is to take control of that language, to reinvent that language to begin anew, to reshape the world" (p. 206). Thus, the new identity is formed through the author's control of a newly constructed language in Sinai's case, which gives him a mock identity.

As well as the unification of the mock identities in the form of multiculturalism, the reification in this study is the reification of the local traditional and religious values in the colony itself as an outcome of the colonial venture. *The Satanic Verses*, in terms of its cultural deterritorialization and commodification of myths, ruptures the conventional narration by not only forming a multi-layered structure but also recreating and satirizing religious myths through the deployment of commodities. This type of reification stands out as a result of the western products introduced in the colony by imperialism and the colonial venture.

Gibreel Farishta, in *The Satanic Verses*, is a film star famous for acting in theological movies in India. In a satirical contradiction to his roles in theological movies, for which he is famous, he loses his faith soon after his arrival in London. His new identity offers what Amin Malak calls as "the clash of cultures and the conflict of representations" (p. 183). A theological movie star turns into a non-believer, and a theatre actor becomes a voice-over actor for commodities. Catherine Cundy regards their condition as the result of a cultural "dislocation" (p. 68). By ironically reformulating these post-colonial identities, Rushdie satirises the aggressive capitalist tendency of imperialism by harshly deploying aggressive marketers and brand names.

In the opening pages of the novel, when the two expatriates fall off the crashed aircraft, Gibreel begins, in the air, to sing an old Indian song that pre-informs the general halo of the novel:

'O, my shoes are Japanese,' Gibreel sang, translating the old song into English in semi-conscious deference to the uprushing host-nation, 'These trousers English, if you please. On my head, red Russian hat; my heart's Indian for all that.' (p. 5)

Gibreel's song foreshadows the cultural bricolage in the novel. Gibreel and Saladin represent a hybridised nation that has lost its national identity. According to the song, this loss of identity is caused by the economic hegemony of non-national products. This song not only suggests a

cultural bricolage, but also informs the reader of the upcoming tone of the novel that clashes myths with commodification. Both religion and nation are under the same economic hegemony.

Hal Valance, one of the minor characters in the book, is a racist advertising executive who used to “employ [Saladin] for the voice-overs in his commercials” (Brian Finney, p. 82). However, he “uses market research to justify removing all signs of black immigrants from his commercials” and sacks Saladin (Finney, p. 82), because he is too alien. Finney regards this as Rushdie’s use of black comedy “evident in the passages concerning politics, capitalist greed and racism” (p. 82). Thus, Saladin’s exclusion from the scene functions as part of the unification of identities. It is only his English voice that is allowed on the screens.

The most striking religious myth that clashes with commodification is Gibreel’s final dream about a walk of pilgrimage organised by Ayesha who persuades a whole village to go on a pilgrimage with her. Mishal, who has cancer, is one of the villagers to join Ayesha. She believes that her cancer will disappear if she walks to Mecca through the Indian Ocean believing that the ocean will part for them. However, her husband Mirza’s attempts to stop her are humorous and suggest a realism that overtakes magic:

‘... When the waters of the ocean part, where will the extra water go? Will it stand up sideways like walls?...’ He began to cry, and fell on his knees, His dying wife came up and embraced him from behind. ‘Go with the pilgrimage, then,’ he said ... ‘But at least take the Mercedes station wagon. It’s got air-conditioning and you can take the icebox full of Cokes.’ (p. 239)

Rushdie creates a grotesque image by parodying an Islamic duty and a holy myth. The burlesque generated by the clash of eastern magical reality with western products indicates how powerfully capitalism dominates religious and national identities and how influentially it reifies them. An air-conditioned car and cold fizzy drinks are suggested as facilitators of a religious duty, thus decreasing the reverence of such a task. The duty of pilgrimage is taken out of its local and spiritual paradigms and converted into a secular task through an impious commodification. Rushdie presents the post-modern cultural condition of the world as an impediment of authenticity and religious and national identities and calls this “the Coca-Colonization” in *The Satanic Verses*:

Amid all the televisual images of hybrid tragedies – the uselessness of the mermen, the failures of plastic surgery, the Esperanto-like vacuity of much modern art, the Coca-Colonization of the planet – ... (p. 406)

Rushdie represents the eclecticism and juxtaposed images of the postmodern condition. In this representation, consumerism and media surround everything, including religion, in contemporary culture. The walk of pilgrimage organised by Ayesha succeeds to elicit attention from media and the business world in *The Satanic Verses*. However, this interest in the pilgrimage is far away from its spiritual content:

The story of the village that was walking to the sea had spread all over the country, and in the ninth week the pilgrims were being pestered by journalists, local politicians in search of votes, businessmen who offered to sponsor the march if the yatrıs would only consent to wear sandwich boards advertising various goods and services ... (p. 488)

In Damian Grant’s words, Rushdie’s fiction calls into question the “value-free world of contemporary culture” wherever it may be found (p. 87), and he presents capitalist marketing as what demonises the divinity. The values of consumer culture become more important than the values of religion and nationality. The interference of consumer culture provides capitalism, in Lyotard’s terms, with “the power to derealize familiar objects, social rules, and institutions to such a degree” that reality can only be realised as nostalgia or mockery (p. 74). The holy

pilgrimage is derealized to a degree of mockery, since it is a contemporary attempt that cannot avoid the bombardment of brand-names and advertisements. When power is possessed by capital, to quote Lyotard once again, contemporary culture becomes eclectic (p. 76) and this eclecticism gives birth to a new form of heteroglossia which lacks the Bakhtinian dialogism as the commodified cultures can only get into a dialogue only when they take part in consumerism.

It is a question whether Rushdie's fictional universe is an allegory of global cultural homogenization, the death of authenticity, the loss of meaning, or, in Homi Bhabha's terms, a "transnational" and "translational dimension of cultural transformation" in postmodernity. Bhabha asserts that "the construction of the colonial subject in discourse, and the exercise of colonial power through discourse, demands an articulation of forms of difference – racial and sexual", and these epithets are seen as "modes of differentiation, realised as multiple, cross-cutting determinations, polymorphous and perverse" (p. 96). When this is the moment of colonial discourse in Bhabha's terms, the same discourse based on differentiations and polymorphism still prevails both in the Western and Eastern post-colonial discourse. I wish to distinguish the western and eastern post-colonial discourses deliberately, since it is possible to differentiate the western post-colonial discourse which takes up the colonial subject's integration to the western society as its major theme as opposed to the eastern one that presents the colonial subjects in their authentic environment, which is even more hybridised. What is contemplated in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, for instance, is the hybridisation process of not only the eastern colonial subject, but also the western originated rock music. Rushdie employs Bombay's multicultural and multilingual cultural scene which provides the novel with post-colonial cultural hybridity. Umeed Merchant, the narrator, describes the jargon comprehensible only to Bombayites:

Not only in English. Because it was only me, she could prattle on in Bombay's garbage argot, *Mumbai ki kachrapati baat-cheet*, in which a sentence could begin in one language, swoop through a second and even a third and then swing back round to the first. Our acronymic name for it was *Hug-me*. Hindi Urdu Gujarati Marathi English. Bombayites like me were people who spoke five languages badly and no language well. (p. 7)

Rushdie's play on language and identity indicates that Indian culture is manipulated and hybridised by imperial intervention. Although *Hug-me* is the consequence of imperial rule to fit into a colonial or post-colonial discourse, it is the mixture of four different indigenous languages, as well as English. Even though the description of this hybrid language stands out as an indicator of the polyglottal nature of Rushdie's narration style, this polyglot does not provide a space for postcolonial multiculturalism in an affirmative sense. As Rushdie suggests, they spoke five languages badly and no language well. He denotes that people in different parts of India have no common language to communicate in other than English (*Imaginary Homelands*, p. 17). Comically in Bombay, people can only communicate in *Hug-me*.

This hybrid Bombayite language turns out to be an ambivalent identification for the people of Bombay in Bhabha's terms. Bombayites are far from creating a national narrative for themselves. Rather they create an ambivalent identification through *Hug-me*, through uncertain cultural meanings in Bhabha's terms (p. 239). Such a use of language invites a Bakhtinian analysis which focuses on the discourse of a novel, arguing that "there is a highly characteristic and widespread point of view that sees novelistic discourse as an extra-artistic medium, a discourse that is not worked into any special or unique style" (p. 260). My argument here is not to exclude Bakhtinian analysis from Rushdie's texts, but if "all attempts at concrete stylistic analysis of novelistic prose" stray into linguistic descriptions of the language, in Bakhtinian terms (p. 261), they also stray into cultural descriptions in Rushdie's narration.

Having said that, the multicultural condition as the outcome of post-colonial migrations in the second half of the twentieth century has been subject to reification. This reification, however, functioned in various ways. The first type of reification has been observed as the commodification of cultural values and objects like traditional types of food and icons of religious beliefs, which were regarded as the means of survival for the immigrants. The second type of reification has come out as cultural fetishism in which the post-colonial immigrant adapts himself to the local culture by using the western cultural icons and symbols to appear more western and to conceal his authentic origin. The third type on the other hand mostly occurs in the form of intrusion of western brand names in the colony, in which case the colonial local culture is dominated by western products. The common point in all these three types is the objectification of culture which leads to uniformity. The more the cultures are reified the more they are alike since reification strips them of their spiritual and traditional meaning and content. Last but not the least; multiculturalism is juxtaposed with cultural uniformity introduced by global capitalism which leads all cultures to sameness. Thus, it is no more the differences that count but it is the uniformity that dominates the new internationalism.

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