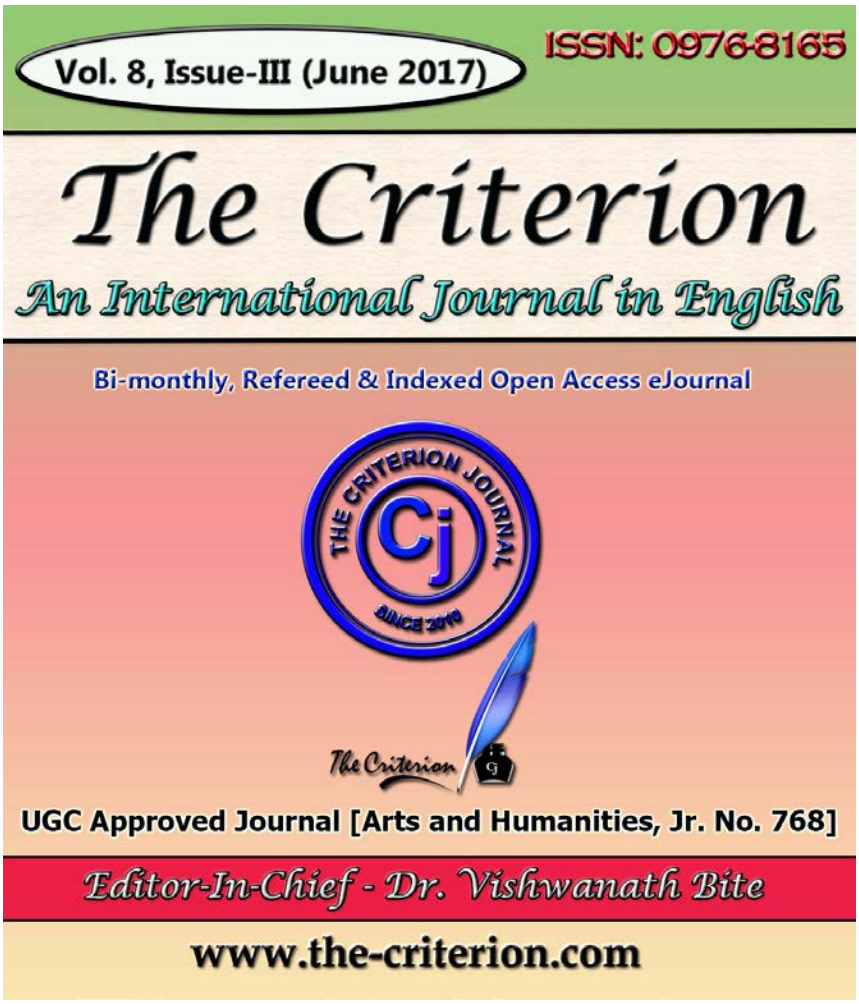

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

Bi-Monthly Refereed and Indexed Open Access eJournal

www.galaxyimrj.com

Towards a New Linguistic Paradigm: A Study of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Article History: Submitted-18/04/2017, Revised-17/06/2017, Accepted-25/06/2017, Published-05/07/2017.

Abstract:

The sustained use of English, by the natives of a former colony of Britain, has long been the subject of debate in postcolonial studies. Very often, the use of English leads to the inevitable debasing of the native language and culture. In the debates that happened, the views ranged from a call for a total rejection of the language to others demanding that the language of the colonizer be used as a tool against them. It is in this context that Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* gains distinction. The work shows how English can be used as a tool of resistance by appropriating it to make it echo the ethos of the native culture. The English that is used in the novel breaks many grammatical rules and conventions. It is a restructured and restyled language that has a native essence incorporated into it. The novel demonstrates how the language and literature of the natives can assist in a cultural liberation. This paper will be an analysis of the linguistic features of the novel from a postcolonial perspective, to explain how Roy uses language as a tool for subverting the colonial legacy, and to see how language has been deployed to establish the identity of the colonized.

Keywords: postcolonialism, language, power.

> **"**Oh, East is East and the West is West and never the twain shall meet"
> - Rudyard Kipling (1129)

Though most of the European nations left their colonies by 1970, the mindset of the people in these former colonies is yet to be decolonized, believe postcolonial critics.

According to them, the East is still governed by a Eurocentric power structure. In his highly celebrated but also provoking book *Orientalism,* Edward Said embarks on describing a long European tradition "of coming to terms with the Orient, that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience" (Said 1). This tradition Said calls 'Orientalism'. In *Orientalism,* Said observes that there are certain observable patterns like the image of the West as the 'invader' and the East as the 'invaded'. European culture is always projected as the superior one whereas the culture of the East becomes the inferior 'Other' (as the Europeans call it). As a result of this, the colonized tried to reclaim their lost self and identity by drawing inspiration from their past (Said 1-31).

The Kenyan novelist Ngugi Wa' Thiang'o in his *Decolonizing the Minds* speaks about the need for decolonizing our minds. Ngugi wrote in his mother tongue 'Gikuyi' and ridiculed those African writers who wrote in Spanish, the language of the invader. He used to write in English but stopped it with the publication of "On the Abolition of the English department"1981. He argued that a language transmits a culture and for the native culture to survive, it needs its own forms of expressions and language. In Ngugi's opinion, we in the third world nations would remain colonized as long as we retained English. To 'decolonize' the minds we need to first shut out English. For that, he called for the abolition of English departments (Thiang'o 1-4). The Algerian writer Frantz Fanon also spoke of the violence of language where native languages and cultures were eliminated by the colonial master's language and thus left the native without his own language.

Writers like Chinua Achebe and Raja Rao justified there selection of English as the medium, citing their own inability. Achebe says "is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else's? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling. But, for me there is no other choice" (Achebe 343). Raja Rao had mourned the legacy of English when he wrote in his famous preface to his novel *Kanthapura* that he could not capture the emotions and feelings of the heart in a language that was not his own (Kundu 38). So it is evident that the early writers like Rao and Achebe felt guilty of writing in English but they wrote in English since they had no options.

Postcolonial authors like Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy 'appropriate' the English language and make it our own. As Rushdie puts it "to conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free" (Rushdie 84). Postcolonial writings have come a long way since the days of Ngugi and others. While Ngugi and Fanon perceived English as the language of the oppressor and called for abandoning it totally, Achebe and Rao mourned their own use of English. But now, authors like Roy and Rushdie successfully use English as the language of the 'oppressed' transforming it to a good tool against the oppressor. So, it makes a lot of sense to study the linguistic features of

Arundhati Roy's sole novel *The God of Small Things* in a postcolonial perspective. Medium is the message. So, a linguistic study can reveal the politics and purpose of the work and the author. Without dealing in detail with the stylistic aspects of the novel, this study explains how Roy uses language as a tool for subverting the colonial legacy and thereby re-establishing the identities of the people around her. As Roy puts it,

> For me language is a skin on my thought and
> I was thinking about it as a story and was thinking of
> a way of telling it. The only way I can explain how I wrote
> it was the way an architect designs a building. (qtd. in Tickell 7)

The God of Small Things can be best described as a 'linguistic protest' against the colonial agenda. The novel was a linguistic experiment. By writing the novel, Roy was inaugurating a new linguistic tradition in Indian writing and postcolonial fiction in general. In her novel, Roy twists and reshapes language with startling precision. She uses a variety of English and that's why she is successful in communicating to the world the culture she represents. Roy writes with a linguistic/stylistic exuberance which lends a flavour and colour, though artificial, of its own to the entire novel. She writes differently to a great extent and in doing so, breaks many of the accepted rules of the English language. In the novel, language becomes a toy which Roy can play with.

Use of the Vernacular against the Colonial Agenda

> Roy is the first Indian writer in English where a marvellous
> Stylistic resource becomes available for provincial, vernacular
> culture without any effect of exoticism and without the book
> reading as translation. (Ahmad 113)

The use of untranslated words is perhaps the most arresting linguistic feature of Roy's narrative. Two people, separated by their caste from their childhood also use Malayalam when the power divide is bridged by their illicit affair. Velutha, who had to place his gifts on Ammu's palm so as not to touch her, is given a tryst by the word *naaley*. Here, Roy uses the vernacular over English. The single word *naaley* captures their love, hope and passion which a thousand English words cannot give. By this, Roy could effectively expose the vulnerabilities of the alien language, and the beauty of the regional language which carries the true heritage of its people. The bondage of the lovers is revealed by their use of Malayalam when they discuss the spider, *Chappu Thampuran* and other small objects during their nightly meetings. In fact, Roy uses Malayalam throughout the novel.

When *The God of Small Things* was published in the U.S., Roy was asked to provide a glossary or rework some of the Malayalam words like *mon* and *mol*. This she

refused to do on the basis that the non-Malayali or non-Indian readers be forced into what Ashcroft terms "an active engagement with the horizons of the culture in which these words have meanings" (Ashcroft 126). Untranslated words, as Ashcroft notes, are "metonymic of the culture they represent, compelling the reader of the master text to negotiate this encounter with the opposed culture's identity of the racial 'other'" (Ashcroft 187).

Many folk songs are interpolated into the text in their original language, including a popular Malayalam film song:

- *Pandoru mukkuvan muthinu poyi,*
  (Once a fisherman went to sea,)
  Padinjaran kattathu mungi poyi,
  (The west wind blew and swallowed his boat,)
  Arayathi pennu pizhachu poyi,
  (His wife on the shore went astray.) (Roy 219)
- *Pa pera-pera-pera perakka,*
  (Mister gugga-gug-gug-guava,)
  Ende parambil thooralley,
  (Don't shit here in my compound,)
  Chetende parambil thoorikko,
  (You can shit next door in my brother's compound,)
  Pa pere-pera-pera perakka.
  (Mister gugga-gug-gug-guava.) (Roy 206)

Intertwined with the songs are the cultural allusions which impart the indigenous heritage to the master text. It manifests the resistance of a culture, its attempt to withstand the impact of the colonialism which in Fanon's words "is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content…[but also]turns to the past of the oppressed people and distorts, disfigures and destroys it" (Fanon 182).

Children's Language- A Revenge

"With extra-ordinary linguistic inventiveness, Roy funnels the history of south India through the eyes of seven year old twins."

- Gillan Beer (qtd. in Tickell 13)
(Chairwoman of the booker judges)

In the novel, children become the makers of a new language. In rendering Estha and Rahel's attempt to understand and assert their place in the world through language, Roy has telescoped words together (*suddenshudder, furrywhirring, slipperoily*),

exchanged syllables between them (*readly dead*), read words backward (*natas in their seys*), split them apart (*lay ter, bar nawl, a live, a lert, a wake*) and coined in the process, new words (*hosling, stoppited, busty*).

Children represent the colonized. They play with the 'superior' language of the colonizer. They distort its structure, break rules, make it ugly, reverse and reshape it as they wish. In a sense, English becomes children's open field of power in which they can bring forth their fantasies. The 'colonized' weave their dreams in a language, which oppressed them in the past. In this way Roy takes a postcolonial revenge against the empire.

The child's view of events interrogates and subverts the established or superior view of reality. Children's reading backwards is tantamount to a powerful subversion of the established order. At the climatic point, Children make their only gesture of revolt available to them through language. They read each of the vaunted mottoes of the Police (history's henchmen) backwards:

Politeness - ssenetilo**P**
Obedience - enceideb**O**
Loyalty - ytlayo**L**
Intelligence - ecncgilleta**I**
Courtesy - ysetruo**C**
Efficiency - yeneiciff**E**

Through this Roy shows how language comes to the rescue of the deprived and how it can be effectively used as a weapon against superior's torture.

Who Assigns Meanings to the Words?

Anna Clarke speaks about the ownership of the language in the light of Pappachi's moth (Clarke 135). According to her, language does not simply matter; it indicates who are in the world; it is also significant because of our ability to name and give meanings to things. "Pappachi had been an imperial entomologist at the Pusa institute…his life's greatest setback was not having had the moth that he had discovered named after him" (Roy 49).

Roy, through this apparently simple passage offers an important figurative representation of complex issues regarding the ownership of the language. As Pappachi is an imperial entomologist, the practice of fixing meanings is presented in the context of imperialism. In its focus on discourse, postcolonial theory is particularly sensitive to the issues of who has the power of speech in colonial and postcolonial contexts. The preoccupation with the

authority of speech and deciding the meaning of language becomes paramount in the colonial historical context.

Velutha- A 'White Washed' Black

> "He was called Velutha - which means white in Malayalam –
> because - he was so black" (Roy 73)

Language embodies attitudes to class, race and gender. The meaning of particular words has changed over centuries and connotes things differently today. The term 'Fair' for example referred originally to a sense of justice. It began to refer to complexion only after colonization. Europeans used the term 'fair' as a means of distinguishing themselves from other races – not only in terms of skin but also in terms of character. In *The God of Small Things* Roy raises the question of what is black and what is white. How did white become a signifier of good and black a signifier of evil? She wanted to make a mockery of the ideologies of colour sponsored by the West. By naming the hero of her novel, a black Paravan, 'Velutha,' Roy creates a parody. She mocks the ruling class, who injected into the people's unconscious 'the algebra of colour and character'.

Strategy behind Repetition and Neologism

One of the fundamental, though primitive, devices of intensification is repetition which Roy uses in profusion. This begins with actual, physical acoustic repetition for an echoic effect. "He loved them. He loved her…she loved him, they loved the children, the children loved them. They all loved each other" (Roy 105). It's very clear that Roy uses repetition in an attempt to bring a certain kind of eloquence to her style. At the same time, to the reader's amazement, she also uses repetition as a negative strategy:

- Past floating yellow limes…
  Past green mangoes…
  Past glass casks…
  Past shelves of pectin…
  Past trays of bitter gourd…
  Past mounds of fresh green peppercorns…
  Past a heap of banana peels…
  Past the label cupboard… (Roy 193-194)
- The white termites on their way to work.
  The white lady birds on their way home.
  The white beetles burrowing away from the light.
  The white grasshoppers with white wood violins.
  The sad white music. (Roy 336)

In the two instances given above, it begins to jar and even indicate a poverty of linguistic resources. Here the reader gets annoyed. Though used in a different sense, the repetition of the word 'past' can bring back the horrors and traumas of our colonial 'past'. So is the case with the repetition of the word 'white'. The reader gets fed up with 'the white'. As a result, Roy executes her linguistic protest against our 'white past' with great success.

Though neologism is not a violation of the lexical rule, a writer obviously can not be allowed the total license in the creation of new words, says the linguistic rules. English language stipulates certain accepted rules like affixation or suffixation for the formation of new words. But in her novel, Roy coins new words by flouting those rules. Examples include: *Offity* (210), *bar nowl* (193), *straight forwardly* (227), *this way and that* (107), *please to meet you* (212) etc. In this manner, she constructs a parallel or underground language. Along with new words, she also spells words incorrectly and makes English crippled. By doing so, she exposes the vulgarities of English and making a mockery of the system which gave birth to 'correct usages'.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* becomes a testimony of what we call as 'the linguistic protest' against the colonial agenda. Drawing inspiration from what Said has said in *Orientalism*, Roy shows how language, literature and other expressions of indigenous culture become a weapon for the colonized to fight the war of cultural liberation. Roy also shows how we can decolonize our minds through colonizer's own language. She says "my language is mine, it's the way I think and I write. I don't scribble around and try and sweat the language. Her words reverberate in the hearts of millions and carries postcolonial writing towards a new linguistic paradigm.

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