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Translingual Writing and Code-Switching in South Asian Anglophone Literature

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Abstract

This paper examines the phenomenon of translingual writing and code-switching in contemporary South Asian Anglophone literature, analyzing how writers from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh deploy multilingual textual strategies to represent the linguistic realities of postcolonial societies. Through close readings of works by Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Mohsin Hamid, and Shehan Karunatilaka, the study identifies distinct modes of translingual practice, including lexical borrowing, syntactic calquing, script-switching, and strategic untranslatability. The paper argues that these practices constitute a politics of language that challenges the monolingual norms of Anglophone literary culture and asserts the legitimacy of multilingual consciousness as both a literary subject and a mode of literary expression.

Keywords:- Translingualism, Code-Switching, South Asian Literature, Postcolonial Writing, Multilingual Fiction

Introduction

South Asian Anglophone literature occupies a unique position at the intersection of colonial linguistic history, postcolonial identity politics, and the everyday multilingualism of the Indian subcontinent. Writers from this region who choose to write in English confront a fundamental tension: English, the language of colonial administration and contemporary global capitalism, is simultaneously an instrument of cultural imperialism and a medium of creative expression, professional advancement, and transnational communication. The ways in which South Asian writers navigate this tension, incorporating words, phrases, syntactic structures, and rhetorical conventions from their mother tongues into their English-language texts, constitute a rich and varied set of translingual practices.

The concept of translingualism, as developed by Canagarajah, refers to the communicative practices of multilingual individuals who draw upon their full linguistic repertoire to negotiate meaning across language boundaries. Unlike the traditional concept of bilingualism, which assumes distinct, bounded language systems, translingualism emphasizes the fluidity, hybridity, and creativity of multilingual communication (Canagarajah 1). In the literary domain, translingual writing involves the deliberate deployment of multilingual textual

strategies to achieve aesthetic, political, and epistemological effects that would be impossible within a single language.

This paper examines translingual writing and code-switching in South Asian Anglophone literature through close readings of four major works: Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children, Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things, Mohsin Hamid's Exit West, and Shehan Karunatilaka's The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida. These works represent different national traditions, historical periods, and modes of translingual practice, and their analysis reveals the diversity and complexity of South Asian literary multilingualism.

Code-Switching as Literary Strategy: Rushdie's Chutnification

Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children is widely recognized as a watershed text in South Asian Anglophone literature, and its linguistic innovations have been extensively analyzed by scholars of postcolonial literature. Rushdie's famous metaphor of "chutnification," the mixing and preserving of diverse ingredients into a spicy, hybrid product, describes both his narrative method and his linguistic strategy. The novel's English is saturated with Hindi and Urdu words, phrases, and idioms that are not italicized, glossed, or translated for the Anglophone reader, a practice that asserts the legitimacy of these languages within the text and refuses to position them as exotic or subordinate to English (Rushdie 459).

Rushdie's code-switching operates at multiple linguistic levels. At the lexical level, he incorporates Hindi-Urdu words for culturally specific concepts, foods, relationships, and practices that have no precise English equivalents. At the syntactic level, he calques Hindi sentence structures into English, producing constructions such as "what-all" and "itself" as emphatic particles that mark his prose as distinctively South Asian. At the rhetorical level, he draws upon the traditions of Urdu oral storytelling, including the use of direct address, hyperbole, and digression, to create a narrative voice that is recognizably different from the conventions of British realist fiction (Ashcroft et al. 38).

Rushdie's translingual practice is explicitly political. By refusing to translate or explain his Hindi-Urdu incorporations, he positions the multilingual South Asian reader, rather than the monolingual Anglophone reader, as the ideal audience for his work. This reversal of the colonial linguistic hierarchy, in which English was the language of authority and indigenous languages were subordinate, constitutes what Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin call the "abrogation" and "appropriation" of the colonial language: the rejection of the colonizer's claim to linguistic authority and the reshaping of English to serve the expressive needs of the postcolonial subject (Ashcroft et al. 37).

Syntactic Subversion: Roy's Malayalam-English

Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things employs a different mode of translingual writing, one that operates primarily at the syntactic and phonological levels rather than the lexical level. Roy's prose is characterized by unconventional capitalizations, neologisms, compound words, and sentence structures that reflect the cognitive and linguistic world of her child protagonists, Estha and Rahel. These innovations are not merely stylistic flourishes but linguistically motivated strategies that reproduce the interference patterns of Malayalam-English bilingualism in the text.

Roy's distinctive compound words, such as "Pappachi's Moth," "the Love Laws," "the History House," and "Edges, Borders, Boundaries, Brinks and Limits," function as a form of syntactic calquing that reproduces the compounding patterns of Malayalam, in which complex concepts are routinely expressed through noun-noun combinations (Roy 33). Her unconventional capitalization similarly reflects the prosodic patterns of Malayalam, in which emphasis is distributed differently than in English. The result is a prose style that is

recognizably English in vocabulary but distinctly un-English in rhythm, emphasis, and conceptual organization.

Roy's translingual strategies serve a political function that operates differently from Rushdie's. Where Rushdie's code-switching asserts the presence of Hindi-Urdu within the English text, Roy's syntactic subversion transforms English from within, making it accommodate the structures and rhythms of a Dravidian language. This strategy is particularly effective in representing the experience of the novel's Dalit character, Velutha, whose social marginalization is reflected in the linguistic marginalization of his Malayalam-inflected speech within the dominant English of the text (Roy 176).

Strategic Monolinguality: Hamid's Transparent English

Mohsin Hamid's Exit West presents an instructive contrast to the translingual density of Rushdie and Roy. Set in an unnamed city that is recognizably Lahore, the novel tells the story of Saeed and Nadia, a young couple who flee civil conflict through mysterious doors that transport migrants to cities around the world. Despite its South Asian setting and characters, Exit West employs a notably "clean" English, largely free of Urdu or Punjabi incorporations, code-switching, or syntactic calquing.

Hamid's choice of a transparent, unmarked English is itself a translingual strategy, one that represents the experience of displacement through linguistic deterritorialization rather than linguistic hybridization. By stripping his prose of local linguistic markers, Hamid creates a linguistic surface that mirrors the novel's thematic concern with the porosity of borders and the universality of the migrant experience. The unnamed city, the generic English, and the magical realist doors all work together to suggest that displacement is not a culturally specific experience but a universal condition of contemporary life (Hamid 73).

This strategy has significant implications for the politics of translingual writing. While Rushdie and Roy assert cultural specificity through linguistic hybridity, Hamid pursues a cosmopolitan universalism through linguistic transparency. Neither strategy is inherently superior; each represents a different response to the challenge of writing postcolonial experience in a global language, and each illuminates different dimensions of the relationship between language, place, and identity in the contemporary world.

Spectral Multilingualism: Karunatilaka's Sri Lankan English

Shehan Karunatilaka's Booker Prize-winning novel The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida, set during Sri Lanka's civil war, deploys what might be termed "spectral multilingualism": a narrative strategy in which the ghosts of Sri Lanka's violent past speak in a polyphonic mix of Sinhala, Tamil, and English that reflects the nation's linguistic and ethnic divisions. The novel's narrator, Maali Almeida, is a dead photographer navigating the afterlife, and his voice, irreverent, multilingual, and culturally omnivorous, embodies the cosmopolitan Sri Lankan identity that the civil war sought to destroy.

Karunatilaka's code-switching is distinctive in its integration of Sinhala and Tamil elements into a predominantly English narrative. Unlike Rushdie, who incorporates Hindi-Urdu as a mark of cultural authenticity, Karunatilaka's multilingualism is explicitly political: it insists on the presence of both Sinhala and Tamil within the novel's linguistic fabric as a counter to the ethnic exclusivism that fuelled the civil war. The novel's linguistic hybridity is thus a form of textual reconciliation, a literary enactment of the multilingual, multiethnic Sri Lanka that the narrator mourns (Karunatilaka 89).

Conclusion

The translingual practices of South Asian Anglophone writers constitute a rich and diverse field of literary experimentation that challenges the monolingual norms of global

Anglophone literary culture. The four modes of translingual writing examined in this paper, Rushdie's lexical code-switching, Roy's syntactic subversion, Hamid's strategic monolinguality, and Karunatilaka's spectral multilingualism, represent different responses to the shared challenge of writing multilingual postcolonial experience in the global language of English. Each strategy carries distinct political implications: asserting cultural specificity, transforming the colonial language from within, pursuing cosmopolitan universalism, or enacting textual reconciliation across ethnic and linguistic divides.

The study of translingual writing in South Asian literature has broader implications for literary studies and linguistics. It challenges the assumption that literary texts belong to a single language and the institutional structures, including national literature curricula, translation studies, and language-specific literary criticism, that are built upon this assumption. As global migration, digital communication, and cultural exchange continue to multiply the sites and modes of translingual literary production, the development of critical frameworks adequate to multilingual literary texts becomes an increasingly urgent task for literary scholarship.

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