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Dr. Narugopal Mukherjee
Associate Professor of English
Bankura Christian College
Bankura, West Bengal, India

Nativization of language in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*: A subversion of the canonical English

Dr. Narugopal Mukherjee

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Abstract

The present paper seeks to explore how Khaled Hosseini in his novel, *The Kite Runner*, has DE canonized the language of the colonial masters and has revolutionized the use of language by making a 'chutnification' of the language, to borrow the metaphor from Salman Rushdie's seminal text, *Midnight's Children* (1981). The paper will make a study of Hosseini's nativization of the foreign language by hybridizing 'canonical' English with purely local words in the form of code-switching, code-mixing, and different forms of heteroglossia. Hosseini retains the native taste of the people of Afghanistan even though he writes in a language foreign to his countrymen. His fiction turns into a discourse on ethnicity, culture studies, nation, and nationhood. The language DE familiarizes the colonial framework of English and shows that the Empire has started writing back. Such a literary text facilitates language learning course and keeps the learners away from linguistic and cultural barriers in the interpretation and perception of a text written in a foreign tongue.

Keywords: Canonical English, chutnification, DE familiarization, culture studies

Introduction

Teaching a literary text in English is unquestionably a challenging task in any ESL situation and demands expertise in pedagogy on the part of the classroom teacher who himself /herself is also an L₂ learner in English. The challenge is further intensified if the text deals with altogether a foreign setting involving characters largely drawn from foreign sources. This is the problem that cropped up when Direct Method of teaching English was applied in America as well as in English by Maximilian Berlitz, Harold Palmer, Wilfred Owen, etc. in the early part of the twentieth century. The scenario changed altogether in the post-colonial phase, and, more particularly, in the last three decades as the focus has been shifted to texts written by Third-World writers. There emerged the notion of English as a second language with a pragmatic, utilitarian function in communication. The nativized variety of English has come to be recognized as part of the local literary and cultural tradition of post-colonial societies because of its use in imaginative and creative contexts, as J. Kachru observed. English language teaching in an ESL situation went through a drastic change as local or regional colour added to this English facilitated language learning. The learners felt quite at home as it was a language not outright foreign, rather very much close to their heart, the setting was their native land, and the thematic issues exclusively addressed their culture and practices. That is what we find in the fiction of Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, and that is what we find again in the fiction of the Afghanistan-born writer, Khaled Hosseini. Timothy Brenann comments: "It was the novel that historically accompanied the rise of nations by objectifying the 'one, yet many' of national life, and by mimicking the structure of the nation, a clearly bordered jumble of languages and styles. It was in the novel that previously foreign languages met each other on the same terrain, forming an unsettled mixture of ideas and styles" (49-50).

In the fiction of the Indian writers in English the nativization of English was quite popular a practice. Mulk Raj Anand in *Untouchable*, R. K. Narayan in *Malgudi Days*, Raja Rao in *Kanthapura* DE canonized English and fusing vernacular expressions profusely they pointed to the multilingual as well as multicultural framework of the country. Raja Rao felt the utmost need for the nativization of English. Rao wrote in his 'Foreword' to *Kanthapura*.

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Narugopal Mukherjee
Associate Professor of English
Bankura Christian College
Bankura, West Bengal, India

Yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make up-like Sanskrit or Persian was before.-but not our emotional make up... We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will someday prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American. Time alone will justify it.

What Raja Rao felt as early as in 1938, the creative writers as well as the scholars in the post-colonial times felt strongly throughout the world. Ashcroft *et al.* in their book, *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (1995) ^[1]. Tried to find out a solution to produce a counter-hegemony to the so-called 'canonical' language of the colonial masters: "There are several responses to this dominance of the imperial language but two present themselves immediately in the decolonizing process-rejection and subversion" (283). Ashcroft and the others challenged the narratives of the rulers and re-created the very language of the masters by incorporating a local flavor into the cooked language. Derek Walcott rightly pointed out: "*The English language is nobody's special property. It is the property of the imagination.*" English language is no longer the property of the colonial masters; it is rather the language of communication of the natives too in different parts of the world.

The Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe felt the need to DE canonize English: "English is to be altered to suit its new surroundings". In his magnum opus *Things Fall Apart* (1958) he has exactly done that, by making a pragmatic use of the language to suit his purpose. Braj B Kachru remarked: "South Asian novelists have not only nativized the language in terms of stylistic features: They have also acculturated English in terms of the South Asian context". To contextualise the text in a particular ESL situation "the creative users of English possess it," as J D'Souza remarked, "Make it their own, blend it to their will and assert themselves through it rather than submit to the dictates of its norms. They borrow it, and recreate, stretch, extend, contort, and indigenize it" (150).

It was Salman Rushdie who in his 1981 novel *Midnight's Children* challenged the hegemony of the canonical English of the British by making 'chutney' of the language in the text, incorporating colloquial expressions all through the text and blending the personal with the political. While responding to the queries from T. Vijay Kumar, Rushdie firmly asserted his experimentation with English language. He said, "The English language is less of problem than people make it out to be" (223). He further observed that English is quite domesticated in India now. "Indian writers will become much freer with the English language," he added, if they 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 more Indianness" (223). This is what he exactly did in his novel *Midnight's Children where he experiments with the language* by "instilling a considerable number of Hindi, Urdu and Hindustani lexical items into English", as Ritu remarks (188). Ritu further remarked that the "multilingual medium in the novel may be considered a plea for resisting the artificial divisions of Indian democracy and for embracing fluidity and multiplicity" (190).

Khaled Hosseini in his debut novel, *The Kite Runner* plays with the canonical version of English quite innovatively or subversively what Rushdie claimed to have done in *Midnight's Children*. Rushdie declared his vowed aim: "To conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free" (*Imaginary Homeland* 17). He 'freed' himself by subverting English not from within but from without. He made the language "lively and comic and playful and punful" (Trivedi 73), and yet militant in its heteroglossic character and in its polyphonic voice. The incorporation of Hindi/ Urdu words and classical Arabic expressions adds to the chutnification of his language, and thereby he subverts the classical or canonical English and asserts his mastery over the "master's" language.

Hosseini also DE canonizes English and gives it an Afghan flavour by incorporating so many native words into his narratorial framework. His language becomes a powerful tool in making the narrative illustrate its major thematic issues. Hosseini undertakes the project of 'nation as a culture' in his novel, and, as Homi Bhabha said in the Introduction to *Nation and Narration*, "The 'locality' of national culture is neither unified nor unitary in relation to itself, nor must it be seen simply as 'other' in relation to what is outside or beyond it. The boundary is Janus-faced and the problem of outside/inside must always itself be a process of hybridity, incorporating new 'people' in relation to the body politic, generating other sites of political antagonism and unpredictable forces for political representation" (4). The distinction between outside/inside in the heteroglossic version of the language in Hosseini's text gets blurred, it turns into a process of 'hybridity', and is never realized as unitary or unified. It is this pluralistic concept of 'nation' that the novelist expresses in *The Kite Runner*.

Hosseini goes deep into the cultural roots of his nation and shows how the Hazara people have been discriminated from the Pashuns, the Shia Muslims from the Sunni Muslims. The Pashuns always oppressed the Hazaras because, as Hosseini himself explains, quoting from Khorami's book, the Pashuns were Sunni Muslims, while the Hazaras were Shia's (8). The sanctity of "*watan*" (35) or nation becomes a serious concern of Aseef as he declares:

Afghanistan is the land of Pashuns. It always has been, always will be. We are the true Afghans, the pure Afghans, not his Flat-Nose (Hassan) here. His people pollute our homeland, our watan. They dirty our blood. (35)

The word '*watan*' is more explicit a term than 'homeland' as it carries with it the so-called heritage of Afghanistan. The local flavour at once brings to the focus the question of nationality which a term like 'homeland' could never have. The essentially patriarchal structure of the Afghan society is well expressed in Aseef's use of the word '*mard*' (35). The voice of the Subaltern remains suppressed in Afghanistan. Later, during Taliban regime this Aseef does not forget the old 'Babalu' and punishes his son, Sohrab. The expressions used there - "Salaam alaykum", "Inshallah", "Agha Sahib", "Naswar", "Watan", "Pirhan-turban", "dil-roba", "Wah-wah! Mashallah", "Shahbas", "Bia-bia", "Parchami", "Goshkhor", "Bas", "Bismillah! Bismillah!" - contain the Afghan 'Mashala' and thereby the thirst of the Afghan immigrants to Europe and America is quenched. Hosseini is

experimenting with English; he “dissolves, diffuses, dissipates” (Coleridge. *Biographia Literaria*) the canonical version and recreates his own variety.

The native words like “Baba”, “Jaan”, “Toofan agha”, “Laaf”, “Kofta”, “Naan”, “Zakat”, “Hadj”, “Qiyamat”, “Sherjangi”, etc. are all new and strange to English, and yet they seem indispensable in the narrative dealing with the nostalgic feeling of Amir, his longing for the golden days in Afghanistan, and that constructs his ‘nation’. While speaking on the concept of ‘nation’ Ernest Renan observes:

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form. (19)

The narrator speaks of this heritage that he is so proud of and that he has lost because of his asylum in America. He remembers the golden days of his life when he was so happy with his “Baba”, “Kaka Rahim”, Ali, and Hassan. He pines for those days and wants to revoke what he did with Hassan. The novel, thus, deals with the narrator’s betrayal, his guilty conscience, his maltreatment of Hassan, and his repentance later. The novelist shows how the narrow view of Taliban nationalism destroys the peace and the harmony, the unity and the integrity of the nation. The novel thus centres on Afghanistan, its heritage, its ethnicity, and the changes that it goes through. Muhammad Asgar Malik *et al.* remarked in this connection that “the linguistic devices of foregrounding, backgrounding, presupposition and emission” to represent the Afghan ethnicity is an approach towards nation building in a postcolonial context. Hosseini, thus, retains the native taste even though he writes in a language foreign to his countrymen. The narrative becomes as well as discourse on ethnicity, culture studies, nation, and nationhood. The language DE familiarizes the colonized framework of English and emerges anew to mark the Empire writing back. Such a literary text facilitates language learning course and keeps the learners away from linguistic and cultural barriers.

Conclusion

Teaching literary texts in English within an ESL context is inherently challenging, especially when dealing with foreign settings and characters. Initially, the direct method of teaching English faced significant hurdles, but the post-colonial phase brought a shift towards texts by Third-World writers. This change fostered the notion of English as a second language with practical communication functions. Nativized English has become integral to the cultural and literary traditions of post-colonial societies, as demonstrated by writers like Salman Rushdie and Khaled Hosseini. Their works blend local linguistic and cultural elements into English, making it more relatable for ESL learners. This approach not only aids language acquisition but also bridges linguistic and cultural gaps, enriching the educational experience.

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