

WALLS OF WORDS: THE NEW LITERATURES IN ENGLISH

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Soon in his childhood, Saleem Sinai, the hero of *Midnight's Children*, found himself involved in the language riots which would eventually lead to the division of the state of Bombay into two parts (Marathi-speaking and Gujarati-speaking). In the eve of the partition Saleem ponders:

“India had been divided anew, into fourteen states and six centrally-administered ‘territories’. But the boundaries of these states were not formed by rivers, or mountains, or any natural features of the terrain; they were instead, walls of words. Language divided us (...)”¹

Saving the natural comic exaggeration, Saleem’s “assorted” background makes him a paradigm of *postcolonial identity*. Supposedly the son of a Muslim couple, he turns out to be the offspring of an Englishman and the Hindu wife of a street-player. His blue-eyed and benosed face shows up his Kashmiri ascendancy, he spends his childhood in Bombay under the care of his Christian Portuguese ayah, Mary Pereira², and when he is sixteen years old, migrates with his family to Pakistan eventually returning to India where he will die.

With the stuff obtained from such a melting pot of religions, places and cultural contexts, the stage is built in which the New Literatures in English perform their play. And it is a stuff of multiple interlocked threads, and a phenomenon, *cross-culturalism*, which is often foregrounded as one of the compounds which has given shape to these new literatures.

The exchanges and influential relationships among the different cultures are, firstly, a direct effect of the modern progress in technology, *communications*, mass media, etc. which have made it possible that very few corners in the world remain isolated from the international trends.

On top of that, there is a phenomenon - *migration* -, which deserves attention as one of the basic constituents of the present-day world. Probably in no other time have so many people been living elsewhere they were born, either voluntarily or not. Much of the responsibility for these movements must be attributed to the fact that we are in a post-colonial epoch and migration is one of the obvious by-products of colonialism.

And this is, no doubt, a key word in the context of contemporary English studies. The New Literatures are strongly marked by *colonization*, a phenomenon of deep cultural effects on both the colonizer and the colonized.

The awakening of the nationalisms in Africa and Asia led to a struggle which progressively accomplished the liberation from the noose which kept the colonized countries linked to their metropolis. A cord which was, in most cases, ambivalent. For, if it kept the baby-nation chained to a patronizing or even tyrannic mother, it was a nourishing cord as well, through which new modes, codes and advances were handed down to the "dependent infant".

A clear consequence -world-wide verifiable, I would tend to say- stems from the nature of the link: a country that has been submitted to another's rule for a long time, develops a series of anacronisms and dual attitudes towards its master, many of which remain even after the padlocks have been removed.

Many instances could be drawn. Whereas a rejection of the Spanish colonization still persists in some South American countries, a name of Spanish origin or a Spanish ancestry is a source of pride even today. In a similar fashion, although perhaps intensified due to the temporal proximity of the decolonizing process, the British Raj in India is strongly criticised, but a British-style school keeps on being considered an equivalent of neat and elegant education.

Political and economical matters put aside, the most lasting heritage a colonized country receives from its metropolis is, probably, *the language*. And, in this respect, Britain has always shown its generosity, because the teaching of English occupied a place of honour in the British imperial policy. As Michael Gorra quotes:

"(...) the spread of the English language itself may stand as the most enduring legacy of the British Empire. Yet that legacy is one about which the victims of empire have always been ambivalent"³.

Thus, as if it were the case of a disputed family inheritance, the legatees do not seem to agree on the real value of the received assets. The English language has been, and still is, the protagonist of an old controverted debate in which the most diverse opinions have been held over its merits and demerits, and over the suitability or not of its use, being the language of the master.

“You taught me language; and my profit on’t
Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you
For learning me your language!”⁴

One needs not go so far away as Prospero’s island to hear the annoyance of Caliban spelt out. Gandhi, for instance, complained about the fact that, due to the many linguistic divisions among the Indians, he was obliged to addressing them in English, an imposed foreign language incapable of “speaking to the heart of the nation”.

Viney Kirpal⁵ analyses the humourous way in which *The English Queens*, by the contemporary Indo-English writer Chaman Nahal, satirizes the cultural colonization the Indian elite underwent without even noticing it, simply by being “gifted” with the English language. One of the gods in heaven tells the story of six “queens” to whom, on the eve of the English departure from India, the last Viceroy entrusts the preservation of English. But the farcical nature of the scene, Kirpal notes, is exhilarating, for the language Lord Mountbatten grants the queens is a language the English do not use any more, who now speak Basic English.

Still, for all the amusement this charade provides, a shiver of horror befalls the reader after Mountbatten’s words:

‘You darn well know the strength of a nation depends on the purity of its people, which depends on the purity of personality, which depends on the purity of language. If the Indians continue to speak English - and I (Mountbatten) know they will misuse it, misspell it, mispronounce it - they will mutilate their won languages and consequently their thinking capacity.’⁶

But this two-sided coin shows its back face in the very different attitude of the early South African writers. For them, English came to be the weapon to counter-attack a colonial regime which actively promoted the use of the different vernacular languages as a strategy to keep the country divided.

This utilitarian defense of the English language, that is, of its fuctional role as a useful means of communication, found its spokesman in the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, for whom English provides the Africans with a powerful tool to demolish the many lingustic walls in their continent.

In *Morning Yet on Creation Day*⁷, Achebe grants English the merit that it gave the Africans:

“(…) a language with which to talk to one another. If it failed to give them a song, at least gave them a tongue, a sighing.”

The communicative - therefore integrative - power Achebe conferred to the English language may serve as the touchstone by which two radically different attitudes towards language can be measured up.

At one end, there is the attitude which, growing with the century, was highlighted by Western modernism: the loss of faith in language as a veracious conveyor of reality (a questionable concept itself). Jacob Horner, the protagonist of Barth's *The End of the Road* gives an accurate statement of the question:

"To turn experience into speech - that is, to classify, to categorize, to conceptualize, to grammarize, to syntactify it - is always a betrayal of experience, a falsification of it"⁸

At the other end, William Walsh⁹ comments on the "high valuation of the word" which can still be found in many of the writers of the Commonwealth. Ascribing this mentality to a complex of historical and social reasons, Walsh refers to their trust in language as the fair herald of immediate experience, an attitude, he points, rather different to the Western one.

Once the accent is placed on the communicative value of language, it very clearly follows that in those colonized countries in which the vernacular languages were multiple, English has very quickly managed to become the "lingua franca".

The speaker or writer's choice, however, is not without difficulties. In many of these countries, any English discourse or text restricts its public to an elite, to the educated classes, for, in most cases, the common people can only speak the vernacular language/s.

On the other hand, it is equally true that only through English can people of so different linguistic contexts be reached, only through a shared language can the understanding - essential to undertake any joint action - be obtained.

Unfortunately, real life (whatever it may be) is often tougher than fiction. And, without any doubt, Gandhi - and probably many Commonwealth writers - would have welcomed a share of the extraordinary powers Saleem Sinai enjoys in *Midnight's Children*. He, together with other one thousand children, was born at an hour of such magical and miraculous influence (the stroke of the midnight at which India gained its independence) that each one was granted a particular power. Nine years after his birth, Saleem's brain suddenly becomes a sort of radio-set capable of receiving the signals from all the children born with him:

"In the beginning, when I was content to be an audience - before I began to *act* - there was a language problem. The voices babbled in everything from Malayalam to Naga dialects, from the purity of Lucknow Urdu to the Southern slurrings of Tamil. I understood only a fraction of the things being said within the walls of my skull. Only later, when I began to probe, did I learn that below the surface transmissions - the front-of-mind stuff which is what I'd originally been picking up - language faded away, and was replaced by universally intelligible thought-forms which far transcended words... (...)"¹⁰

So, Saleem needs not resort to English as Gandhi had to. Saleem manages miraculously to unify this apparent multiplicity around him and finds the language

that allows universal communication, a language not dissimilar to Plato's *divine* discourse. Saleem seems to have transcended the frontiers by which Plato conceived human experience was bounded. For him, human language was very poor, and only suitable to communicate the deceiving appearances of the forms:

“As for the soul's immortality, enough has been said. But about its form, the following must be stated: To tell what it really *is* would be a theme for a divine and a very long discourse; what it *resembles*, however, may be expressed more briefly and in human language¹¹.

Whichever attitude is maintained towards the language of the colonizers, be it impotent anger or trusting valuation, an inquisitive interest over the nature of the tool which is being handled is also observable. Walsh himself adds that even within the countries of the Commonwealth, some “professional philosophers” (as he calls them) hold opinions about language which divert from the general word-valuating trend. I would tend to believe, however, that this club of seemingly skeptical outcasts is larger than Walsh states and that the situation in such bilingual contexts has become more problematic than in many Western countries.

The general plight of language and the difficulties of satisfactory communication is not such a restricted concern in the New Literatures in English. The preoccupation over the complex nature of language is equally traceable in them. What is more, the predicament here grows sharper, because to the shortcomings inherent to any given language they add supplementary ones, derived from the fact that a foreign language is hardly ever mastered as the native one.

With regard to the first part of this question, one can with good reason accept that the speaker of any language progressively learns to adapt the language to his needs, but it seems equally true that he gets conditioned and is also forced to accommodate himself to it. He has to cope with language deficiencies and in this conflict, he may have to negotiate meaning with an interlocutor who, for his part, approaches the situation shaped by his own version. Pacts are needed:

“Well, well, friendship is a bad word for the thing between Raza and Iskander, but for a long time after the incident of the stake it was the word they both used. Sometimes the good words can't be found”¹²

Raza and Isky accept the inadequacies of their language and resort to the only, though improper, term which is available to them.

In fact, language despotism is exerted in various ways, as another character in the same novel, *Shame*, painfully experiences.

Having lost in an explosion all her possessions (house, family, clothes), young Bilquis is saved from the confusion originated in the days of the Indo-Pakistani Partition by a man, Raza Hyder, who marries her and takes her to Pakistan to live

with his family. It is a family of such gigantic dimensions that she is not able to memorize the type of kinship which links herself to so many new relatives:

“Bilquis Hyder’s head whirled. Trapped in a language which contained a quite specific name for each conceivable relative, so that the bewildered newcomer was unable to hide behind such generic appellations as ‘uncle’, ‘cousin’, ‘aunt’, but was continually caught out in all her insulting ignorance, Bilquis tongue was silenced by the in-law mob. She virtually never spoke except when alone with Rani or Raza; (...)”¹³

Silence appears as the ultimate and most flagrant tyranny of language over its victims. “Silence: the ancient language of defeat”¹⁴, says the narrator of *Shame* later on. Silence falling like a dividing curtain when man is overcome by the feeling of powerlessness, and language is of no help¹⁵.

In this same novel, Bilquis and Raza fall silent when they see their “wrong miracle” (a daughter which should have been a son) and must face the terrible fact that they can do nothing to change her sex. The baby herself, Sufiya Zinobia, having no other option, goes silent as her very essence is put into question. In *Midnight’s Children*, another newly born child, Adaam Sinai, refuses to speak, rendered powerlessly dumb by the overwhelming amount of sound addressed to himself.

Man is tightly confined by his language then. The intricacy of human experience cannot be communicated through the unsteady bridge that language constitutes. It is rather like a footbridge under a heavy burden. It immediately and inevitably collapses although the external appearance be one of a tightly built structure.

But let us take a step ahead now and, the frailty of these language-bridges assumed as the common denominator, let us concentrate on what differentiates them because any language has specific limitations inherent in the culture from which it originates. Or, to get things further, a culture and its language nurture and limit mutually so that, ultimately, they can explain each other¹⁶.

Going back to *Shame* again, the narrator suddenly faces the problem that he cannot convey in English a fundamental attitude of one of his characters:

“‘As you wish’, she wrote back, and what made her write this was not entirely guilt, but also something untranslatable, a law which obliged her to pretend that Raza’s words meant no more than they said. This law is called *takallouf*. To unlock a society, look at its untranslatable words. *Takallouf* is a member of that opaque, world-wide sect of concepts which refuse to travel across linguistic frontiers; (...)”¹⁷

The narrator of the novel has been living in England for many years, and his shortcomings cannot be explained by a lack of proficiency in the language, for he shows a wonderful command of English throughout his narration. However, there is another occasion in which he finds himself treasoned by his adopted language

which, as a foreign one, shows its inability to convey his innermost feelings and thoughts accurately. He is thus forced to resort to Urdu in order to put forth an untranslatable concept, and one of the utmost importance for the understanding of his story:

“This word: shame. No, I must write it in its original form, not in this peculiar language tainted by wrong concepts and the accumulated detritus of its owners’ unrepented past, this Angrezi in which I am forced to write, and so for ever alter what is written...

Sharam, that’s the word. For which this paltry ‘shame’ is a wholly inadequate translation. Three letters, *shin rē mim* (written, naturally, from right to left); plus zabar accents indicating the short vowel sounds. A short word, but one containing encyclopaedias of nuance. It was not only shame that his mothers forbade Omar Khayyam to feel, but also embarrassment, discomfiture, decency, modesty, shyness, the sense of having an ordained place in the world, and other dialects of emotion for which English has no counterparts.”¹⁸

So it seems the inherited “Angrezi” is an inadequate vehicle for conveying the experiences of the narrator, a problem the non-British writer shares with him. But, what possibilities does such a writer have if he wants to communicate in a universal language without renouncing to making it reflect his idiosyncrasy?

As far back as 1937, Raja Rao had shown the proper path to take. Referring to the Indian writer in English, he wrote that

“(...) the tempo of Indian life must be infused into our English expression, even as the tempo of American or Irish life has gone into the making of theirs.”¹⁹

The way in which American English came to be consciously shaped into something new has been taken as a reasonable argument by many writers and critics of Commonwealth literature. Bruce King, for instance, takes this as a starting premise of his silogism:

“Prose cadences in the writing of Mark Twain or Norman Mailer are *significantly unlike* those we find in the novels of Jane Austen or E.M.Forster; in poetry we are often aware that British and American verse seems based upon different feelings for the movement of speech. (...) If such a difference has developed between American and British style, *greater differences* can be found in Africa, India and the West Indies, where other languages influence the use of English. In reading African English poetry, for instance, one is often conscious of the influence of traditional oral literature on poetic form, organization, and the way meaning is communicated. In the West Indies there is the importance of Creolization, and the sophisticated playing-off of various registers of English against each other; (...)”²⁰

Similarly, Chinua Achebe hopes no African writer ever learns to speak English as a native speaker and he affirms it is the language that has to adopt camaleonic attitudes to suit the most different experiences:

“The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use. The African writer (...) should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once *universal* and able to carry his *peculiar* experience.”²¹

So, those living outside the limits of the Anglo-Saxon culture have the obligation of *decolonizing* the English language, of making it speak with different voices. Now, it is the turn for the previous subjects to counterattack. Referring to Rushdie, Darras says:

“Avec *Les Enfants de Minuit* la colonisation de la langue anglaise commence”²²

The current panorama of English Literature proves that Achebe undervalued the possibilities of the imposed language. English has become more than a mere sign, a vehicle to express contempt. Now, much of the most energetic and creative English Literature can be encapsulated within that wide jar labelled “Commonwealth Literature” or “New Literatures in English”. Famous editing houses publish the works of writers such as Achebe himself, Ngugi, Ama Ata Aidoo, Sam Selvon, Derek Walcott, Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, etc. Whole collections have been created to gather the various manifestations in the different areas: English African Literature, West-Indian Literature, etc.

Jean-Pierre Durix quotes an example of an attempt made by an African writer, Gabriel Okara, to render the African patterns of speech into English, thus collaborating to the process of linguistic decolonialization²³. In this short, but illustrative, fragment from *The Voice*, the narration tends very obviously towards a transliteration of the native African tongue, and encompasses many of its structures and strategies, such as the placing of the verb at the end of the sentence, or repetition as a means of emphasizing certain words, etc.:

“When Okolo came to know himself, he was lying on a floor, on a cold floor lying. He opened his eyes to see but nothing he saw, nothing he saw. For the darkness was evil darkness and the outside night was black black night. Okolo lay still in the darkness enclosed by darkness, and he his thoughts picked in his inside.”

English is no longer *one* English language. It grows now from many roots and the differentiation from standard English is a more and more tangible reality in the current literature in English. For Rushdie, the flowering of these new literatures is the most important linguistic process in English literature since the convulsions Beckett, Flann O’Brian and Joyce brought to it²⁴. María Lozano welcomes the process and, referring to the literature produced in Britain by non-English authors - Hanif Kureishi in particular - she says:

“El monolitismo de un idioma único se ha quebrado; pese a las apariencias, son dos modos absolutamente divergentes de estar en una realidad, dos idiomas que necesitarían de una traducción recíproca para captar sus significados, no digo ya sus matices o connotaciones.”²⁵

Translation, then, seems to be the key word. A general understanding is possible, but a previous bridging is necessary to reach that level. After all, it is not strange in a context where so many cultures are at stake, where so many ways of apprehending reality are being exchanged, where so many different languages are coexisting, or did previously coexist, with English.

But trans-lation (from the Latin) means “to carry across”, and so does metaphor (from the Greek). And this journey needs not necessarily be an impoverishing process. On the contrary, it can positively bring about the acquisition of new, supplementary material to enrich, not to destroy, one’s personal self. *Enlargement* instead of reduction, *abundance* instead of lack, *variety* instead of uniformity: these are the profits and attributes of the writer of the new English literatures. The unidentified narrator of *Shame* confesses he shares the experience of multiculturalism. His words may appropriately serve to draw the conclusion in our stead:

“Omar Khayyam’s position as a poet is curious. He was never very popular in his native Persia; and he exists in the West in a translation that is really a complete reworking of his verses, in many cases very different from the spirit (to say nothing of the content) of the original. I, too, am a translated man. I have been *borne across*. It is generally believed that something is always lost in translation; *I cling to the notion* - and use, in evidence, the success of Fitzgerald-Khayyam - *that something can also be gained*.”²⁶

NOTAS

1 RUSHDIE, Salman: *Midnight’s Children*. London: Pan Books, (1981) 1982; p.189.

2 Mary Pereira is an amusing example of this multiple rooting herself. Her Christian faith is mingled with Hindu traditions but still, she finds it difficult to imagine which colour can Lord Christ Jesus be. In order to avoid “the usual colour problems”, the young priest (following the Bishop’s advice) tells her that God is, without any doubt, of the purest pale sky blue, as the Hindu love-god Krishna, believing this pigmentation will work as “a sort of bridge between the faiths”. RUSHDIE, Salman: *Midnight’s Children*., p.103.

3 GORRA, Michael: “The Sun Never Sets on the English Novel” in *The New York Times Book Review*. July 19, 1987; p.3

4 SHAKESPEARE, William: *The Tempest*. (I, ii, 365-7) London & New York: Methuen, 1986, p.33.

5 KIRPAL, Viney: “The Indian Elite and *The English Queens*”. in DHAWAN, R.K.(Ed.): *Three Contemporary Novelists: Khrushwant Singh, Chaman Nahal and Salman Rushdie*. New Delhi: Classical Publishing Company, (1985).; pp.139-47

6 NAHAL, Chaman: *The English Queens*. New Delhi: Vision Books, 1979; p.33. Quoted by KIRPAL, Viney: *Op.Cit.*; p .141.

7 ACHEBE, Chinua: *Morning Yet on Creation Day*. London: Heinemann, 1975; p.57

8 BARTH, John: *The End of the Road*. New York: Bantam Books. 1981. p.119.

9 WALSH, William: “The Meeting of Language and Literature and the Indian Example” in AMIRTHANAYAGAM, Guy (Ed.): *Writers in East-West Encounter. New Cultural Bearings*. London & Basingstoke: Macmillan, (1982); pp.100-37.

- 10 RUSHDIE, Salman: *Midnight's Children.*; p.168
- 11 PLATO: *Phaedrus*. Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956; p.28. Emphasis added.
- 12 RUSHDIE, Salman: *Shame*. London: Pan Books Ltd., (1983)1984; p.111.
- 13 Ibidem; p.75
- 14 Ibidem; p.89.
- 15 The linking of silence and defeat is a main concern in some of Harlod Pinter's plays too. As long as the characters have something to say, there is a hope. When silence falls, every possibility is lost, they are defeated. See, for instance, *The Birthday Party* and *The Homecoming*.
- 16 When you change your language, you also change who you are, Rushdie affirms in KAUFMAN, Michael: "Author From 3 Countries" *New York Times Book Review*; November 13th.,1983; pp.3 & 22-3.
- 17 RUSHDIE, Salman: *Shame*; p.104
- 18 Ibidem, pp.38-9
- 19 GORRA, Michael: Op.cit. ; p.24.
- 20 KING, Bruce: "Introduction" in KING, Bruce (Ed.): *Literatures of the World in English*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., (1974); p.5. Emphasis added.
- 21 ACHEBE, Chinua: Op. cit.; p.61. Emphasis added.
- 22 DARRAS, Jacques: "Les Enfants de Minuit par Salman Rushdie" *Esprit*; October 1983; pp.295-7
- 23 OKARA, Gabriel: *The Voice*. London: Heinemann, (1964)1979; p.76. Quoted in DURIX, Jean-Pierre: *The Writer Written. The Artist and Creation in the New Literatures in English*. New York, etc.: Greenwood Press, (1987); p.50
- 24 RUSHDIE, Salman: "The Empire writes back with a vengeance" *The Times*; 3 July 1982; p.8.
- 25 LOZANO, María: "Buscando su identidad: la novela inglesa contemporánea y una tradición difícil" *Revista de Occidente*; Octubre 1988; n°89; pp.39-40.
- 26 RUSHDIE, Salman: *Shame*; p.29.