

**Languages of the Nation in
Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*
and Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy***

Neelam Srivastava

The publication of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* in 1981 marked the explosion of Indian-English fiction onto the international literary scene. One can find several similarities between many of the Indian novels written in English and published in the 1980s and 1990s, namely a renewed focus on national history, a self-conscious transformation of English into an "Indian" language, and a distinctly postcolonial translation of postmodernism and canonical realism into a variety of "nativized" literary styles. The years between the 1970s and the 1990s were a momentous period marked by India's post-Independence status, which coincided with a temporary rupture in the democratic process, and culminated with the rise of the Hindu right in politics. Two novels in particular engage in a dialogue with the eventful changes of the post-Nehru era, a period characterized by the gradual erosion of the hitherto hegemonic discourse of secularism in the Indian public sphere. In this article, focused on *Midnight's Children* and Vikram Seth's 1993 novel, *A Suitable Boy*, I will compare Rushdie's and Seth's use of language, specifically their hybridization of English with Indian vernacular languages, their translatability into Hindi, and their politicization of English. By contextualizing these two canonically "postcolonial" texts within a South Asian linguistic, historical, and political habitus, this paper will counter-act the critical tendency to view *Midnight's Children* in particular, and Indian English fiction more generally, as cosmopolitan and "elitist."¹ I will argue that, on the contrary, it is important to focus on the novels' location as being against a "defeatist surrender of the putatively elite text to the politics of metropolitan reception" (Bahri 3).

The famously megalomaniac narrator of *Midnight's Children*, Saleem Sinai, presents his story as an autobiographical narrative that draws

self-conscious parallels between events in his own life and those of the Indian nation. Born of hybridized Hindu, Muslim, and Christian parentage, Saleem gives us his own version of subcontinental history as seen from the point of view of he and his diasporic Muslim family during their frequent changes in location between Kashmir, Delhi, Bombay, the Sundarbans, Dhaka, and Karachi. The novel can and should be read as a satire of the mid-1970s state of Emergency. In 1975, the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, availing herself of a constitutional clause, proclaimed a state of National Emergency, in which all civil liberties were suspended, censorship was imposed on the press, thousands of oppositional elements were jailed and all executive powers were concentrated in her hands: effectively, the Emergency was a dictatorship that lasted almost two years.

A Suitable Boy, published in 1993, responds to a different political context from that of *Midnight's Children*. The 1990s saw the rise to power of right-wing Hindu nationalism. In response, this 1500-page-long novel, which has an omniscient third-person narrator, is set between 1950 and 1952: key years in the period that witnessed the rise of the Indian middle class and the consolidation of the Indian state along secular lines under Nehru. The plot is centered on four families, three Hindu and one Muslim. The story ostensibly takes off from a mother's desire to find a suitable boy as a husband for her daughter, Lata. The romantic plot, the "private" narrative of the novel, alternates with its "public" narrative, which revolves around the land reforms undertaken by the Congress government in the 1950s and the first general elections of 1951. In its exploration of social, political, and economic changes in the first years after Independence, *A Suitable Boy* endorses a progressivist and gradualist approach to the dynamics of social transformations.

This article will look at the effects arising from the interaction between English and *bhasha* (Indian vernacular) languages in these two novels. I aim to show how this interaction, on the one hand, sets up English as a pan-Indian language which seeks to subsume, or at the very least represent, the vernaculars, but how, on the other hand, English is also nativized through its dialogue with the *bhashas*. Hence, while the use of English serves to objectify the representation of Indian "na-

tional” culture for a transnational audience, in the process it also becomes anchored to the Indian context, and made the expressive vehicle for specifically national concerns. Rushdie’s and Seth’s use of English in these texts, which are by now part of a globalized “postcolonial” literary canon, exemplifies the discursive oscillation between the global and the vernacular which characterizes the language of Indian English literature. I will demonstrate how, in *A Suitable Boy* and *Midnight’s Children*, English functions simultaneously as a semiotic system of modernity and as a vernacular language.

More specifically, I contend that the linguistic mixture of the two novels projects (a secular and multicultural vision of the Indian nation-state), make calculated use of the ideals and writings of Nehru. (In particular, both novels contain frequent allusions to Nehru’s nationalist text *The Discovery of India*). But whereas *Midnight’s Children* juxtaposes the languages in a deliberately accumulative and expressionistic manner, which results in a studied babble of idiolects relatively devoid of ideological hierarchy, in *A Suitable Boy* the different languages (which are aligned with the sense of social idioms) that make up the voices of the novel are composed into a “structured stylistic system” which reveals a more “orderly”—one could say statist—vision of the nation.

Heteroglossia, namely the dialogic interrelation of different registers and dialects, which gravitate within the orbit of a national language, is in constant tension with the tendency towards linguistic centralization and unification (Bakhtin 272–73). In India, one might suggest, that rather than a single national language, there is a national linguistic ‘system,’ composed of a variety of different languages. Seth’s and Rushdie’s different use of language mixture forms an integral part of their differing representations of Indian heteroglossia, and proposes differing political solutions for India’s ‘present needs.’ Rushdie’s “Super-Sexy-High-Masala-Art” is an expression of the rebelliousness of the democratic forces rising up against the authoritarianism of the Emergency. *Midnight’s Children* celebrates the fragmentation of the polity because it signifies the pluralism of democracy as opposed to the dictatorial discourse of Indira Gandhi’s regime. Saleem represents, within his often-unwieldy first-person narrative many voices, many languages, many characters, and

he struggles to contain them all until the end of the story, where he foresees his imminent disintegration into 600 million separate identities, the population of India. But this fragmentation is celebrated as a positive value for the polity, because it re-affirms the pluralism that is a vital component of democracy, a form of government which Rushdie strongly endorses. Thus heteroglossia in *Midnight's Children* often appears Joycean, excessive, over the top. In *Midnight's Children* readers find all the voices that the Emergency is trying to silence.

Seth, on the other hand, is writing in a political climate that differs greatly from the Emergency. *A Suitable Boy* is a Nehruvian epic, but in a very different sense from *Midnight's Children*. Seth's realistic, ordered narrative, which sets firm boundaries for bourgeois desire, presents a wonderfully orchestrated cast of characters whose voices are always contained within the unobtrusive presence of the third-person omniscient narrator. The realism of Seth's style is underscored by a developmental and statist idea of the nation-state. The novel endorses Nehruvian secularism as the only politically viable solution for a potentially centrifugal polity that is being increasingly undermined by Hindu right-wing politics. Minorities such as Muslims and lower castes were directly threatened with exclusion from the Indian body politic under these conservative politics. Seth's organic portrayal of an India whose minorities are a vital part of its identity, and his endorsement of a strong state secularism, seeks to write against the fragmentation of the polity. He reworks the multilingual reality of modern India into a monologic form by using the secular perspective of an omniscient third-person narrator.

The way in which language mixture is used in the two novels ties in to the question of whether English can be seen as a pan-Indian, secular language in the Indian linguistic context, and how this status defines it in relation to vernacularization and globalization. Rushdie and Seth partly draw from this already established notion of English as a pan-Indian secular language in order to create secularist and pluralist representations of India that are, however, very different from each other, as can be observed in a series of close readings of the two texts. Both novels present code-switching and code-mixing from other *bhashas*, though these processes are more frequently apparent in Rushdie than in Seth. English

also functions as a language of “translation” from other Indian languages. In *Midnight’s Children*, the other language of interaction is Urdu, in *A Suitable Boy* it is Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, and a “rustic dialect” spoken in the village of Debaria. G.J.V. Prasad has perceptively outlined the analogy between Indian English texts and translations. He claims that Indian English writers are not so much translating texts from vernacular languages into English, as using various strategies to make their works read like translations (“Writing Translation”).

Indian English writing has been defined as a contact literature, which grows out of a close proximity to Indian languages, while simultaneously immersed in an Indian context (Kachru 44). The artistic potential of contact literature can be theorized in Bakhtinian terms:

The unity of a literary language is not a unity of a single closed language system, but is rather a highly specific unity of several “languages” that have established contact and mutual recognition with each other. (295)

The transformation of English within an Indian context is well exemplified in the code-mixed Indian English Rushdie adopts for his characters’ speech. An example of this can be seen in the speech of the narrator’s uncle Hanif:

. . . He wallops me in the back, toppling me forwards into Mary’s arms. “Hey little wrestler! You look fine!” “But so thin, Jesus! They haven’t been feeding you properly? You want corn-flour pudding? Banana mashed with milk? Did they give you chips?” . . . And Hanif booms, “Yes, tickety-boo! The boy is really ship-shape! Come on phaelwan: a ride in my Packard, okay?” And talking at the same time is Mary Pereira, “Chocolate cake,” she is promising, “laddoos, pista-ki-lauz, meat samosas, kulfi. So thin you got, baba, the wind will blow you away.” . . . “Your Pia aunty is waiting! My god, you see if we don’t have a number one good time!” (239)

The syntactic and lexical exchanges that occur between English and the other Indian languages create an English with a much larger scope

of expression than the Anglo-American standard. Likewise, this Indian English encompasses the new meaning which arise from English being integrated into a specifically Indian context. The language of Seth and Rushdie draws on more than one linguistic basis, though the way in which the *bhashas* are represented within the novels presents two very different conceptions of Indian English, one monologic (*A Suitable Boy*) and one heteroglotic (*Midnight's Children*).

Significantly, Seth's novel has a very wide range of heterogeneous narrative material, and yet the narrator arranges an ideological hierarchy of all the different languages of the novel in such a way as to privilege a monological tone. The use of *bhasha* words in the text does not enter into a carnivalesque collision with the English. However, Seth Indianizes the English in more subtle ways, which are not as immediately apparent as Rushdie's pyrotechnic linguistic experimentalism. An example is the ridiculous but highly comic dissonance created by Seth's spoof on nationalist Indian poetry of the worst kind. In *A Suitable Boy*, Dr. Makhijani, an "eminent" poet from the University of Brahmipur, is shown reciting his "Hymn to Mother India" to a captive audience:

How to describe bondage of Mother pure
By pervert punies chained through shackles of law?
British cut-throat, Indian smiling and slave:
Such shame will not dispense till a sweating grave.

While reading the above stanza, Dr Makhijani became highly agitated, but he was restored to equanimity by the next one:

Let me recall history of heroes proud,
Mother-milk fed their breasts, who did not bow.
Fought they fiercely, carrying worlds of weight,
Establishing firm foundation of Indian state. (163–64)

In both novels, but especially in Seth, it is interesting to distinguish between intentional spoofs of Indian English—a rendering of language use by Indian speakers to *comic* effect—and an effective "recreation" of Indian English as a spoken variant of Standard English.

The idea of hybridizing English in order to fashion it as a pan-Indian literary language took the form of a programmatic nationalist statement in Raja Rao's preface to his novel *Kanthapura*:

We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. 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 some day prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American. Time alone will justify it. (v)

Rao's *Kanthapura* is of interest namely for "the manner in which [its] experimental use of the English language is geared towards the definition of a cultural identity" (Sethi 40–41). Rao's manifesto established hybridity and language mixture, and most importantly bilingualism, as key features of Indian English as a literary language. A defining characteristic of English as it was typically used to narrate an Indian context had always been linguistic experimentation and innovation. For one critic, Rushdie's "verbal play, internal rhyme, and strange verbal conjoinings characterize the linguistic practices of postmodernism" (Myers n.p.). But for Rushdie, restructuring the English sentence in *Midnight's Children* is not only postmodern, it is also a way of letting Indian speech patterns into the English:

Midnight's Children was partially conceived as an opportunity to break away from the manner in which India had been written about in English, not just by Indian writers but by Western writers as well. ("Interview" 19)

Language emerges as one of the key concerns for Rushdie in writing *Midnight's Children*. He acknowledges the important influence G.V. Desani's novel *All About H. Hatterr* had on his language, and notes how it served as a linguistic model for transforming his English:

The way in which the English language is used in that book is very striking; it showed me that it was possible to break up the

language and put it back together in a different way. . . . one thing it showed me was the importance of punctuating badly. In order to allow different kinds of speech rhythms or different kinds of linguistic rhythms to occur in the book, I found I had to punctuate it in a very peculiar way, to destroy the natural rhythms of the English language; I had to use dashes too much, keep exclaiming, putting in three dots, sometimes three dots followed by semi-colons followed by three dashes . . . That sort of thing just seemed to help to dislocate the English and let other things into it. (“Interview” 19–20)

The rhythm of Desani’s language in *All About H. Hatterr* is similar to Rushdie’s: there is the same ironic, playful rhetorical tone, filled with redundant adjectives and attributes. Rushdie’s vernacularization of English serves to assimilate it into an Indian context, to make it into an Indian language. This vernacularization of English is at work in Seth as well, though in a less visible manner. Making English into an Indian language is essential in lending verisimilitude to Seth’s and Rushdie’s narratives of India. An important part of their achievement as novelists is that they each show the extent to which English can be made into an expressive medium for chronicling contemporary India. The question is: why does the transformation of language towards vernacularization appear so necessary for Rushdie and Seth?

English came to be identified with modernity and nation-building after Indian Independence. Contrary to the received opinion that equated English with modernity during colonialism, Amit Chaudhuri claims that it was the rise of the vernacular that was in fact the vehicle of modernity for the growing Indian middle classes. The creation of the first modern Indian literature in Bengali, for example, was directly related to the fact that Bengali had become the principal medium of expression of the educated Bengali middle classes. The vernaculars, Chaudhuri claims, “which were, in truth, paradigms of a new consciousness—emerged from a feudal-religious world into a secular one” (xxi). The emergence of so many vernacular literatures serves as an emblem for the increased embourgeoisement of India in the twentieth century.

At the time of Independence there was no agreement on what was to be the national language. The debate was divided between Hindi extremists and moderates, and both sides conceded that “the idea of having a single language being a precondition of firm, unassailable nationalism,” was an idea which revealed the profound influence of European nationalist precedents on the Indian intelligentsia (Kaviraj 54). Although the Nehru government encouraged the adoption of Hindi as a national language, what *de facto* became the language of India’s nation-building post-Independence was English. English became the language of the secular elite, and in time came to be identified with a secular subject-position. The English language of *A Suitable Boy*, for example, by aspiring to a pan-Indian representativeness which transcends religious, cultural and linguistic differences, finds its truest voice in the third-person omniscient narrator who projects a “superior” secular perspective on communal and other “non-modern” conflicts. English has assumed an increasingly hegemonic role in Indian public life after Independence:

In the public sphere the elite has used English—obviously English here is more than simply a language; it is also a juridical/legal apparatus, also a political idiom, in short, a semiotic system signifying modernity, etc.—to impose its secular categories on the social world. (Dhareshwar 115)

Caste and religious idioms, when articulated in English, had to be approached at one remove, as it were, as an ‘experience-distant concept.’ In some sense, secular discourse could best be articulated through English because it acted as a ‘meta-language’ vis-à-vis caste and tradition. The English language of *A Suitable Boy* similarly acts as a secularizing, and occasionally homogenizing medium for the heterogeneous religious and cultural traditions, which are represented within it. The novel’s linguistic uniformity manages to convey a sense of representational transparency, which makes it an extremely supple fictional medium, one able to encompass lengthy political debates, Urdu poetry, and comic dialogue without losing its narrative momentum. Seth’s style performs the ideological function of conveying a classically Nehruvian idea of India premised on “unity within variety.”

In both novels, English assumes the role of a pan-Indian language—the opposite of localized—in order to provide a pan-Indian representation. The concept of translation serves as a useful metaphor for its simultaneous transformation into a vernacular, national, and global language. On the one hand, the narrative voices in both novels effect a “translation” from Indian languages into English so as to represent the multi-lingual complexity of the Indian nation-state within an overarching (though not perhaps unifying) narrative discourse. The heteroglossia of the nation is “translated” into a monolingual medium (though characterized to a greater or lesser extent by language mixture) that aspires to a pan-Indian representativeness. On the other hand, the narrators of both novels are vernacularizing English by presenting it as a medium of translation from other Indian languages.

In the novels, many different Indian languages circulate either in the dialogues, or in the free indirect discourse of characters who do not speak English as their first language. Rushdie and Seth, in different ways, radicalize Bakhtinian heteroglossia as a model for conceiving of national language. They do so by transposing into their English the multi-lingual nature of the Indian nation-state, whose unity, unlike the majority of the European nations, was not conceived on the basis of a common national language.²

The contrast between the carnivalesque proliferation of idioms in *Midnight's Children* and the more monologic prose of *A Suitable Boy* comes out in their different methods of ‘translation.’ What I am calling translation here is, of course, not a translation at all, in the sense that the dialogues and free indirect speeches in other Indian languages which are rendered in English, or Indian English in the text, are renditions of an “original” which does not exist. The idea of Indian English writing as translation is based on the analogy described by Maria Tymoczko:

The culture or tradition of a post-colonial writer acts as a metatext which is rewritten—explicitly and implicitly, as both background and foreground—in the act of literary creation. The task of the interlingual translator has much in common with the task of the post-colonial writer; where one has a text, however, the other has the metatext of culture itself. (20)

Rushdie himself likens the condition of the postcolonial writer to that of a translator, in his famous definition of British Indian writers as “translated men” who are “borne across across the world” and act as mediators between cultures (*Imaginary Homelands* 17). The most significant devices by which English is Indianized in the two novels are, in varying degrees, code-mixing, hybridization, and transfer of context. Transfer of context, a term coined by the linguist Braj Kachru,

involves transfer of those cultural patterns which are absent or different in those cultures where English is used as a first language. For instance, in Indian English fiction, the following cultural patterns, which repeatedly occur in typically Indian plots, come under such transfer: the caste system, social attitudes, social and religious taboos, superstitions, notions of superiority and inferiority. (131)

Code-switching and code mixing occur in a situation where there is language contact, and the alternation of codes “is determined by the function, the situation, and the participants” (Kachru 193). Code-mixing, in this case, consists of the presence of Hindi-Urdu words in the dialogues and/or the narrative voice. Kachru notes how in Indian creative writing there is a long tradition of *bhasha sankar* (language mixture), especially in poetry, in order to elicit various effects. Hybridization, a subcategory of code-mixing, entails the use of at least one item of English and one from a native language, as for example the word “jaikhana” used by a character in *Midnight’s Children*: “Oh my God my hour has come, my darling Madam, only let me go peacefully, do not put me in the jaikhana!” (279). Generally speaking, the translated dialogues of *Midnight’s Children* privilege what I shall call an expressionistic rendering of the *bhashas* in such a way as to make them virtually undistinguishable from Indian English. Rushdie’s language is characterized by much code-mixing, and generally aims toward a comic effect. There is a strong contrast between the dialogues, which are in Indian English, and the language of the narrator, which is in an English much closer to the British standard. The translations from Indian languages of *A Suitable Boy*, on the other hand, display what I shall call a symbolic use of the

vernacular, with little or no code-mixing: English, in some instances, becomes a *symbolic* Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, and so forth.

In what sense can it be said that Seth's is a symbolic translation, whereas Rushdie's is expressionistic? Here is an example of how Seth renders the ornate Urdu speech of the Muslim courtesan and musician Saeeda Bai, who is gently reproaching her lover Maan for not visiting her:

“Rumour has it, Dagh Sahib, that you have been in town for some days now. Twirling, no doubt, that handsome ivory-headed cane. But the hyacinth that obtained favour yesterday appears withered today to the connoisseur.”

“Begum Sahiba—” protested Maan.

“Even if she has withered away only for lack of the water of life,” continued Saeeda Bai . . . (871)

The English of this passage functions as a symbolic Urdu; in order to foreground the purity of the language, Seth chooses an elevated register of English. Code-mixing with Urdu, and other linguistic hybridization does not occur in the passage, because it is not felt to be a sufficiently representative translation of the elegance of “chaste” Urdu. The author fashions a symbolic, rather than material equivalent to the Urdu out of an elevated register of English. Rushdie's translated Urdu, on the other hand, aims to reproduce—at least partly—some of the syntactical structures, lexical items, and tone of the source language, in order to express the earthiness of the Hindi-Urdu spoken by some of his characters. When Parvati-the-Witch, Saleem's future wife, first meets Saleem in person (previously they had only conversed telepathically), she exclaims happily:

“Arre' baap, Saleem, you remember—the children, yaar, O this is too good! So why are you looking so serious when I feel like to hug you to pieces? So many years I only saw you inside here,” she taps her forehead, “and now you're here at last with a face like a fish. Hey, Saleem! Say one hullo at least.” (379)

This different rendering of *bhashas* in the two authors expresses different attitudes to the conception of the body politic in these two writers.

It is not so much that Rushdie is allowing the vernaculars to roam unchecked within his text, while Seth is keeping them under tight control. Indeed, Rushdie often provides the translations of Hindi-Urdu words next to the original in the text (though not always). Seth, on the other hand, deliberately does not provide a glossary or translations of Hindi, Urdu or Bengali words. Even so, the images of national Indian heteroglossia that Seth and Rushdie create differ radically. Rushdie celebrates the uncontainable, almost anarchic multiplicity of voices and languages that take over the voice of the narrator, who struggles to govern them. But just as India continuously strains at the seams; and the imposition of Emergencies is of no use, so the voices make themselves heard anyway. Conversely, the orderly containment of vernaculars within a symbolic use of translation in Seth's text is a function of a much more statist idea of the nation: clearly not the statism of Indira Gandhi's Emergency, but rather the statism of Nehru. Seth's English is not less innovative than Rushdie's, though it is less visibly characterized by linguistic virtuosity. It subverts Standard English in subtle ways, often turning common figures of speech into comic and suggestive images, such as the old Bengali clerk Biswas Babu's new twists to English idiomatic expressions:

“But you are probably making hail while the sun shines, and sowing oats. That is why I have come,” [said Biswas Babu].

“Sowing oats?” Amit was puzzled.

“But Meenakshi has rolled the ball, now you must follow it.”

It suddenly struck Amit that Biswas Babu was talking . . . about marriage. (451)

Biswas Babu's unconsciously creative reformulations of metaphor are examples of the possible metamorphoses that English can undergo in native utterance. Both Seth's privileging of symbolic representation of the vernacular, and Rushdie's code-mixed and slangy Indian English, are highly stylized renderings of Indian heteroglossia.

Seth's symbolic translation of Urdu has a similar function to the transfer of context; indeed, in many cases cultural and linguistic translation are virtually indistinguishable from one another. In a similar vein, both

novels foreground the issue of the ‘ethnocentric’ text/translation versus the ‘foreignizing’ or ‘ethnodeviant’ text/translation. In the ethnocentric version, a translation focuses on bringing the author to the audience—translation consists of a process of familiarization. Tymoczko refers to this type of translation as “an assimilative presentation in which likeness or ‘universality’ is stressed and cultural differences are muted and made peripheral to the central interests of the literary work” (21). In the foreignizing or ethnodeviant approach, on the other hand, the translator deliberately foregrounds unfamiliar cultural elements or leaves some lexical items untranslated, in the effort to bring the audience towards the text, rather than the opposite:

modes of translating the “other” that allow “alien” languages (and ways of life) to interrogate, even radically disrupt the language (and way of life) that the self inhabits by virtue of being embedded in it. (Dingwaney 7)

Whether a translation can be said to be ethnocentric or ethnodeviant is largely determined by the provenance of its audience. But what makes a novel like *A Suitable Boy* so interesting, and at the same time so difficult to ‘read’ analytically, is that the different Bakhtinian ‘languages’ of the novel produce both ethnocentric and ethnodeviant forms of English. At times, the English-speaking reader will immediately tune into the language being spoken, as in the case of the self-conscious verbal play of the Mehra and the Chatterjis, the two families who generally speak directly in English. In their case there is no translation on the part of the narrator. The different varieties of English present in the novel induce a constant reflection on language, as well as the many instances where the characters themselves discuss knowledge and command of English. Seth’s subtly parodic and metalinguistic subversion of Standard English provides an interesting stylistic contrast with Rushdie’s form of vernacularization. The language of *Midnight’s Children* allows Indian English to take centre stage, by dramatizing and highlighting each character’s idiosyncratic Indianisms.

The Indian English of *Midnight’s Children* displays some similar formations to that of *A Suitable Boy*, though Rushdie uses it much more fre-

quently in his dialogues. Seth's seamless rendering of Urdu is in striking contrast with Rushdie's deliberately 'dirty,' namely code-mixed, translations. These translations can be called expressionistic in the sense that they are pervaded by the earthiness of street Hindi. Within the language of the narrator Saleem Sinai, English takes on a very wide spectrum of registers, from the peculiar, slightly deranged linguistic idiosyncrasies of Saleem's narrative style, to translations of dialogues from Indian languages, to examples of Indian English as a spoken language, namely the slangy code-mixed variety used by the Anglicized middle-class of 1950s Bombay. It is important to note that Rushdie's translations from Hindi, Urdu, and other *bhashas* come across as Indian English, as in the case of the street Hindi spoken by the *artistes* of the magicians' ghetto. This English translation of a Hindi-Urdu original which does not exist includes deviations from native varieties of English—for example the writer will omit the article, translate figures of speech literally, put 'only' at the end of the sentence, and use the present continuous instead of the simple present (is in all Indianisms). The language's origins are rarely stated explicitly, and must deduced from the social and geographical context.

In *Midnight's Children*, the speech of the boatman Tai contains examples of code-mixing with Urdu, which is a way to foreground the vernacular element. Here Tai, who is reputedly as old as the hills, tells Aadam of his meeting with the aged Isa (Jesus Christ) when, according to legend, he came to the Kashmir valley:

Nakkoo, listen, listen. I have seen plenty. Yara, you should've seen that Isa when he came, beard down to his balls, bald as an egg on his head. He was old and fagged-out but he knew his manners. "You first," Taiji, he'd say, and "Please to sit"; always a respectful tongue, he never called me crackpot, never called me *tu* either, always *aap*. Polite, see? And what an appetite! Such a hunger, I would catch my ears in fright. Saint or devil, I swear he could eat a whole kid in one go. I told him, eat, fill your hole, a man comes to Kashmir to enjoy life, or to end it, or both. His work was finished. He just came up here to live it up a little. (16)

Here we have examples of code-mixing and hybridization: “Nakkoo”= the nosy one (from the Hindi *nak* = nose), “yara,” an exclamation, and as Tai explains, Isa used the deferential form *aap* of the personal pronoun, instead of the more casual *tu*, which is used to address social inferiors. The linguistic distinction thus becomes a social one, but only a Hindi or Urdu speaker would be able to understand Tai’s reference. “Please to sit” also sounds like Indian English.

Throughout the novel, characters constantly use Hindi-Urdu words; in some cases the words are translated for the non-Indian reader, in other cases they are not. Harish Trivedi claims that most of the Hindi words have an English translation, for “instant intelligibility”:

Rushdie does not risk incomprehension and spells out the meaning of whatever little Hindi he uses. Thus, “the Muslim muhallas” of Chandni Chowk are not left at that by him but specified to be “the Muslim muhallas or neighborhoods” . . . and in the phrase “Godown, gudam, warehouse, call it what you like,” we have an embarrassment of riches, what with Indian English followed by Hindi followed by proper English. (79)

Trivedi’s point is that Rushdie’s bilingualism is superficial, and that Hindi words are scattered here and there as a badge of authenticity which is not backed by a deeper mediation between the Western and Indian culture. Trivedi relies on a traditional concept of the relationship between the two languages and cultures involved in translation. This traditional perspective assumes a source language, or culture “invariably carrying an aura of authenticity—and a target one, seen in some way as imitative” (Orsini 82) As mentioned earlier, it is more productive to think of the relationship in terms of “guest” and “host” languages:

[t]he question then becomes not whether “individualism,” for example, means something different in modern Indian [. . .] culture, but how Chinese or Indian writers might translate and deploy the concept to make locally significant points. In this way, what is untraditional is not necessarily seen as Western, or as un-Indian or un-Chinese. (Orsini 82)

Moreover, apart from the irrelevance of whether Rushdie's bilingualism is superficial or not—presumably, the last thing he is interested in is “authenticity”—there is quite a large number of words left untranslated in the text. A prime example of this can be seen in the following passage: “a real rutputty joint, with painted boards proclaiming LOVELY LASSI and FUNTABULOUS FALOODA and BHEL-PURI BOMBAY FASHION with filmi play-back music blaring out of a cheap radio by the cash-till . . .” (215).

By contrast, Trivedi's review of the Hindi translation of *A Suitable Boy* is highly complimentary. Trivedi says that of all the recent Indian English novels, *A Suitable Boy* is the most deeply embedded in the theme and the context that it depicts, and the most intimately complicit in a local language. Trivedi finds a confirmation of this in Seth's preface to the Hindi edition of *A Suitable Boy*:

Seth begins by saying that he is happier than he can say at the publication of this Hindi translation, for the translator has restored most of the episodes in his novel which were set in the Hindi-speaking area to “their original character,” reconstructed the dialogue in a language which was the one which had resonated in his own ears, and thus made his work “stronger” in many respects. (31)

It is interesting that Seth here talks of the “original character” of the Hindi dialogues, for it confirms the idea that in many places in the novel he is thinking of his writing as a translation from various *bhashas* into English.

The language distribution among the characters of Seth's novel aims to foreground the four languages which are elevated to the role of languages of the nation, vehicles of national culture: English, Hindi, Urdu, and Bengali. They are languages of the nation in the sense that the concept of nation consists of a process of idealization and selection of historical events, religious traditions, and *languages*, to construct an organic ideology that can claim a national representativeness. Not surprisingly, the characters who speak these languages all belong to the rising Indian middle-class—their languages are made into cohesive and symbolic ele-

ments of national culture, while subaltern languages are relegated to the status of dialects. For example, the dialect spoken by the peasants in the fictional village of Debaria, another setting of the novel, is not considered a representative national language, and therefore is left unspecified. It appears in one of the very few dialogues left untranslated by the author:

Whenever he needed the bus push-started he would turn and yell in the powerfully vocalic *local dialect*:

“Aré, du-char jané utari auu. Dhakka lagauu!”

And when the bus was about to move, he would summon them with a battlecry of:

“Aai jao bhaiyya, aai jao. Chalo ho!”³ (italics added 700)

Debaria village-speak—elsewhere described as “rustic Hindi”—is not represented as a *national* language, but as a *local* dialect, without anchoring it to the specifics of its probable linguistic model, Bhojpuri.

The social group that dominates the language(s) of the novel is the bilingual Indian middle class, represented by four families. Each of the four families speaks one language more frequently, and a second one less frequently, depending on the social context and the interlocutor, according to the following division:

	frequent	less frequent
• Mehras:	1) English	2) Hindi
• Kapoors:	1) Hindi	2) English
• Chatterjis:	1) English	2) Bengali
• Khans:	1) Urdu	2) English

Mrs. Rupa Mehra, for example, speaks in English with her children, but in Hindi with Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor. Seth uses different registers of English to represent the different languages and contexts in his text. As in Rushdie, often the change is not explicitly signaled in the text, but can be deduced from the type of character who is speaking, by taking into account the caste and the social class to which he or she belongs. An Indian reader, unlike a Western reader, would probably recognize from contextual clues that a language shift has occurred. The two authors’

representation of the Indian linguistic context is largely ethnodeviant. A key feature of Indian English texts like *A Suitable Boy* and *Midnight's Children* is their renditions of the different Indian milieus and their specific socio-linguistics. In *A Suitable Boy*, the various languages are pulled off with varying degrees of success: the scenes in Calcutta where the Chatterji dialogues take place are much more vividly memorable than the simple referential English which renders the speeches of the Debaria villagers. The narrator's point of view is more at one with certain characters, than with others. Underlying this relation of identification/distancing between the narrative voice and the characters is the concept of 'character zones' in relationship to the dialogic structure of the two novels. Character zones describe the way a character extends his or her "sphere of influence" beyond direct discourse. Free indirect discourse is often used to show the double-voiced nature of a thought which is apparently stated by the narrator, and not directly attributed to a character, but which clearly belongs to her ideological sphere of influence. If judged by its formal markers, the logic motivating the sentences seem to belong to the author, because he is formally at one with it; but in actual fact, the motivation lies within the subjective belief system of the character. The diffuse use of character zones in the novel is what creates reader empathy for characters, and multiplies the number of 'languages' in the novel.

In *Midnight's Children*, on the other hand, character zones are rendered through the dialogue of the characters, rather than through the fusion of authorial discourse and the speech of others, thus leading to a radically irreducible heteroglossia. We have only one point of view, that of the narrator Saleem Sinai. A consequence of Saleem's solipsism is that the characters are not as well rounded as in *A Suitable Boy*, and to some extent we lack empathy for them. Since free indirect discourse is not an option for such a first-person narrator, characterization relies almost exclusively on dialogue, which is made to be as expressive of each character's individuality as possible. Thus we get a wide variety of strongly idiosyncratic idiolects, each using their own particular brand of Indian English. In the Muslim muhalla in Delhi, when Saleem Sinai's birth is announced, the inhabitants speak Hindustani, which is rendered as a lit-

eral translation of Indian vernacular idiom. They are berating the Hindu Lifafa Das, who is showing his famous “peepshow,” a sort of magical lantern full of pictures from all over India, while crying “Dunya dekho! See the whole world!” (76). But communal hatred is sparked, and from the balconies the Muslim inhabitants cry:

Mother raper! Violator of our daughters! . . . Rapist! Arre’ my God they found the badmaash! There he *is!* . . . So, mister: is it you? Mister Hindu, who defiles our daughters? Mister idolater who sleeps with his sister? (76–77)

These epithets—‘Mother raper, mister idolater who sleeps with his sister’—are typically Indian curses, namely specifically vernacular speech functions translated into English. Here the English is adapted to take on communal connotations: Lifafa Das is an ‘idolater,’ a worshipper of idols, which for Muslims is a grave blasphemy.

Unlike in *Kanthapura*, in which Rao effectively creates an English based on Kannada speech-rhythms that have no basis in spoken language, in *Midnight’s Children* the dialogues often recall spoken Indian English. Saleem’s childhood in Bombay, his dealings with family and friends, are all mediated through the Indian English of upper-class families living in Bombay in the 1950s. Bombay was the most Westernized of all big Indian cities, and Saleem’s family belong to the Anglicized business class that was emerging just after Independence. In this sense, then, the central part of the novel is not so different from the setting of *A Suitable Boy*, which also features the dialogues of middle-class Anglicized Indians like the Mehras and the Chatterjis, though these are Hindus. Saleem is brought up speaking both English and Urdu, but most of the dialogues of his Bombay period are in English. The language of this ‘Bombay period’ of the novel is a language re-created from memory, gleaned and re-shaped from what Saleem remembers of his childhood, as he sits by his lamp “in a pool of Anglepoised light” and tells his story. Thus, though it sounds very much like spoken Indian English, it is still a creative re-imagining, rather than a faithful mimesis, of the ‘original.’ If we compare Seth’s and Rushdie’s use of character zones, it emerges that in Rushdie, they are rendered through the dialogue of the characters,

rather than through the fusion of authorial discourse and the speech of others, thus leading to a radically irreducible heteroglossia. Language is an essential part of the nation-building process that both novels portray. *A Suitable Boy* gives great space to different technical and professional jargons which form part of the linguistic fabric necessary for the development of a functional and democratic state. English, Hindi and Urdu emerge as the languages of the nation-building process in post-Independence India—the languages of business, law, and politics.

Hindi-Urdu is the language of politics in *A Suitable Boy*, and it reflects the gradual rise of the Hindi-speaking regional elites—a result of post-Independence democratic politics. This elitism is represented in the novel by the Kapoors, and Seth shows that the gradual ascendancy of this class had already begun in the Fifties. The language divide marks the sharp differences in socio-cultural terms between this regional elite and the English-educated elite such as the Mehrahs and the Chatterjis. The fact that so much of the novel *de facto* belongs to a Hindi-Urdu linguistic sphere—though in ‘translation’—points to the contested hegemony of English as a link language in independent India (Sunder Rajan 16). Seth traces the roots of these fluctuations in linguistic popularity in the politics and society of the early Fifties, which can be defined as a foundational moment for Indian nation-forming.

A Suitable Boy and *Midnight's Children* take up two different aspects of the hot debates raging around language in Nehru's young nation-state. In *A Suitable Boy*, the Legislative Assembly is the battleground of identity, and as well as definitions of Indian citizenship, of which language is a fundamental part. A debate in the Legislative Assembly pits Begum Abida Khan, the representative of the Muslims, against the conservative Hindu Home Minister Agarwal. At stake is the official state language of Purva Pradesh: should it be Hindi or Urdu? Begum Abida Khan takes the stance that the “two brother languages” should be adopted together, whereas Agarwal takes the hard line that there can only be one official language, or rather one official script, Devanagari: “Urdu is not being dispossessed, as the honourable member supposes. Anyone who learns the Devanagari script will find no difficulty in coping” (1107). Begum Abida Khan points out that the differences in the two languages go

beyond the different scripts that they adopt. But for Agarwal, adopting two scripts is equivalent to what in contemporary Hindutva politics is known as “minority appeasement. . . . You are asking for a two-language theory now, you will be asking for a two-nation theory tomorrow,” he says to Abida Khan (1105). The conservative ‘one-nation, one-language’ position runs counter to the point the novel is making in favour of a multi-lingual nation (albeit narrated, or ‘translated’ in English for an international audience). This novel’s multi-lingual/crypto-English position reflects the linguistic situation of post-Independence India: though the Constitution listed eighteen official languages of the Union, English in fact became the language of nation building.

In *Midnight’s Children*, the heteroglossia of the nation-state is not foregrounded in the democratic space of a parliamentary debate, but rather in a violent riot. In 1956–57 there were language riots in Bombay, due to the conflict between the supporters of Marathi and those advocating Gujarati. These had coalesced into two political parties, each wishing for a linguistically delimited state, and each claiming Bombay for their own. The demonstrations of the two parties are avidly observed by the young Saleem and his friends; at one point Saleem gets pushed down among the Marathi language marchers, who make fun of him for not knowing either Gujarati or Marathi.

The heteroglossia of the Indian nation-state can threaten to break up territorial unity, as in the case of the language riots of Bombay. But more importantly, this episode highlights the most significant linguistic divide in modern India: that between English-speakers, almost invariably upper-class, and those who do not know English. As Kachru points out, code-mixing with English is not only pan-Indian, but it is a marker of modernization, socio-economic position, and membership in an elite group: “It continues to be used in those contexts where one would like to demonstrate authority, power, and identity with the establishment” (200). Saleem, as a member of the Anglicized middle class, does not even know Marathi, the language of the state where he lives, and for him, language marches are a mere spectator’s sport. The upper class, secure in its command of English, is little concerned with the struggle of one vernacular against another for supremacy because English is effec-

tively, the language of command. Saleem finds himself suddenly thrust in the midst of these alien struggles, and narrowly escapes with his life.

The sites and protagonists of the language issue in the two novels differ starkly. In *A Suitable Boy*, the debate does not leave the democratic confines of the Legislative Assembly, and is articulated by two members of the upper classes, the zamindari class in the case of Abida Khan and the bania (or traders) class in the case of Agarwal. In *Midnight's Children*, the riot becomes the site for the forging of national identity—heteroglossia is collisional, the young upper-class English-speaking boy haplessly running into the crowd of underclass protesters. The scenes pointedly illustrate the different aspects of the nation-forming process highlighted by Seth and Rushdie respectively: democratic dialogue, on the one hand, and violent insurgency, on the other. In this respect, one can say that the different historical contexts in which the texts are to be placed explain for their different attitudes to democratic processes: in the case of Seth, democratic debate, the importance of giving space to different representative voices of the Indian polity is sustained as an important value at a time when the very meaning of the Indian nation is being hijacked by the Hindu right-wing. Rushdie, on the other hand, is writing a history of the nation from the perspective of a political situation which has seen the rejection of democracy on the part of the government: in this case, it is useless to invoke the merits of parliamentary debate, but rather the oppositional energies represented by the subaltern classes, such as the language marchers or the conjurers of the magicians' ghetto.

In the above discussion, I have tried to show that the staging of linguistic heteroglossia in the two novels serves an ideological function, expressing the idea of a pluralistic, secular nation-state. However, a similarity of Nehruvian political perspectives in Seth and Rushdie yields two very different Nehruvian 'epics' of India. The irreducible heteroglossia of *Midnight's Children* emerges from the juxtaposition—or in some instances, pastiche—between the more or less literal 'translations' from bhasha languages, indigenized varieties of English, and the stylistic idiosyncrasies of the book's master translator, Saleem Sinai. Saleem continuously stresses the unreliability of his translations, based as they are on an original stored in his memory. Yet ultimately, Saleem's abilities

as a translator affect the aim of all good translations: a creative re-writing of the original. In Seth's case, the third-person omniscient narrator plays the translator's role. Thus cultural and linguistic translation privileges a transparent, rather than opaque, or 'dirty' medium. The symbolic nature of the translations from Indian languages in Seth reflects the symbolic-mimetic construction of his representation of India.

In the language of both novels, translation plays an important role in the simultaneous vernacularization of English and globalization of the *bhashas*. Only through language mixture can the English be vernacularized and thus shaped into an Indian English, and yet only through translation can Indian languages become integral part of a post-colonial, globalized literary English: as Rushdie says, "it is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained" (*Imaginary Homelands* 17).

Notes

- 1 See Brennan and Trivedi.
- 2 Significantly, the Constitution lists eighteen official languages of the Indian Union. See the Eighth Schedule (Articles 344(1) and 351).
- 3 A rough translation would be: "Come on, two or four people get down and push . . . Come on board, brother, come on board. Let's go!"

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