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Language and the postcolonial city: The case of Salman Rushdie

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Abstract
This article examines the ways in which the fact of writing about the postcolonial city of Bombay inflects the language of Rushdie's novels. With specific reference to *Midnight's Children, The Satanic Verses, The Moor's Last Sigh* and *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, the article proposes that a productive analysis of language in Rushdie can be made by replacing the unwieldy and diffuse category of Indian English with the more meaningful contextualization provided by the category of Bombay English. It goes on to argue that while Rushdie's "chutnified" language offers an enabling point of entry into the complex, multilayered and heterogeneous socio-economic fabric of the Third World postcolonial city, it fails to tease out the relations of power and privilege that are intimately tied to the ways in which language, even a "chutnified" one, is deployed.

Keywords
advertisements, Bombay, chutnification, lettered city, minor literature, signs

The real language problem: how to bend it shape it, how to let it be our freedom…

(Rushdie, 1998: 281)

In his groundbreaking work, *The Lettered City* (1996), Angel Rama makes a startling proposition: that the cities of colonial Latin America were not only written or planned into existence, but actually maintained their status as centres of imperial power for more than three centuries primarily through the act of writing. The "new" continent offered a Foucauldian heterotopia of compensation to the Iberian *conquistadores*, who built

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highly planned urban centres as symbols of order and control over the landscape. The *letrados* or administrative functionaries, "wielders of pen and paper", enlisted the power of signs to negate the actual for the ideal and "constrain changing reality in a changeless rational framework", imposing the "rigidity of letters" over the "fluidity of speech" (Rama, 1996: 17, 28-9). At the centre of each visible city, then, was a figurative city, a city of letters, which controlled and directed it.

Rama's observation becomes the point of departure for this article, which explores the ramifications of the "lettered city" in the novels of Salman Rushdie. In particular, it investigates the shapes that words take on in the Third World, postcolonial metropolis, as written in the postcolonial novel in English. These words embody not only peculiarly urban (or "citi-fied") forms of conversation and narrative, but also advertisements, political slogans, shop-signs, and instructions to the public. What do these linguistic forms reveal about the cities across which they are inscribed? What do they shield, obfuscate, and hide from the readers' eyes? To what extent does the language of Rushdie's novels emerge from and make audible, and visible, the multiple speech-acts and written words that mark the postcolonial cityscape? Does the "lettered city" always constrain and curtail the ceaseless dynamism of urban life as Rama argues, or can it, as I go on to suggest, engage with it in a symbiotic way, both drawing upon as well as feeding into the multiple linguistic possibilities generated by a polyglot metropolis?

Critical discussions of Rushdie's language have tended to fall into two "camps": one treats his novels as textual markers of an enlivening, celebratory polyvocality (Bardolph, 1994; Engblom, 1994; Fugmann, 1997), while the other sees in them reification and stagnation, markers of inauthenticity and entrapment within both the foreign language of the (ex-)colonial master as well as the transnational, "flattened" lingo of global consumer capitalism (Ahmad, 1992; Brennan, 1989; Khair, 2001; Trivedi, 1999). Such discussions have also tended, by and large, to discuss the question of language in Indian writing in English in terms of the loose baggy monster of "Indian-English", a category that I believe is far too diffuse to enable any focused analysis of the matter. My objective here is to avoid, as far as possible, both critical poles; each has a validity that is at the same time partial. Further, instead of floundering in the undefined and undefinable flaccidity of the category of "Indian-English", I intend to ground the following discussion within the specific locus of the city of Bombay, the consistent locale of Rushdie's first few novels: *Midnight's Children* (1981), *The Satanic Verses* (1988), *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995b), and *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999). I propose that the language of these novels cannot be seen outside of its relationship with the city of Bombay. City-speak,

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or the hybrid form taken by language(s) and its registers in the Third World metropolis is, I hope to demonstrate, the primary basis for the polyphony of these novels. I shall argue in this essay that the fractured, multi-faceted, and multi-layered realities of the postcolonial metropolis can be most immediately accessed by an examination of the language in these novels, both in terms of the language of characters, as well as of ways in which the city itself speaks/writes. In other words, the language of these novels *enacts* the heterogeneities and contradictions of a Third World postcolonial metropolis, acquiring in the process the multi-tonality that it embodies. The following analysis is by no means a purely celebratory account of the diversity and multiformity of city life; it takes into account the fact that much of this diversity and multiformity is predicated upon grossly unequal and unfair access to resources. It also does not overlook the limitations and omissions of Rushdie's "script-writing" and its attempt to simplify and gloss over some of the fractures across the surface of the cityscape. At the same time, this discussion seeks to break out of the powerful–powerless dichotomy and draw out the ways in which these categories are never fixed and invariable but closely interact and impact upon each other, so that canonicity is both unravelled and forged in a simultaneous process. Language, in particular the *bambaiya* argot that has such an important presence in Rushdie's novels, actualizes and expresses such interanimation resonantly.

I

This section invokes the various forms of "writing-shiting" stamped across the postcolonial cityscape and mimicked with characteristic verve in Rushdie's novels (1995a: 24). These are the ubiquitous slogans and instructions that turn up with great regularity, almost always in English as it endows them with greater authority. Some of them are:

> the Pioneer Café […] a real rutputty joint,[1] with painted boards proclaiming LOVELY LASSI and FUNTABULOUS FALOODA and BHEL-PURI BOMBAY FASHION, with filmi playback music blaring out from a cheap radio by the cash-till, […]. (1995a: 215)

> Lambajan said nothing, and his silence spread outwards from him, muffling the hooting of taxis […] and the loud playback music emerging from the 'Sorryno' Irani restaurant up the hill (so called because of the huge blackboard at the entrance reading *Sorry, No Liquor, No Answer Given Regarding Addresses in Locality, No Combing of Hair, No Beef, No Haggle, No Water Unless Food Taken, No News or Movie Magazine, No Sharing of Liquid Sustenances, No Taking Smoke, No Match, No Feletone Calls, No Incoming with Own Comestible, No Speaking of Horses, No Sigret, No Taking*

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> *of Long Time on Premises, No Raising of Voice, No Change,* and a crucial last pair, *No Turning Down of Volume – It Is How We Like,* and *No Musical Request – All Melodies Selected Are To Taste of Prop*). (1995b: 204-205)

> a man […] sitting cross-legged in a room on whose walls are pictures of Vishnu in each of his avatars, and notices reading, WRITING TAUGHT, and SPITTING DURING VISIT IS QUITE A BAD HABIT. There is no furniture … and Shri Ramram Seth is sitting cross-legged, six inches above the ground. (1995a: 84)

Needless to say, the primary effect of the above examples of writing is that of humour. My endeavour in this section is to understand precisely what makes these examples funny, and why, and what this tells us about the city across which these letters are written. As will be evident on a closer look, the main reason underlying the humour of these examples is the contrast between the pompous solemnity of the statements and the contexts within which they occur. The "rutputty" Pioneer café, the "Sorryno" restaurant, and Shri Ramram Seth's premises all happen to be located in run-down, impoverished areas of the city (Bombay or Delhi), crowded with beggars and street-urchins, areas that are, by the narrators' (Saleem's, Moraes's) own confession, very different from their own domiciles. Two further factors that contribute to the humour must be noted: first, the misspellings, malapropisms, grammatical errors, over-formal constructions, as well as the ingenious alliteration between hybrid conjoinings of words, and second, the incongruous deployment of the English language to designate a wholly un-"English" and uniquely "Indian" (read easygoing, familiar modes of social interaction, combined with a degree of disregard for so-called civic sense) set of realities. The instructions in "Sorryno" restaurant constitute a socio-linguistic document of the conflicting, contradictory aspects of the post-colony. As Frank F. Conlon informs us, the "Irani" has been a venerable Bombay institution that rose to prominence in the beginning of the twentieth century. These were cafés and provision stores operated by immigrants from Persia. Typically functioning as zones of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion, these cafés "with their high ceilings, bright lights, mirrors, marble-top tables, and bentwood chairs quickly became social gathering places, earning the title 'poor man's parlour,' although the city's truly poor would be financially excluded". Many "Iranis" also stocked some canned goods, biscuits, and other items, functioning as a neighbourhood general store for "Westernized", and thereby class-specific, goods and foodstuffs. Apart from the attractions of their food and drink, these cafés also promoted new models of sociability in Bombay. In Conlon's words, "Given the densely crowded residential quarters with which much of the city's population had to cope, a café could serve as a leisure-time destination, and with the introduction of the jukebox holding an adequate supply of

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'filmi' songs, the Irani cafés became even more a social resort for Bombay's male population" (1996: 99-100). At the same time, the instructions put up in Rushdie's "Sorryno" restaurant clearly and categorically point to the existence of fine gradations of hierarchy within what one would assume is a universally accessible public space. Not unlike the posh Taj hotel, one of Bombay's tourist landmarks, the down-at-heel Irani joint also has reserved rights of admission. It is not merely a question of having sufficient money to buy oneself a cup of tea or a meal here, which, one presumes, would not be difficult even for the large under-class population of Bombay; the "prop" insists upon the strict maintenance of norms of "respectability" and compliance in the café, and thereby seeks to exclude a large segment of potential "trouble-makers" from its premises. The gesture of writing the rules in English, however mangled, is, one suspects, a carryover from the early decades of the twentieth century when the Irani joints stocked Western goods and were thereby associated with higher standards and greater Westernization than the corresponding Pioneer café selling "Lovely lassi" and "Funtabulous falooda".

The "Sorryno" rules alert us to the fact that no simplistic distinction can possibly be made between English/Western/First World and Indian/non-Western/Third World "realities". Clearly, the presence of all these rules forbidding so many things testifies to the schism (one of many) *within* the urban Indian public sphere, so that any generalization cannot take us beyond a point. The important thing to note is the legitimacy and authority presumably accorded to these statements by the fact of being written in English, so that even a rough-and-ready knowledge of the language is considered useful and is deployed at every available opportunity to impress. As Braj Kachru notes, in attitudinal terms, "urban English" has a "prestige function" and provides "'in' group membership" (1978a: 7). Kiran Nagarkar's *Ravan and Eddie* (1995), a novel that chooses, at the furthest possible remove from the upper-class world of Rushdie's novels, the Central Works Department *Chawl* No. 17 as its locale, describes the "prestige function" of English in the eyes of those denied easy access to it:

> Because there are only two kinds of people in the world. Those who have English and those who don't. Those who have English are the haves, and those who don't, are the have nots. How could you possibly grasp the meaning and value of English if you spoke it before you were toilet-trained or had a place reserved for you in an English-medium school? English is a mantra, a maha-mantra. It is an 'open sesame' that doesn't open mere doors, it opens up new worlds and allows you to cross over from one universe to another. (1995: 180)

The slogans and instructions under discussion are thus testaments to the contradictory aspects of a postcolonial reality. An internalized sense of the

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ontological superiority of the ex-colonial master's language is reflected in the workings of a socio-economic public sphere that privileges those who study in "English-medium" over poorly-funded municipal schools and acquire a proficiency in it. It comes as no surprise that those who have the resources and opportunity to study in these "English-medium" schools already belong to the privileged upper class and upper-caste minority. The working classes and the lumpen, especially those making a precarious living in big cities, quickly acquire the street savvy to use even an elementary knowledge of English to their advantage. In most cases denied a formal education, particularly in English, their acquisition of the language is enabled by scraps and fragments of phrases that constitute the common currency of the public domain – a domain created, to a large extent, by the entertainment media of television and cinema – and inflected by a swaggering, "*tapori*", street-smart quality. Bombay has, of course, been unique among all the metropolises in India, primarily because of the highly heterogeneous mixture of citizens who come from all parts of the country, in creating its own particular form of dialect, *bambaiya*, which Rushdie elsewhere refers to as a combination of Hindi, Urdu, Gujarati, Marathi and English – "*Hug-Me*" (2000: 7). This dialect is widely prevalent among the lower and middle classes, an outcome of the practical necessity of communicating across several regional languages. Further, the context of a metropolis like Bombay becomes crucial in understanding the significance of the English language in it. In a city inhabited by people from all parts of the country, and visited by a substantial number of tourists from abroad, English offers a medium of communication between widely disparate class, regional, and national identities. So that the street-urchin in an impoverished northern suburb of the city knows that the most effective way to communicate with Saleem's mother, clearly an outsider in those parts, is in English: "Gib the car poliss, Begum? Number one A-class poliss, Begum? I watch car until you come, Begum? I very fine watchman, ask anyone!" (1995a: 215). The spatial divides across the Third World metropolis are paralleled by the different registers in which English is spoken by the nameless urchin and Saleem, two children of about the same age; one, however, has the power to describe, present, and narrate the other. At the same time, the individuality of the urchin refuses to be fully subsumed by Saleem's narrative; his imperfect English reveals his distance from the upper-class world of the narrator just as much as his inventive use of it is a marker of his confidence and enterprise.

It is important for our discussion to keep in mind that the first half of *Midnight's Children* unfolds against the backdrop of the re-organization of states in 1956. As the narrator tells us: "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

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any natural features of the terrain; they were, instead, walls of words. Language divided us" (1995a: 189). Around the same time, there were language riots in Bombay between the Marathi- and Gujarati-speaking camps, each calling for the division of Bombay state into Maharashtra and Gujarat, which eventually came into effect in 1960. Saleem's head-on collision with the language marchers leads him to claim an "active-literal" intervention in the course of the language riots (1995a: 238). The stress in these descriptions is on images of division and violence: the creation of "walls of words", Saleem's "crashing into history" on being pushed from the Methwold's Estate hillock, the rioting that erupts immediately after, "fifteen killed, over three hundred wounded", and even Saleem's nonsense rhyme, "*How are you? – I am well! – I'll take a stick and thrash you to hell!",* offered by him, ironically, in near-complete ignorance of both Gujarati and Marathi, but quickly adopted as the mocking battle-cry of the Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti against the Maha Gujarat Parishad. In the later novel, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, the divisive potential of language is stressed once again. At the high point of the language riots, Aurora decides that

> neither Marathi nor Gujarati would be spoken within her walls; the language of her kingdom was English and nothing but. "All these different lingos cuttofy us off from one another," she explained. "Only English brings us together". (1995b: 179)

Two points must be made concerning the above quotation. The valorizing of the English language as a more inclusive one than any of the Indian languages is of course a simplistic and blinkered response. In a country in which only a very small, elite minority is English-literate, positing English as the answer to linguistic divides is simple-minded at best. At the same time, it is worth noting that Aurora's paean to English is not unmixed with a highly individualized and simultaneously highly citi-fied remoulding of the language in question. The antidote to the "cuttofy"-ing potential of different regional languages is not a "foreign" but very Indian, very Bombay-ized version of English. A metropolis like Bombay offers a (very crowded) space for the jostling and rubbing together of a great variety of languages and accents, and the hectic pace of city life necessitates communication across these differences in the most efficient and matter-of-fact manner. Hence *bambaiya* – not simply a potpourri of words from different languages used simultaneously but a uniquely Bombay-ized speech that transforms words by the addition of new prefixes and suffixes and often coins new words altogether.[2] Rai, the narrator of *The Ground Beneath her Feet*, calls it "Bombay's garbage argot, *Mumbai ki kachrapati baat-cheet*, in which a sentence could begin in one language, swoop through a second and even a third and then swing back round to the first" (2000: 7).

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Rushdie's Bombay novels struggle with ways to capture this slippery, energetic mode of utterance in English.[3] One strategy is of course the inclusion of Hindustani (Hindi and Urdu) words within the narrative. The other is to introduce a variety of registers of speech, so that most characters are identified with highly idiosyncratic sentence constructions and vocabulary. In some cases, such individuation has a sound socio-economic basis, as with the pickle-factory worker Padma and the Anglo-Indian *ayah* Mary Pereira in *Midnight's Children*, or Gibreel Farishta's humble *dabbawala*-origins in *The Satanic Verses*;[4] in others, as with Aurora in *The Moor's Last Sigh* or Zeeny Vakil or Rekha Merchant in *The Satanic Verses*, it symptomizes educated, "smart-alec Bombay English" (1998: 333). The overall effect is that of heterogeneity and effervescence; multiple speech-rhythms and registers coexisting and communicating with each other, mirroring and simulating the contingent, fluid forms of speech in the postcolonial metropolis.

Needless to add, such use of language in Rushdie's novels can be criticized on many levels. It can be seen as patronizing, condescending, and sexist, particularly in *Midnight's Children* where the women characters' speech tends to be far more "colourful" than the men's; furthermore, the multiple accents and speech rhythms of the characters in this novel pointedly show up the contrast with the voice of the narrator Saleem which, confused and self-contradictory though it may be, invariably speaks in grammatically correct, "proper" English. In the later novels, however, this distinction ceases to exist. For instance, Moraes, the narrator of *The Moor's Last Sigh*, speaks a *bambaiya* version of English just as much as the other characters in the novel. Again, it can be criticized for being erratic and inconsistent; the urchin who offers to guard Amina's car speaks a highly "uneducated" version of English (discussed above), while Shiva, also an urchin, speaks in the same register as Saleem and his friends in Methwold's Estate and Cathedral School. The implications of this are discussed in Section III.

II

Advertisements figure prominently in the "lettered city", performing not just a denotative but an evocative function. In other words, advertisement tags, slogans and jingles are not merely used to *represent* the city in a realistic mode but actually help to *evoke* and conjure up the city for Rushdie's narrators. In *Midnight's Children,* they constitute an intrinsic part of Saleem's linguistic universe, indelibly conjoined with his memories, desires, and fears about the city of his birth.

> The road to Methwold's Estate (we are entering my kingdom now, coming into the heart of my childhood; a little lump has appeared in my throat) turns off Warden Road between a bus-stop and a little row of shops. Chimalker's Toyshop; Reader's Paradise; the Chimanbhoy Fatbhoy jewellery store; and,

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> above all, Bombelli's the Confectioners, with their Marquis cake, their One Yard of Chocolates! […] Past the saluting cardboard bellboy of the Band Box Laundry, the road leads us home. (1995a: 94)

The above is only one example of the chant-like invocation of the names of shops and landmarks in the city of Bombay. This becomes an important mode of invoking the city in the novel, running through the novel as a refrain or leitmotif. The narrator's consciousness latches on to certain spatial markers that constitute the city of Bombay for him. There is no intrinsic connection between the names and the places they evoke, as there would be, for instance, between Charminar and Hyderabad or India Gate and Delhi or the World Trade Centre and New York; it is an intensely personal version of Bombay that is given shape in the novel. It also happens to be a highly privileged version, class-marked as it is by toys, books, cakes and chocolates, names and objects that appositely constitute the upper-class narrator's "kingdom". Shop and road names acquire an aura by the simple fact of having been associated with Saleem's childhood; they demarcate his childhood world, a sealed-off, unchanging zone of stability and permanence (albeit a highly precarious one) within the frenetic flux that marks the life of the city. As William Mazzarella in his study of advertising in contemporary India points out, it is "precisely this same abstraction from the purposive and instrumental rounds of productive life [that] makes a fragment of childhood memory so powerful" (2003: 260). What we see in the novel is a fetishized narrative version of the narrator's childhood world. Hence the nostalgia for Bombay is expressed through the nostalgia for these signs. The city in this novel, then, does not exist outside its ritualistic invocation. Rushdie's famed Bombay novel is a novel about *Saleem's* Bombay, a child's eye view of the city.

In sharp contrast to Karachi and Delhi, the two other cities that appear in the novel, the Bombay of *Midnight's Children* is repeatedly brought into being by a ritualistic chant. It is a carefully constructed mirage, pieced together by a paranoid performativity at work, one that reduces the heterogeneity of the city to a safe, familiar, and repeatable paradigm.[5] The advertisement slogans and jingles repeated through the novel – "See you later, alligator! I'm off to London on Air-India!", "Keep Teeth Kleen and Keep Teeth Brite! Keep Teeth Kolynos *Super* White!" – enact the process of "naked" repetition, as against the "clothed" repetition, seen in a novel like *Ulysses.* Simply put, while the repetition of names and advertisements in *Ulysses* serves to layer each repeated instance with a new and different meaning, which continues to work in tandem with the "original" meaning(s), repetition in Rushdie's novel is an attempt to delineate and fix a world that is inexorably slipping out of the narrator's limited grasp. The city's incommensurable realities are so many and so varied that to conceive of

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them in their entirety is beyond the abilities of the narrator, so that mini-worlds have to be chalked out and carefully brought into linguistic being. The repetition of names in *Midnight's Children* is an attempted magic trick, an attempt at conjuring up the city by a magical spell or incantation. By the end of the novel, however, the spell fails to work. On Saleem's final return to Bombay, he realizes the mutability of what, to him, had stood for the unchangeable and permanent:

> – and then Warden Road! The Breach Candy Swimming Baths! And there, look, the shops … but the names had changed: where was Reader's Paradise with its stacks of Superman comics? Where, the Band Box Laundry and Bombelli's, with their One Yard of Chocolates? […] yes, it was my Bombay, but also not-mine, because we reached Kemp's Corner to find the hoardings of Air India's little rajah and of the Kolynos kid gone, gone for good, and Thomas Kemp and Co. itself had vanished into thin air […] Elegiacally, I murmured under my breath: 'Keep Teeth Kleen and Keep Teeth Brite! Keep Teeth Kolynos Super White!' But despite my incantation, the past failed to reappear (1995a: 452)

In *The Satanic Verses* too, a book that presents quite a different Bombay from that of the earlier novel, a remembered advertisement marks and designates not just the city itself and all that it stands for in the immigrant Saladin's memories, but also his own identity, as Bombayite, Indian, and non-white.

> 'I see,' he said to her, 'Zeeny, you didn't lose your Binaca smile.' *Binaca.* Where had that come from, the long forgotten toothpaste advertisement?[6] And the vowel sounds, distinctly unreliable. Watch out, Chamcha, look out for your shadow. That black fellow creeping up behind. (1998: 53)

It may be worthwhile here to comment on the use of English in advertisements – an essentially foreign language, accessible only to a very small percentage of India's population – as a medium for reaching out to large numbers of people, as also the presence in India of a brand like, say, Kolynos toothpaste. Multinational corporate activity (Kolynos was an American brand which came into existence in the 1930s) was quick to penetrate the far reaches of the rapidly globalizing world order from the 1950s onwards. After the American Dental Association withdrew its recommendation of Kolynos in favour of fluoride toothpastes in the 1960s, it spelled the end of Kolynos in the United States. However, it continued to sell in the newer and less fastidious Third World markets of India and Latin America, poorer cousins in the international balance of power, until it was swallowed up by the even larger multinational giant, Colgate-Palmolive, in the 1990s. Predominantly addressing the literate middle- and upper-class segment of urban societies, much advertising in the post-independence decades used English as its medium. This development was assisted by the rise, in the Bombay of the 1960s, of a particular class of professionals,

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the relatively small group of Anglophone copywriters and advertising executives known as "the Churchgate Set", people like Frank Simoes and Kersy Katrak who, Mazzarella points out, "were forging careers out of their self-consciously cosmopolitan identifications and their expert understanding of this imagined empire of signs" (Mazzarella, 2003: 106, 261). The aspirational sentiment that all advertising mobilizes is integrally bound up with the use of English (Western) linguistic and visual registers to construct the world of the advertisement, opening up seductive vistas of upward mobility and Westernization. Jonathan Raban notes how, "In the city, we are barraged with images of the people we might become. Identity is presented as plastic, a matter of possessions and appearances; and a very large proportion of the urban landscape is taken up by slogans, advertisements, flatly photographed images of folk heroes – the man who turned into a sophisticated dandy overnight by drinking a particular brand of vodka" (1998: 59). However, within the divided terrain of the postcolonial city, the use of English not only conveys the message of the ad but embodies it. It is a masterstroke: it allows the ad to directly address the privileged few who can access its linguistic codes and offer them the pleasures of identification, at the same time as it reaches out to the large majority that is at a remove from the world of the ad, offering them, if only they would purchase the commodity being advertised, symbolic entry into a lifestyle that is otherwise unavailable to them.

III

This section takes as its point of departure Tabish Khair's discussion of the English language in contemporary Indian novels in English. With particular reference to Rushdie, Khair argues that the supposed "hybridity" and "polyglossia" of his novels does not, as it has been seen to, offer a mimesis of an authentic pan-Indian English. On the contrary, the mongrel, "chutnified" English of his novels is an artificial and highly stylized construct that is based upon the ironical, exaggerated, consciously mocking and self-confident register that *some* people from the culturally and economically elite and cosmopolitan classes may speak *some* of the time in an informal setting. As an until-very-recently-colonized people, Indians, in particular those of the upper or upper-middle classes, strive to acquire as close an approximation of "proper", Queen's English as they possibly can. The underclasses, on the other hand, either speak no English at all or learn a smattering of words in English (depending on their ingenuity and profession) to enable a rudimentary communication with foreign tourists or the Indian upper classes. Neither group would be heard to speak Rushdie's "chutnified" English, at least not consistently. In that respect, Rushdie's English is no more authentically Indian than

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is the grammatically and syntactically unadventurous English grapholect of say, Amitav Ghosh. Further, Khair deconstructs the supposed "orality" of Rushdie's narratives, his attempt to use elements from spoken Indian English. Challenging Anita Desai's statement that it was Rushdie who "finally brought the *spoken* language off the streets onto the printed page", Khair argues that:

> the "spoken language [of] the streets" in India is seldom English and *never* the stylized Englishes of either Rushdie or [Raja] Rao. [...] No doubt, Rushdie incorporates elements of spoken Indian English and creates the impression of a colloquial language. But this language is a combination of consciously manufactured English used (if at all) by a small circle of cosmopolitan Babus and a sprinkling of staged English extracted from the speech of people lacking an 'English-medium education'. [...] As such, in spite of Rushdie's desire to appropriate the condition of dialect, his English is almost as staged and artificial as Rao's. (2001: 109)

While accepting the overall validity of Khair's observation (which feeds into his main argument regarding the "alienation" that underpins all Indian writing in English), I wish to locate his thesis not in the undefined and diffuse geographical category of India as a whole, as he seems to do, but in the specific context of the metropolis of Bombay. In the final analysis, sorting the entire spectrum of social classes across the length and breadth of the country into English-speaking "babus" and non-English-speaking "coolies" must of necessity be a simplistic and attenuated exercise. For instance, members of two low-income-families, one based in Delhi and the other in, say, Saharanpur, a mofussil town in the neighbouring state of Uttar Pradesh, would have quite different levels of knowledge of English. Owing to greater exposure to the tourist industry, upper-class cosmopolites, as well as other concrete markers of a transnationalized economy, even underclass inhabitants of a metropolis would acquire, willy-nilly or through pragmatic choice, a larger English vocabulary than their regional counterparts. (This would invariably be an untutored, thickly-accented, rough-and-ready acquaintance with certain strategic terms that facilitate communication with potential customers, as in the street-urchin's speech in *Midnight's Children* quoted above.)

Khair's main objection seems to be that the supposed "newness" of Rushdie's language is only a carefully calculated impression given by the narrative, without being either an authentic transcription of Indian speech nor in any real sense innovative or experimental. He also accuses this language of being "almost Orientalist", with "Hollywoodish and 'stage English' roots", but does not develop this observation at any length. Another aspect of the same objection, which Khair does not point out, is the gendering of certain kinds of speech as mentioned above, so that

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the female characters in Rushdie's novels seem to speak, by and large, in far more idiosyncratic and grammatically "unsound" ways than the male characters, and a case could plausibly be made against Rushdie for infantilizing and patronizing the women in his novels. However my purpose here is to address the more strident of Khair's objections: that English is not a spoken language in India, and hence Rushdie's novels are not really written in the demotic Indian-English they are famed for (2001: 102-3). In order to do this, I shall be shifting the terms of analysis from a supposedly generic form of Indian-English to a more specific, spatially-located form of city-speak, or Bombay-speak, or *bambaiya*. Further, I posit the numerous instances of language inscribed across the space of the city, in the shape of hoardings, advertisement slogans, and public instructions, also as forms of city-speak. Its metropolitan status means that the city of Bombay encompasses a largeness and heterogeneity in the composition of its citizens, prominently in terms of class and language. Rushdie's narratives seize on, and attempt to re-enact, this hybridity and heterogeneity in and through their use of language. Much of the effect is created by a skilful mimesis – Rushdie's keen ear and observation hold him in good stead – as in the eminently realistic examples of the Irani café instructions and the street-urchin's English discussed above.

Rushdie's broad attempt is to gesture towards the hybrid, heteroglot, uniquely citi-fied *bambaiya* language by creating an English version of it in his narratives. This language, like the creoles, is in a state of constant flux and metamorphosis; it represents both a necessity (of communication between people who have very different mother tongues and levels of education/literacy), as well as an attitude, peculiarly urban, street savvy, somewhat aggressive and cocky. It is, however, not the same as the ironic register used self-consciously at times by the English-educated elite classes, particularly metropolitan teenagers and youngsters, and as noted above, Khair objects to Rushdie's use of this register of privilege as the demotic medium of communication among the characters in his novels, on the grounds that the demotic medium of communication in India is not English. However, this medium, particularly in the context of Bombay, is a highly specific, unique, composite creation, mostly Hindi-based but with generous smatterings of English, Gujarati, and Marathi, among other languages. Any attempt to transcribe this "Bombay mix", this "*Mumbai ka kachrapati baat-cheet*" in *any* one language, whether English or Hindi or Marathi, cannot but be a creative stylization. This *ad hoc* language offers a means of communication between people of widely differing class and regional backgrounds, and stands as a linguistic manifestation of the diversity of Bombay's citizens. While it would be simplistic to claim, in the vein of Partha Chatterjee's "domain" theory, that *bambaiya* is the language of the streets and is markedly distinct from the (pure, regional) language spoken and preserved inside the home, there is a sense in

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which this distinction can be posited. As Kachru informs us, "code-mixing", or the "consistent transfer of linguistic units from one language to another", is a highly contingent linguistic phenomenon, being both "role-dependent" and "function-dependent", deployed by certain users to attain particular ends (1978b: 28-29). Of course, in the case of upper-class cosmopolites like Rushdie himself, this regional language spoken at home would more often than not comprise a large component of English. However, out in the public space of the streets, buses, local trains, and markets, people of all classes would mutually acquiesce in modifying their "home" registers, whatever they may be, in order to conform to the rough-and-ready, street-slangish, and hybridized form of *bambaiya*. Rushdie's novels are a consistent attempt to give voice to this language. Whether or not it is a successful attempt is arguable; it is, however, the raison d'être of his linguistic project.

Success, in literary terms, can and often does preclude "authenticity". While all literary language, sans exception, is a mediation and stylization of reality, the difficulty is greater in Rushdie's case as he attempts to render in one language an argot that is a unique, contingent, and constantly mutating composite of many languages and registers. Khair's point regarding Rushdie's dislodging of a specific mode of speaking English from its elite context and deploying it as a generic form of "Indian-English" across classes and contexts is well made; at the same time, it is undeniable that this mode is the closest approximation we have, in contemporary Indian literature written in English, to the hybrid affiliations, associations, and genealogies of language in a postcolonial metropolis like Bombay. It is by no means a wholly accurate or comprehensive reproduction of *bambaiya*, depending for much of its effect on the introduction of predominantly Hindustani words and constructions, as well as the indiscriminate dropping of articles that has come to be seen as the hallmark of "Indian-English" ever since G. V. Desani's spectacular *All About H. Hatterr* (1998/1948). However, it brilliantly poses an energetic and spirited challenge to establishment grammar and syntax, and conveys an easy fluidity across linguistic borders – the two most important things that the *bambaiya* argot also does.

It is not the choice of the particular register which Rushdie uses that I find so problematic; it is the fact that he deploys it almost invariably *throughout* the landscape of his novels. This is particularly true of the later Bombay novels; while Saleem's voice in *Midnight's Children* is markedly different (more "educated") when compared to Padma's or Mary Pereira's, in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Aurora, the upper-class artist and socialite, ends up sounding not very different from her gatekeeper Lambajan Chandiwala. Nowhere in the novels is there a sense of different registers being spoken in different contexts. A real-life Aurora Zogoiby would speak one register with her servants, quite another with her family, and yet another with her socialite crowd. The servants, on the other hand, would be fluent in a variety

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of languages and registers from pidgin English to street *bambaiya* to their own regional languages. Rushdie nowhere gestures towards this linguistic elasticity, and the socio-economic factors that it is predicated upon. This allows him to gloss over the numerous fractures within the postcolonial cityscape, smoothing them over with the patina of a common linguistic register. In a sense, the artificiality (the distance from reality) of his characters' language across the board becomes a means to cover up the huge disparities within the heterogeneity of the city; the fact that it conforms to no actual register of speech allows it to be deployed as a universally valid register. It is made to stand in for a reality that is far more fragmented and fractured than is revealed by the language used to represent it.

IV

An examination of Rushdie's lettered city has allowed us a glimpse into the socio-linguistic world of late twentieth-century Bombay. Deleuze and Guattari's (1986) concept of "minor literature" offers a very useful point of entry into the questions that I want to address in the concluding section of this article. Echoing the "nomadism" they so brilliantly tease out in Kafka's writings, Deleuze and Guattari's discussion takes off in several directions simultaneously along distinct "lines of flight". However, it would be helpful for our purpose here to isolate some of the main characteristics of a "minor literature": it involves a questioning of the concepts of identity, autonomy, authenticity, and development, and a suspicion of narratives of totalization and unification. It is worth clarifying, at the risk of redundancy, that the term "minor literature" is not synonymous with Modernism or Postmodernism. Much Modernist and Postmodernist literature fulfils the criteria of minor literature, but not all and not always. As David Lloyd, in an excellent analysis of the Irish nationalist James Clarence Mangan, puts it: "wherever the writer continues to conceive the work as playing in some sense a prefigurative and reconciling role, that work remains, whatever its stylistic features, assimilated to a canonical aesthetic" (1987a: 23). Again, much "minority writing", or writing from the so-called margins, could qualify as minor literature, but not necessarily. In Lloyd's somewhat optimistic view, the emergence of a Third World and postcolonial literature signifies a superseding of the hegemonic function of aesthetic culture, constituting a "literature of collectivity" for which "the canon as an institution and representation as a norm" would be "irrelevant". The collapse of canonicity also means the end of minor literature (as its rasion d'être is to stand in opposition to canonical literature), so that minority writing "continues" where minor writing has "passed away" (1987a: 25, 1987b: 162). I differ from Lloyd in that I do not see the emergence of postcolonial literature as a sufficient prerequisite for the end of canonicity; it may disrupt, challenge,

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and modify an existing canon but does not do away with the existence of the canon per se, so that Rushdie is as much a "canonical" writer as is, say, Joyce, despite the fact that their works stand as examples of "minor literature". As Deleuze and Guattari posit, "minor no longer designates specific literatures but the revolutionary conditions for every literature *within the heart of* what is called great (or established) literature" (1986: 18).

Differences notwithstanding, the English language for Rushdie can be said to function in a way similar to that of German for Kafka; both languages are, in the contexts of Bombay and Prague respectively, "affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization", and appropriated by these writers for "strange and minor uses" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986: 16-7). This article has examined some of the ways in which such a deterritorialized language traverses the circuits of exchange, both inter subjective and economic, that criss-cross through the lettered city of Bombay, opening up in the process "linguistic Third World zones by which a language can escape" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986: 27). Seizing on the largeness and admixture that Bombay represents, and written as they are in a highly energetic and inventive mode, Rushdie's Bombay novels convey vividly the mixed, multi-faceted, and multi-tonal heterogeneities that compose a Third World postcolonial metropolis. At the same time, by making this "chutnified" lingua franca apply, for the most part, indiscriminately to characters spread across the socio-economic spectrum, Rushdie cheats; he draws upon the celebratory and comedic possibilities of the "*mélange*, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that" (Rushdie, 1992: 394) that the city embodies and chooses to disregard, at the linguistic level, the flip side of the coin, the deep schisms and inequalities that are such a crucial aspect of a metropolis like Bombay. These undoubtedly emerge in the turns of plot and leitmotifs, such as that of the crowd, but are sought to be smoothed over by the celebrated, and uniform, "chutnification" of his language. The "minority" of Rushdie's novels gets mediated and compromised by the attempt to elide some of the more uncomfortable heterogeneities of the lettered city.

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NOTES

1. A word that, as far as I am aware, has been coined by Rushdie, since no dictionary, including Hobson-Jobson, recognizes it. It does, however, convey quite wonderfully the ramshackle, run-down state of Pioneer café.
2. A good example of this is the perplexing term "powertoni", held in great respect by everyone in Bombay. After much confusion, Suketu Mehta discovers that it is a contraction of the term "power of attorney", "the awesome ability to act on someone else's behalf or to have others do your bidding" (2004: 55).

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3. I am not interested here in re-opening the tired debate about the aesthetic and political compromises an Indian writer willy-nilly makes when s/he chooses to write in English. For all practical purposes, I treat English as another Indian language, albeit one that, even within India, occupies a position of much greater social, economic, and political power than all the other so-called regional languages.
4. It must at the same time be mentioned that a "real" Padma would be unlikely to speak in English, however broken. Her speech, as of other characters like Ramram Seth or Lambajan, to mention just a few, is most likely intended to be understood as a translation from the Indian language (Hindustani, Marathi) they would speak in. The fact that Rushdie does not signal this in the narrative is significant.
5. I use the word "paranoid" advisedly, to describe a "creative" enterprise that is fully aware of its own precariousness.
6. Binaca toothpaste was inextricably associated with the highly popular radio countdown show "Binaca Geetmala", launched towards the end of 1952 on what was then called Radio Ceylon, and very soon the most popular radio programme in India. Its highly popular anchor, Ameen Sayani, was instrumental in making the phrase "Binaca smile" a household one. As corporate brands changed hands and names, it later came to be called the "Cibaca Geetmala", and ran for an astounding total of 39 years. It was recently revived again in 2001, this time with the name Colgate-Cibaca Geetmala.

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