Appropriating the Language of the Other

Between Resilience and Resistance

Yasmina DJAFRI

University of Abdelhamid Ibn Badis, Mostaganem, ALGERIA

DOI : https ://doi.org/10.17184/eac.9969

Abstract: The present paper addresses the complex issue of translating local cultural realities in the language of the Other; a phenomenon referred to as "Appropriation". This same paper discusses the sensitive role of the postcolonial writers, who not only use the language of the colonizer, English language in our case, to fashion unique literary narratives of their own but also have to subvert colonial associations and assert their agency towards hegemony. To do so, postcolonial writers' commitment to the appropriation of the language of the Other, we assume, involves borrowing, adaptation, reimagining of cultural practices and literary traditions; a fastidious exercise as it were! In this view of things, two major issues are at the core of the debate: how do postcolonial writers manage to negotiate the burden of the cultural experience? And do they succeed to perform the "bearing across" process? (Rushdie, 1991)

Keywords: postcolonial writers - English language - Other - appropriation - *bearing across*

1 Introduction

The present reflection is an attempt to cast light on the role postcolonial writers embody while writing their fiction in the language of the colonizer, namely English language. At this point of the discussion, we need to remind, it is not our objective to debate the appropriateness nor the legitimacy of the use of English language by former colonized people, rather, it is our premise that only through the use of the imperial language that local realities can be translated and made perceptible. We contend that it is a meant process through which former colonized people 'spite' the Empire, to use Achcroft et al, (1989) jargon in *The Empire Writes Back*, and '[dismantle] it from its imperial centralism' (43). Hence, postcolonial writers' burden is of the utmost importance as they are not concerned by the literary qualities inherent to the text of literature solely, but they are also responsible for their dismissed history to get visible to the entirety of the world which urge to take hold of language of the Other

and appropriate it accordingly. African fiction writer Chinua Achebe reports in this sense : "the price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use," (1975, 61) accentuating then the load of exigencies postcolonial writers are asked to meet.

2 Background

The point of departure of this discussion points at the imperative to understand the historical and theoretical context from which the concept of appropriation of the language of the Other has emerged. Unveiling the specificities of the context does remind us that the machinery of colonialism is at the origin of all kinds of change, be they cultural, ideological, or linguistic. In this vein, historian David Huddarts comments on the concept of cultural hybridity, as adopted by Bhabha, explaining that "Disparate cultures are in no ways pre-existing, but are an effect of historical change specifically of colonialism and post colonialism." (84) This assumed, the postcolonial discourse is undoubtedly a by-product of colonialism where differences are celebrated rather than occulted. As appropriation took on different declinations, the linguistic appropriation of English language is, to our sense, the most pertinent form of appropriation of the Other for, it reflects the amount of awareness former colonized people made use of to cope with the 'insidious occupation of minds and cultures' (Leela Ghandi 1998 15) imposed on them.

Referred to as the *writing back* process, postcolonial advocators have embarked in a complex machinery where a lot of variables intersected to shape a committed discourse fueled by a set of ambivalent feelings. Admittedly, education in English language was the first cause responsible for indoctrinating the minds of the natives and fostering in them a biased sense of belongingness. While education in English language was perniciously instilled to gain control over the colonized people and regulate the emanating danger over their disparity, colonizers were far from imagining that they would be later attacked by these same minds using the same weapon, namely language. Anthony Appiah (1998) reports interestingly, "education in English was the colonizer's "most formidable weapon" to tame the threatening cultural identity of the colonized" (947). Palestinian critic Edward Said, among many postcolonial thinkers who reported the devastating effects of their colonial schooling, argues that feeling doubtful and lost about their situation towards English language and towards their own native language made them engage forcefully in a process of *writing back* in the language of the colonizer. Said remembered how his education in English language was responsible for the loss of his identity, " [I was] a Palestinian going to school in Egypt, with an English name and an American passport and no certain identity at all." (in "Between Worlds"). In her turn, Egyptian novelist Leila Ahmed expressed her loss differently accentuating the depth of her colonial educational wounds, "[my colonial schooling created in me] "false perceptions" and "unexamined prejudices" not only towards "the Arabic language but even against our own kind and the most cherished people in our lives" (in "Border Passage")[1]. Both representatives of the postcolonial thought confess their serious disruption while getting acquainted with English language education and

[1]For more information about Edward Said and Leila Ahmed schooling education, see Ikram Ahmed El Sherif (2013)

Published in : SZENDE, Thomas ; BENSEKAT, Malika ; ROUBAI, Amine ; MASSOUD SRIDI, Iman (dir.), *Penser la didactique des langues/cultures, des littératures et de la traduction. Regards croisés*, Editions des archives contemporaines, ISBN : 9782813005953, doi : 10.17184/eac.9782813005953

this in itself was the reason why they had approached the language more intimately imbuing it with their own intellectual perceptions and cultural distance.

Often, the postcolonial discourse is stigmatised as paradoxical, antagonistic, contentious, unclear and incoherent because of the sense of loss prevailing over its agents. The underlying ambiguity around this same discourse is interestingly formulated by a number of scholars who consensually point at its inherent dependence upon Western dynamics of power.

Michel Foucault (1978), for instance, elaborates on the paradox upon the voice of the 'subaltern' and the 'marginal' claiming that : "if 'marginality' is being constituted as an area of investigation, this is only because relations of power have established it as a possible object." (78), 'othered' by the Western epistemological academic systems. However, these same scholars agree that despite the disparate characteristics of this discourse, language is central to its articulation and it is in this sense that we would like to know more about the profile of its advocators of thought and the reasons which stimulated them to do so.

Probably, the most known reason for embracing the postcolonial condition and using the language of the colonizer is the need to correct fallacies that have so long clung to 'Us', fostering images of inferiority, uncivilisedness and backwardness while referring to former colonies. Taken from Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, where he speaks not of the position of Eastern peoples, but of the poverty-stricken smallholding peasants of France at a particular juncture in the mid-19th century, Carl Marx phrase : "They cannot represent themselves ; they must be represented," has for so long been understood as the colonized people inability to represent themselves so the colonizer's job to represent them. Thus, it is in the sense of this ill-interpretation of Marx' phrase and its wrong association with the former colonized people that we believe deeply ingrained beliefs and narratives about 'US' need to be deconstructed leaving place to more authentic depictions to be constructed and defended.

Central to the concern of the *writing back* process is the sharp distinction between those who have adopted the language of the Other and have adapted it to their own needs ; a process named as Appropriation echoing the resilience of the latter and those who have proceeded to a total rejection of the language of the colonizer substituting it for their local language ; sole language believed able to reflect the local realities proper to them ; a process named as Abrogation echoing the natives' resistance. However, and for the contention of this research, we assume that postcolonial literature is not just about opposition, it is also about survival, adaptation, and creativity. Some writers fight against colonial legacies, while others find ways to *bear across* and transform those legacies into something new and meaningful. Jordanian- British fiction writer Fadia Faqir, for instance, is a perfect example of an author who complicates the idea of *bearing across* in ways that go beyond simple resistance or resilience. Her works play with linguistic hybridity, power dynamics, and the fractured nature of postcolonial identity, making it difficult to place her within any single category.

Accordingly, the present work will be debated as follows : first, a definition of the *bearing across* phenomenon will be presented then we will distinguish between what

Published in : SZENDE, Thomas ; BENSEKAT, Malika ; ROUBAI, Amine ; MASSOUD SRIDI, Iman (dir.), *Penser la didactique des langues/cultures, des littératures et de la traduction. Regards croisés*, Editions des archives contemporaines, ISBN : 9782813005953, doi : 10.17184/eac.9782813005953

is appropriation and what is abrogation highlighting the main drives of this division. At last, we will show that contemporary authors strive to go beyond this dualistic and narrow distinction fashioning a space of negotiation of their own where the generational shift represents the most pertinent motif of change.

3 Bearing Across : A Metaphor of Translation

When attempting to profile the advocators of the postcolonial thought, one is confronted to an elite of academics and intellectuals who interestingly made use of their colonial education 'to spite' the Empire albeit strangely. Academic Cornel West reinforces the idea of strangeness suggesting that postcolonial critics, "While lining their activities to the fundamental, structural overhaul of these institutions(of Western power) often remain 'financially dependent on them, theirs is a gesture that is simultaneously progress and coopted"[2] , thus in attempting to understand the condition of the postcolonial, we are often met with antagonistic and contentious relationships that hinder and limit rather than establish and foster a clear and coherent discourse.

Indian essayist and fiction writer Salman Rushdie is probably an interesting representation of this sum of postcolonial contradictions, often responsible for his stigmatisation. His cultural hybridity, migratory and exilic experiences as well as his sense of displacement made him theorise about the concept of identity across boundaries and be the precursor of the metaphor of translation he has come to coin as the *bearing across* act. For Rushdie, identity formation across boundaries entails necessarily the transfer of ideas, local identities and histories across borders. It is a process through which local realities are being translated and revealed to a much wider and farther world.

In *Imaginary Homelands* (1991), a collection of essays in which he discusses how migrants and exiles are constantly involved in acts of *bearing across*, Rushdie considers postcolonial agents as cultural translators, moving between worlds, carrying memories and traditions, yet reshaping them in new contexts. He writes :

> It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt.
> (Imaginary Homelands 10)

Rushdie's reflection enforces a deep sense of loss as he claims that the act of *bearing across* entails that even the past is not preserved, it is being altered and constantly reshaped by the power of the present. Beyond translation, *bearing across* functions metaphorically in Rushdie's work to describe the hybrid identities of postcolonial subjects. In *Midnight's Children* (1981), Saleem Sinai, the protagonist, literally bears the history of India within his body, his life seems intertwined with the fate of the newly independent nation. His narrative is a form of *bearing across*—he translates history into personal experience and sees his personal experience as the essence of history. Saleem notes : "To understand just one life, you have to swallow the world." (109)

[2]See Ghandi (1978), p.59.

Published in : SZENDE, Thomas ; BENSEKAT, Malika ; ROUBAI, Amine ; MASSOUD SRIDI, Iman (dir.), *Penser la didactique des langues/cultures, des littératures et de la traduction. Regards croisés*, Editions des archives contemporaines, ISBN : 9782813005953, doi : 10.17184/eac.9782813005953

This suggests that identity is not singular but carried across generations, geographies, and histories—never fixed, always in motion.

Similarly, in *The Satanic Verses* (1988), Rushdie plays with *bearing across* through the novel's structure and the experiences of its protagonists, Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha. Both undergo literal and figurative transformations, embodying the hybrid, often painful negotiations of postcolonial and diasporic existence. Rushdie states : "Metamorphosis, the paradox of translation : to bear across, to transport, to metamorphose." (428) Here, *bearing across* encompasses exile, transformation, and the reinterpretation of self—a central concern in much of Rushdie's work and all the postcolonial writers alike.

4 From *Bearing Across* to Linguistic Appropriation

The transition from the *bearing across* act to the linguistic appropriation of the language of the Other is an evident progression as the language is not only being translated or transported from one culture to the other but rather transformed and imbued with the views of those who once were marginalised by it. The whole act of appropriating the language of the Other and inhabiting it with one's hybrid culture entails an act of reinvention and reimagination of this same language. Linguistic appropriation is far from being an innocent act of translation where writers act passively as mere recipients and transporters, rather they engage consciously in an active process of the remaking of the language. Rushdie reports in this sense :

> *The English language ceased to be the sole possession of the English some time ago. The word 'Commonwealth,' if it means anything, means that the inheritance of the language is now a joint one. (Imaginary Homeland 17)*

Aschcroft et al., define linguistic appropriation of English as the process by which postcolonial writers took hold of the language of the master, subverted it and made it their own. The critics even hint at the amount of vengeance which has characterised the process and often employ terms as 'nativise', 'indiginize', or 'hybridize' the language of the master to describe the ideological drives of the process of appropriation. In *Midnight's Children*, for instance, Rushdie's English is not "pure" English ; it is hybrid, infused with Hindustani, Urdu, and Bombay street slang. This linguistic bricolage is evident in linguistic distortion of English language where Saleem Sinai narrates :

> *I told you the truth, Memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also ; but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events ; and no sane human being ever trusts someone else's version more than his own. (242)*

The novel's language itself is fragmented, mirroring the chaos of post-independence India. Rushdie does not merely write in English ; he *Indianizes* it, making it carry the

Published in : SZENDE, Thomas ; BENSEKAT, Malika ; ROUBAI, Amine ; MASSOUD SRIDI, Iman (dir.), *Penser la didactique des langues/cultures, des littératures et de la traduction. Regards croisés*, Editions des archives contemporaines, ISBN : 9782813005953, doi : 10.17184/eac.9782813005953

weight of his hybrid identity. This is linguistic appropriation in action. In a different context yet convergent, Fadia Faqir elaborates on how the language of her fiction is infused with her Arab origins,

> If it is possible to separate sensibility from language, then the body of my work has an Arab attitude, responsiveness, perception, flavour and identity, expressed through the medium of an 'Arabised' English, an English selected carefully to convey a specific Arab flavour. (2013 76)

Interestingly, the process of linguistic appropriation does manipulate the colonial authority which used to regulate the power structure thus leaving space for minor powers to emerge and disrupt the hierarchy of the whole world structure. Otherwise said, the linguistic appropriation which operates through the distortion of the language of the Other by the use of various strategies is far from being purely aesthetic ; it is political in essence. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Homi Bhabha argues that linguistic appropriation leads necessarily to mimicry and in so doing, postcolonial writers destabilise the colonial power, "mimicry is at once resemblance and menace." (123)

Seen from this perspective, the linguistic appropriation of English language appears as an act of resilience where postcolonial agents constantly engage in a process of adaptation and adjustment bearing in mind that only through the use of the colonizer's language that bitter realities could be echoed and voiced. However, and always within the process of *writing back* to the centre, some postcolonial writers refused to voice their response through the language of the Other showing a deliberate resistance. Instead, they have chosen to promote their own local languages at the expense of the imperial language. Ngugi wa Thiongo (1981) called for the "abolition of English departments." He argued that language transmits culture and for the native culture to survive, it needed its own forms of expressions and language. He posited that natives of the Third World would remain colonized as long as they retained English, and in order to "decanonise the mind", they need to shut out English. But again, for the premises of this research, we assume Ngugi's position too radical and unfitting as after having decided to write his fiction in Gikuyu, he was obliged later on to translate it into English so it would reach a world audience.

While the process of *writing back* to the center reflects a deep form of dissatisfaction, we can advance that both *abrogation* and *appropriation* are two intricate strategies of writing that complement each other. While abrogation is a crucial first step in dismantling colonial authority over language, it does not exist in isolation. It works alongside appropriation to reshape English into a language of the postcolonial experience. Together, these strategies form the backbone of *writing back*, allowing postcolonial writers to assert their voices, histories, and identities in ways that challenge the dominance of the colonial centre.

Published in : SZENDE, Thomas ; BENSEKAT, Malika ; ROUBAI, Amine ; MASSOUD SRIDI, Iman (dir.), *Penser la didactique des langues/cultures, des littératures et de la traduction. Regards croisés*, Editions des archives contemporaines, ISBN : 9782813005953, doi : 10.17184/eac.9782813005953

5 Transcending Resilience and Resistance : On Negotiation in the *Writing Back* Process

Interestingly, contemporary postcolonial writers' engagement with English is not just about rejecting or adapting, rather it is about disrupting, subverting, and reconfiguring language itself to fit the fragmented, often violent realities of postcolonial subjects. In other terms, one can advance that the earlier category of writers embedded the *bearing across* act as an obligation to defend their legacies, record their cultures and report their own 'truths'. Pondering on the reasons which made former colonized people use English language despite all the paradoxes that inhabited them, Ikram El Sherif (2013) reports that Achebe's novels, for instance, did not portray his people's life before the coming of the colonial power as a utopia of perfection, he does show instead that they did have a history of their own, a functional way of life and a viable culture that was devastated by colonialism.

Conversely, by the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, another category of writers, female dominant ; emerged as a category which saw in the use of English language a liberating medium of self-expression as the mother tongue is necessarily the language of taboos and inhibitions of all kinds. These female writers articulated the use of English language around the urge to liberate the self, heal the wounds of oppression, flee horror and voice the malaise of a whole sisterhood. On writing in English, Afaf Kanafani explains in *Nadia, Captive of Hope : Memoir of an Arab Woman* (1999) :

> Writing in English let me pretend that the wars in the Middle East were someone's wars and that it was not me, but rather someone else, who endured their horror and suffered great loss…[English had for me] a neutral quality, [allowing me to work through and " deal with the cruelty of the wars that have dominated my life. (87)

In her turn, Fadia Faqir comments on her complex relationship with Arabic language and her need to use English language to free herself from all kinds of oppression. In *My Name is Salma* (2007) and *Willow Trees Don't Weep* (2014), both female protagonists Salma and Nadjwa flee Jordan their mother land where they have suffered alienation and a sense of loss to England where they establish themselves freer and more serene.

In *My Name is Selma*, Salma's long struggles are transmitted through an *Arabized* English which breaths pain and suffering. Salma exemplifies geographical and cultural displacements which urge her negotiate two different identities and opt for an identity of her own, "…I became neither Salma, nor Sal nor Sally, neither Arab nor English. Puff- like magic I would turn into a white cloud." (191) Salma is proud to reply "I am British of Arab origin." (150) to Max, her tailor boss ; evidence that despite all the ordeals she has experienced, she is consciously embracing both cultures. Thus, because Faqir strove to appropriate English language and adapt it to her own vision of the truth that her fiction is contributing substantially to alter preconceived images around Arabs in general and Arab women in particular.

Published in : SZENDE, Thomas ; BENSEKAT, Malika ; ROUBAI, Amine ; MASSOUD SRIDI, Iman (dir.), *Penser la didactique des langues/cultures, des littératures et de la traduction. Regards croisés*, Editions des archives contemporaines, ISBN : 9782813005953, doi : 10.17184/eac.9782813005953

In *Willow Trees don't Weep* (2014), Faqir seems to have transcended the worries of any Arab immigrant who seeks integration in the West. Nadjwa, the Arab protagonist from Amman, is ready to undertake a long painful journey through three continents despite the very childish English she has come to recall from her early classes (171). Not only does she jot down all the new English words she comes to hear to check them later in the dictionary but she

also dares using the very few ones she knows to defend her native tongue and bears no humiliation to the language of her ancestors, " 'Amani looked me in the eye. *Asfih* : I am sorry.' 'Don't speak Arabic. You're slaughtering my language' " (151).

In a speech entitled : *Granada : Migration, Hybridity and Transcultural Encounters* (2013) she delivered at GUST University in Kuweit in 2012, Fadia Faqir reports :

> Relationship with the Arabic language was a forbidden love, laden with danger and taboos. In a society governed by strict traditional values the use of language freely was hazardous [...]. The Tripartite of politics, religion and sex were neither discussed at the home nor in the classroom, I felt incarcerated both physically and linguistically. (70)

We can understand then that while portraying her female protagonists, Faqir not only does depict them proud of their Arab origin but also entice them celebrate their femaleness more freely thanks to their mastery of the language of the Other.

6 Conclusion

To the question whether postcolonial writers have succeeded to perform the *bearing across* process or to put it differently whether they have managed through the appropriation of the language of the other to translate local realities, we would evidently answer 'yes.'

Postcolonial writers are embracing a new world where differences melt to become stronger and as such, they are renouncing neither their identity nor that of their host countries. Making compromise, negotiating space and feeling proud of their own identity appear to be the guiding principles current postcolonial writers adopt in their lives to transcend the clear-cut distinctions which used to associate writers with either resilience or resistance.

Works Cited

Achebe, Chinua. Morning Yet in Creation Day. London : Heinneman, 1975

Appiah, Anthony. "Topology of Nativism" *Literary Theory : An Anthology.* Eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael Rayan. Massachusetts : Blackwell, 1998, 945-957

Aschcroft, Bill. "The Transformation of English Language in Postcolonial Literatures" Language and Semiotic Studies Journal, Vol., 1, No. 4, 2015, 80-94

Aschcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back : Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literature.* London and New York : Routledge, 2nd ed., 2002

Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture.* London. Routledge, 1994

Published in : SZENDE, Thomas ; BENSEKAT, Malika ; ROUBAI, Amine ; MASSOUD SRIDI, Iman (dir.), *Penser la didactique des langues/cultures, des littératures et de la traduction. Regards croisés*, Editions des archives contemporaines, ISBN : 9782813005953, doi : 10.17184/eac.9782813005953

Faqir, Fadia. *My Name is Salma*. London : Black Swan, 2007

Faqir, Fadia. "Granada : Migrations, Hybridity and Transcultural Encounters." *Adventuring in the Englishes : Language and Literature in a Postcolonial Globalized World*. Ed. Ikram Ahmed Elsherif and Piers Michael Smith. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013, 70-78

Faqir, Fadia. *Willow Trees Don't Weep*. Great Britain : Heron Boos, 2014

Foucault, Michel. Robert Hurley (trans.). *History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, Penguin, Hammondsworth, 1978

Ghandhi, Leela. *Postcolonial Theory : A Critical Introduction*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1998

Huddart, David. *Homi K. Bhabha*. Routledge & Taylor and Francis, Oxon, (2006)

Elsherif, A., Ikram. "English Literature of Literature in English : Appropriating the Language of the Colonizer" *Adventuring in the Englishes : Language and Literature in a Postcolonial Globalized World*. Ed. Ikram Ahmed Elsherif and Piers Michael Smith. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013, 39-54

Kanafani, Fay Afaf. "Preface" *Nadia Captive of Hope : Memoir of an Arab Woman*. New York and London : M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1999

Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Decolonizing the mind : The politics of Language in African Literature*. London : James Curry, 1981

Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight's Children*. New York : Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2006 (1981)

Rushdie, Salman. *The Satanic Verses*. New York : Viking Penguin Inc., (1989)

Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands : Essays and Criticism* 1981-91, London : Granta (1991)

Said, Edward. "Between Worlds : Edward Said Makes Sense of His Life" *London Review of Books*, 20 :9, 1998

Published in : SZENDE, Thomas ; BENSEKAT, Malika ; ROUBAI, Amine ; MASSOUD SRIDI, Iman (dir.), *Penser la didactique des langues/cultures, des littératures et de la traduction. Regards croisés*, Editions des archives contemporaines, ISBN : 9782813005953, doi : 10.17184/eac.9782813005953