

MENACING THE RACIST VOICES: READING SALMAN RUSHDIE'S REPRESENTATION OF THE MIGRANT EXPERIENCE IN QUICHOTTE

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ABSTRACT

A postmodern retelling of Cervantes' Don Quixote (1605), Rushdie's novel Quichotte (2019) engages with the migrant experience of life in contemporary America. It explores how immigrants of different racial and geographical origins in America are constantly subjected to racial abuse, violence and pushed to the peripheries of society. Rushdie suggests in the novel that the process of the marginalisation of immigrants is fuelled by racially motivated and artificially manufactured discourses which constantly seek to demonise the immigrants. In other words, for Rushdie, it is the racist descriptions of the immigrants by the white society, which perpetuate racism and marginalisation of the immigrant communities. Hence, for him, the first step to countering racism and the process of marginalisation of immigrant communities is to seize and remake the very means itself i.e., the language by which such descriptions are manufactured and legitimised. This paper explores Rushdie's representation of the reclamation and assertion of identity by the immigrants through their redescription of the country in their own private language, which becomes an act of resistance and assertion of their rightful ownership of the country, of equal space, which the racist society denies them. Through a close textual analysis of Quichotte, this paper analyses how Rushdie remakes the English language and menaces its power of description by making his characters of Indian origin speak a language that indulges in intentional obscenities and liberties, mixing the standard English language with the vernacular, "Bambaiyya" and disrupting its syntactic and semantic structures as well.

Keywords: Racism, white supremacy, migrant experience, marginalisation, racialised space

INTRODUCTION

We have lost our tongues. We must be cowardly and tear our own tongues from our mouths.

- (Salman Rushdie in *Quichotte* 149)

This ain't a place for you.

- (Salman Rushdie in *Quichotte* 126)

In *Imaginary Homelands* (1991), Salman Rushdie stresses that “description is itself a political act”. Hence, for Rushdie, the first step towards changing one’s lived experience of reality is to redescribe it in one’s own language, “... redescribing a world is the necessary first step toward changing it” (*IH* 14). The following words of the manticore, the metamorphosed migrant, confined in a sanatorium in London in the novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988; henceforth *SV*) echo Rushdie’s sentiment as the creature whispers in pain and agony to Saladin Chamcha, a fellow inmate, “They describe us ... They have the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct” (*SV* 174). Drawing upon Richard Wright, a black American writer, Rushdie suggests in *Imaginary Homelands* that all racial conflicts have their origin in the incompatibility of the descriptions of reality. In other words, when the description of one community of itself and the world around contradicts the description of another community, conflict begins. Investigating into the origin of the fierce racial conflicts constantly plaguing America, Rushdie writes echoing Richard Wright, “... black and white Americans were engaged in a war over the nature of reality. Their descriptions were incompatible” (*IH* 13). Thus, for the author, describing is having power over the subject being described. In his novels, *The Satanic Verses* (1988) and *Quichotte* (2019), both of which are especially engaged in exploring the dynamics of racial oppression of the migrants of foreign origins in England in the 1970s and '80s and contemporary America, Rushdie underscores the role the English language plays in perpetuating racism and racial divides. Referring to the greater role the English language played in establishing and advancing racism as a “fully developed ideology” (*IH* 145), a by-product of British colonialism and colonial legacy, Rushdie observes in *Imaginary Homelands*:

... think about the ease with which the English language allows the terms of racial abuse to be coined: wog, frog, kraut, dago, spic, yid, coon, nigger, Argie. Can there be another language with so wide-ranging a vocabulary of racist denigration? (130)

LANGUAGE AND RACIST DISCOURSE:

In *The Satanic Verses* and *Quichotte* — both the texts engaging with the processes of racism and racial conflicts — Rushdie’s aim has been, much in the vein of what the authors of “rubble literature” (*IH* 273) did in the post Second World War period in Germany through a radical reformulation of language and the novel itself as an art form of creative expression, to point to the debasement of English language as a result of its use as a powerful tool for denigrating others. Just as the authors of “rubble literature” in Germany of the post-war period were required to remake and reimagine the language to recover it from the state of debasement owing to its use as a weapon by the fascist regime to advance racist propaganda, to wage wars and wreak havoc upon earth, Rushdie, too, in a way seems to be engaged in such a political act — to seize and reclaim the language, the language of power. Both novels revel in expressions of profanity and racial abuse to illustrate the debasement of the English language that has occurred in society and the role it plays in perpetuating racial divides through racist descriptions of the other. He takes hold of the language, the very weapon with which the white man wields power and domination over the people of colour, people of different racial, cultural and geographical origins. Rushdie stresses that “we cannot use the language in the way the British did; that it needs remaking for our own purposes. ... To conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free” (*IH* 17). Through a close textual analysis of *Quichotte* (henceforth *Q*), this paper explores how Rushdie remakes the English language and menaces its power of description by making his characters of Indian origin speak a language that indulges in intentional obscenities and liberties, mixing the standard English language with the vernacular, “Bambaiyya¹” (*Q* 153) and disrupting its syntactic and semantic structures. For the characters in *Quichotte*, who are subject to constant racial abuse and pushed to the margins of society for being racially different in America, “To redescribe the country in their private language was also to take ownership of it” (*Q* 152). Redescribing the country in their private language becomes an act of resistance and assertion of their rightful ownership of the country, of equal space which the racist society denies them.

Through his representation of numerous episodes of racist abuse and encounters that the characters of Indian origin in *Quichotte* experience through their journey across America, Salman Rushdie points to the alarming rise and popularity of the fascist right-wing ideology. He shows how the cities, metonymically representing the whole country itself, have increasingly become intolerant and racialised spaces². Rushdie suggests that the migrants live in a strange fictitious world, for the real world which they always think themselves to be inhabitants of, never recognises their existence. For Rushdie, the migrants seem to inhabit a

world that exists between the real and the unreal. The episodes of racist encounters represented in the novel suggest how real places can become completely unreal and foreign to the migrants even though they have always lived in them.

RACIST ENCOUNTERS IN THE NOVEL:

With a resolve to meet his love, Salma R., a famous television personality, Quichotte, an old man, an Indian-born immigrant in his seventies, undertakes a journey along with his imaginary son, Sancho, by car from the American Southwest all the way across to New York City, and then back again to California, which means both Quichotte and his son travel the country twice. It is through their journey across the country that Rushdie touches upon some of the most contemporary issues. The issue of white supremacy or racism is one of them. The racist encounters represented in the novel point to how American society has always been racially divided and how these divisions are cleverly exploited in contemporary times, which echo the era of the rise of the far-right as a political power in the country. The first incident of racist encounter occurs at Lake Capote, Colorado where Quichotte and Sancho stop for a while to map out their next route. The “lethal otherness of their skin” (Q 141), as Sancho would say, attracts constant hostility and racist abuse as the duo journeys towards their destination. The very presence itself of Quichotte and Sancho at Billy Diner in Tulsa, Oklahoma, seems to attract immediate suspicion and hostility from the white people, “... wherever they went there would be suspicion and hostility” (141). Sancho realises that the mere colour of his skin can make him “worthy of disapproval” (141), of racist abuses and insults. He suggests Quichotte to get out of the diner as fast as possible to avoid any untoward incident. Sancho reminds him, “They are looking at us like we’re ghosts, by which I don’t mean that we’re invisible, more that we’re spooking them. We’re the kind of ghosts people want to bust” (142). But Quichotte, an old man who often seems to live in a world of dreams and to be quite oblivious of his surroundings, rises to speak in his characteristic “declamatory manner” (141) of universal love and the growing intolerance in the world. This further worsens the condition, “The frowns were deeper, the eyes were blazing, the ears were burning, and there were fists, Sancho noted, that had begun to clench” (142). Billy, the owner of the diner appears to give Quichotte a “gentle warning”, “... you two are out of here in sixty seconds or less, otherwise one of these fine folks around you just might remove one of those guns of theirs from their holsters and utilize it, and the consequences would be bad for my décor” (143). He further adds, “I’ll have no talk of communism and Islam under my roof” and does not forget to remind Quichotte in a matter-of-fact manner, “You’re lucky I don’t shoot you myself” (143). Then follows a torrent of grotesque, repulsive and dehumanising racist insults hurled at Quichotte and Sancho at the

diner. What is striking is that the following sentences that describe these insults do not identify any of the persons hurling these abuses by name, which suggests how human beings cease to lose human identity, for they all become predatory beasts when they are overcome by hatred and violence:

“Fuck you,” said one of the mouths that were not, or not overly, full of food. “You look like somebody rubbed shit in your faces so deep you can’t wash it off.”

“Fuck you,” said another of the mouths. “Get out of my country and go back to your broke bigoted America-hating desert shitholes.

We’re gonna nuke you all.” “Fuck you,” said a third mouth whose ears had at least momentarily been listening. “And don’t you fucking talk about love when you so filled up with hate.”

“Fuck you,” a fourth mouth said, and this may have been a relative of the white lady at Lake Capote. “And where did you hide your turbans and fucking beards?” (143)

The next surreal episode of racist violence, based on Eugene Ionesco’s play *Rhinoceros* (1960), is a scathing attack by the author against the rise of white supremacy, the climate of growing intolerance and fascist tendencies in America. On their way to New York, Quichotte and Sancho stop at a motel in Berenger, New Jersey, where perfectly ordinary white people are, all of a sudden, seen to metamorphose into strange mastodons. The phenomenon of sudden transformation of people into mastodons rapidly takes the form of an epidemic and the epidemic has a name, *mastodonitis* (Q 185), as Quichotte and Sancho learn from Jonéscó, the owner of a motel. The unwillingness and inaction of the local authority to contain the spread of *mastodonitis* suggest certain political regimes’ calculated move to let racial divisions and hatred thrive unchecked in America for political gains.

The *mastodonitis* seems to have reached New York too. Even though people here have not physically transformed into mastodons, Sancho can see in them what he saw getting unleashed elsewhere on the way through his journey to New York City. Weary from a long journey and mentally disturbed by the unpleasant racist encounters on the way, Sancho begins to experience fits of delusions as he walks through the city streets after finally arriving in New York City. As he walks across the park at Madison, he encounters three middle-aged white men. He thinks he has noticed some strange collars with broken leashes around their necks. The three men accuse Sancho of staring at them and turn aggressive. The three white men pounce upon Sancho like “dogs that have broken their leashes” (Q 209). They hurl racist abuse

as they beat him almost to death:

“Extraordinary,” said the second man. “He compares us to dogs.”

“He thinks we *are* dogs,” the third man said, “dogs that have broken their leashes.”

“Savage, dangerous dogs that have been unleashed,” the first man said.

“Dogs frothing at the mouth,” the second man said. “Beware of the dogs, am I right?”

“Beware of the fucking dogs,” the third and first men said in unison.

“Because we have been fucking unleashed,” said the second man. (209)

The places of racist encounters, as the text relates, are thus spread across the whole of the country. As Quichotte and Sancho travel across the length and breadth of the country, they witness growing intolerance and xenophobia everywhere. Quichotte and Sancho’s encounter with dehumanising racist abuse wherever they went in the country indicates that the rise of racial intolerance in America is not limited to one particular city or state rather it has taken the form of an epidemic that the text sarcastically refers to as *mastodonitis*.

COUNTERING RACIST DISCOURSES:

Rushdie argues how all ideologies of dominance like white supremacy i.e., *mastodonitis* in America, as the text calls it, operate by taking hold of the language and culture of the dominated groups with which they define themselves and erasing them completely through various means. Then the dominant group imposes their language on the weaker communities, which becomes the language of power. In the novel, the migrant characters are seen to face hostility for merely speaking their native language in public places. The language of the migrants makes no sense to the white Americans and hence threatens their position of power. Being driven by the unrealistic and fantastic fear of the Other, the white American is always on vigil for any untoward invasion into their safe space. Speaking in a language by the migrant people, of which the white Americans cannot make any sense, disrupts their act of surveillance and thus, begins the white America’s insistence on speaking only the English language.

Quichotte and Sancho have faced hostility for speaking their own language. Speaking in a language that is incomprehensible to the white Americans adds to the immigrants’ ‘foreignness’. The white lady at Lake Capote, Colorado, who hurls racist abuse at the duo, is disturbed by their appearance as well as their language, “You got a bad foreign look to you ... sound foreign too” (126). This makes her declare, “This ain’t a place for you” (126). Sancho’s beloved, Beautiful from Beautiful tells him, “There is also the question of language. We are Telangana people, our language is Telugu. But we tell each other, do not speak Telugu where

others can hear. ... we are not safe. ... nowhere is safe” (149).

When Sancho discovers the sheer power and beauty of Bambahiyya tongue from his father, Quichotte, the language becomes a potential weapon for him to assert his ownership of the country that dehumanises and marginalises them. Bambahiyya, possessing the quality of the “harshness of life on the city streets”, is not a polite vernacular and has a strong disruptive quality to it. Thus, as the narrator explains, Sancho’s beloved, Beautiful, from the town of Beautiful, Kansas i.e., Beautiful from Beautiful becomes *Khoobsoorat sé Khoobsoorat*, in standard Hindustani language which could also mean “more beautiful than beautiful,” in English. But in Bambahiyya, “She was also *rawas*, “fantastic,” and *raapchick*, “hot”” (151).

Bambahiyya, being a language of the streets, has an inherent subversive power to it. It rejects the elitist insistence on refinement and sophistication of all sorts and menaces the position of power and authority. The narrator continues to elaborate on the disruptive power of the vernacular, “In Bambahiyya: A sexy girl was *maal*, literally “the goods”. A girlfriend was *fanti*. A young, hot, but unfortunately married woman was a *chicken tikka*” (152). Sancho is thrilled to discover the disruptive power of his father’s native language and so, tells Quichotte:

I want you to teach me your language ... The language you spoke back there. I want us to speak to each other in that language, especially in public, to defy the bastards who hate us for possessing another tongue. (150)

Thus, starts Sancho’s description of the foreign land in his private language. As Sancho and Quichotte stop to take a look at the university campus at Ann Arbor, Sancho notes, there is a “lot of *maal* walking around” (152). To which his father responds teasingly, “I thought you found yourself a *fanti* who is waiting for you back in Beautiful, ... Also that girl you’re looking at has a ring on her finger. She’s definitely *chicken tikka*, I’m sorry to inform you” (152). Sancho adds excitedly, “And that girl over there ... is a carrom board”, which means she is “flat-chested” (152). Sancho’s use of his father’s tongue to describe public spaces that do not allow the use of it is an act of resistance, an act of “linguistic possession” (153). “To redescribe the country in their private language” also implies taking “ownership of it” (152):

Their linguistic act of possession made the country begin to make sense again. The random spatial and temporal dislocations stopped. The world settled down and gave Sancho the illusion, at least, of comprehensibility. (153)

It is a means for Sancho to overcome the “error in space and time” that he, including his father, Quichotte, experiences after their first unpleasant racist encounter at Lake Capote in Colorado. Rejecting the language that has been used to define and dehumanise immigrants is an act of resistance. In one of the essays titled “Truth” in his latest book of non-fiction, *Languages of*

Truth (2021), Salman Rushdie notes how the authors of what was called *Trümmerliteratur*, “rubble literature” in Germany after the Second World War, perceived the need to rebuild their language from the scratch, for the language was left polluted by Nazism. It was left in a state of ruins much like the bombed cities that needed to be rebuilt (214). Thus, the authors of “rubble literature” by engaging in rebuilding their language were essentially rebuilding or reconstructing reality and truth from the ground up. Similarly, for Sancho, the first step to countering the white man’s racist description of the immigrant community is to reject the very language that has been used to manufacture such dehumanising descriptions of reality and truth. Replacing the language of the oppressor with one’s own language is taking control of the very weapon used for such oppression. Sancho realises, “why the racists want everyone to speak only English,” (152). It is because “They don’t want these other words to have rights over the land” (152). For Sancho, learning Bumbaiyya is an assertion of his roots and his self-identity. It is also an act of resistance because speaking in a language in which he is not allowed to speak is refusing to accept his helpless predicament of which his beloved, Beautiful, speaks in one of her deeply anguished statements, “We have lost our tongues. We must be cowardly and tear our own tongues from our mouths” (149). Sancho’s learning of the Bumbaiyya language makes him feel to be part of the community, of the land from where Quichotte, his father, hails. It is through this language that Sancho registers his first voice of protest against the three white men in New York City, who beat him for allegedly staring at them. Although inaudible to the perpetrators because of his weak voice as a result of extreme exhaustion caused by the injuries and violent physical abuse, Sancho protests, ““*Chimaats!*” he called after them. “*Khajvuas!*”” (Q 210), meaning “weird looking” “guy[s] who scratch [their] balls” (Q 152) respectively.

CONCLUSION:

Thus, for Rushdie, Quichotte and Sancho's defiance against racial abuse and discrimination, their reimagining of the nation using their own private language, represents an act of resistance and a political statement. Through this courageous and subversive act, they embark on a journey as immigrant citizens, initiating a transformation in the everyday reality of life in a foreign land that persistently marginalizes them.

NOTES

1. Bumbaiyya: It is a local variant of Hindi spoken in the city of Bombay. Drawing heavily from diverse Indian languages, Bumbaiyya vernacular has an eclectic quality to it and is often regarded as the language of the streets, of the uncivilized and the uncouth. The very nature of

Bambaiyya, a hybrid product of the coming together of different cultures and languages in the cosmopolitan city of Bombay, seems to inherently resist all purist insistences on linguistic and cultural purism.

2. Racialised space: The term is used by the scholars engaged in understanding the concept of race and racism from spatial perspectives. Scholars seeking to explore the intrinsic connection between race and space use the term *racialised space* to designate the processes through which particular spaces come to be defined in racial terms. The expression *racialised space*, quite obviously, takes its meaning from the word ‘racialisation’ which broadly refers to the “ways of thinking about race as well as to institutional processes that give expression to forms of ethno-racial categorization” (Murji and Solomos 3). Thus, the term *racialised space* refers to any physical location, attributed with particular sets of meanings, values, qualities that come to define the people who happen to inhabit such physical location.

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