

*Mixed-Up, Jumble-Aya, and English:
“How Newness Enters the World”
in Salman Rushdie’s “The Courter”*

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AS A WRITER, Salman Rushdie is claimed by the critics of both India and Britain, celebrated for revitalizing not only the Indian novel in English, but the British novel as well.¹ The slim collection of short stories Rushdie published in 1994 under the title *East, West* tellingly illuminates his own sense of his location — or his resistance to confinement in any one location (and in the process calls into question the whole practice of categorizing writers according to geographical origin or domicile). In its title and structure, *East, West* enacts a small parable of identity both divided and fused. The book consists of three sections — one headed “East,” one headed “West,” and finally a section with the same title as the book, “East, West.” Commenting on this tripartite structure, David Isaacson suggests that Rushdie “deliberately marks the differences between the esthetic traditions of East and West. The three Oriental tales are excellent parables while the three Occidental stories indulge the avant-garde. . . . The final three contributions synthesize the two styles.” Terry Eagleton, however, sees a more complex and troubled relationship between East and West in this volume than Isaacson’s reductive (and implausible) final synthesis: although he proposes that the comma in the title “forms a bridge as well as marking a gap,” Eagleton concludes that “if the two hemispheres can meet, it is not in fusion or harmony but in that creative impasse or undecidability which is known to the rhetoricians as ‘aporia.’”

My project here is an analysis of the story that functions as a capstone both of the collection’s final section and of the collection as a whole, “The Courter.” “The Courter” is a story about migrants and foreigners — people who “shift location” (210) —

set in London in the early 1960s. It is a story about displacements, conflicted loyalties, misprisions of identity, and failures of communication — yet it celebrates connection across the boundaries of race, nation, and language, and asserts the possibility of an identity that is not single but resolutely divided. As interesting as the fractured identities in “The Courter” — and intimately connected to them — is the fracturing of language within the story. All the central characters have problems with English — with standard English as spoken in England — and there are recurrent instances of mistakes and miscommunications: the relationship between writing and speech is troubled, sounds go astray in the mispronunciations of “non-native” speakers, connections between words and things are disrupted, meaning is lost — and sometimes transformative new meanings are formed from the fragments of the English thus broken. “Mistakes” in English, then, are not always harmful and disruptive: they may serendipitously bring about a new understanding, a new reality.

“How does newness come into the world? How is it born?” Rushdie asks elsewhere, “Of what fusions, translations, conjoinings is it made?” (*Satanic Verses* 8). In “The Courter,” newness is brought into the world by means of broken English.

Like Rushdie himself, the unnamed narrator of “The Courter” turned fifteen in the summer of 1962 and seventeen in the summer of 1964, during which period author and narrator alike were at boarding school in England. In the story, the narrator’s family — his parents, his three sisters, and the ayah, Mary — is also in England during this time, having arrived from Bombay for an extended visit (Rushdie’s own parents and three sisters similarly followed him to England in 1962 and stayed for two years before his father decided to move to Pakistan²). They live in Kensington, in a block of flats called Waverley House, whose other tenants include “not one but two Indian Maharajas” (182). It is the hall porter at Waverley House who is the unlikely hero of the story.

The porter’s name is foreign, Eastern European, difficult, which moves the narrator and his sisters to fantastic speculation:

His real name was Mecir: you were supposed to say Mishirsh because it had invisible accents on it in some Iron Curtain language in which the accents had to be invisible, my sister Durré said solemnly, in case somebody spied on them or rubbed them out or something. His first name also began with an m but it was so full of what we called Communist consonants, all those z's and c's and w's walled up together without vowels to give them breathing space, that I never even tried to learn it. (178–79)

The pronunciation of "Mecir" disrupts English-based expectations of sound-symbol relationships. Fourteen-year-old Durré, aware of the power of diacritical marks to modify these relationships,³ tries to rationalize the pronunciation "Mishirsh" by positing "invisible accents" — but must then explain their invisibility in terms of secrecy and conspiracies behind the Iron Curtain. The siblings are themselves presumably bilingual in English and Urdu, but this does not diminish their discomfort at the alienness of the porter's Slavic name, their propensity to link linguistic features with cultural and political attributes — as in the vision of "Communist consonants" as oppressed citizens "walled up" and deprived of the free "breathing space" of vowels — or their wild attempts to explain away the illogic of language. Their next speculation suggests the magical power of linguistic transformations:

At first we thought of nicknaming him after a mischievous little comic-book character, Mr Mxyzplk from the Fifth Dimension, who looked a bit like Elmer Fudd and used to make Superman's life hell until ole Supe could trick him into saying his name backwards, Klptzyxm, whereupon he disappeared back into the Fifth Dimension; but because we weren't too sure how to say Mxyzplk (not to mention Klptzyxm) we dropped that idea. "We'll just call you Mixed-Up," I told him in the end, to simplify life. "Mishter Mikshed-Up Mishirsh." (179)

"Mxyzplk" is an extreme and fantastical version of Mr Mecir's consonant-rich first name; said backwards, according to the comic-book, it has the uncanny power to make the character it names disappear. This vulgarized comic-book contrivance in fact taps into widespread beliefs in the mystical power and sanctity of words, above all of names, and in the transformative potential of *changing* a name. The definition of "Name" in the

Oxford Companion to the English Language is as follows: "In many societies, especially in the past, people's names have been regarded as closely linked with their owners' inmost natures. They are often intimately associated with those to whom they refer and in a non-rational way are considered to possess great power" (McArthur). In "The Courter" the power of names is realized.

When the narrator, unable to say either Mr Mecir's actual first name — "I never even tried to learn it" — or Mxyztplk, resorts to calling the porter "Mixed-Up," he evokes more than the alien consonant combinations of the porter's real name. Mr Mecir *is* mixed up; a stroke "had broken his tongue long ago" (205); "his mind turned to rubble" (193), he is often "lost . . . for words" (194). The appellation is thoughtlessly and arrogantly cruel ("I was fifteen then and bursting with unemployed cock and it meant I could say things like that right into people's faces" [179]). On another level, however, "mixed up" can be seen as having positive associations; arguably, only an unreasonable prejudice against mixing makes the epithet seem like an insult in the first place. This story, like virtually all of Rushdie's work, rejects notions of pure origins and authenticity in favor of the impure, the hybrid, the mongrel, and the mixed. What Rushdie says of his *Satanic Verses* (echoing the question within that book about how newness enters the world) is true of his work in general: it

celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. Mélange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is *how newness enters the world*. It is the great possibility that mass migration gives the world, and I have tried to embrace it. ("In Good Faith" 394; Rushdie's emphasis)

In light of this ringing affirmation, the name "Mixed-Up" can be seen as not an insult but a tribute; as such it is linked to a central theme in "The Courter." This valorization of mixtures and mongrelization, however, was hardly in the mind of the boy who was fifteen in 1962, and in the immediate context of that time the casually bestowed epithet serves to obscure and limit the porter's identity.

Mr Mecir is not the only character to go by a name that is false, misleading, or otherwise anomalous. The "sort-of-cousin" after whom the narrator lusts is known to him by her Indian name of Chandni, but at the folk-music hangout Bunjie's "she answered to the name of Moonlight, which is what Chandni means" (187). The two maharajas are almost, but not quite, anonymous: in identifying them as the Maharaja of B— and the Maharaja of P—, Rushdie appropriates the device, common in English novels of an earlier time, of suppressing the full name of what is supposed to be a real place (why else would it need to be concealed?). In this context, the device implicitly — and implausibly, in the case of readers located in Britain or the US — claims that the names of the realms over which these maharajas rule would, if revealed, be recognizable; in mildly parodic fashion, it sets the maharajas alongside the British noblemen who rule over fictional domains identified only by a initial capital letter and a dash. Then the Maharaja of B— adopts a pseudonym of his own for the purposes of his assignations with prostitutes. To escape his wife, he makes phone-calls from the call-box in the porter's room: "Yes, bring all appliances. Room is booked in name of Mr Douglas Home" (189–90). Sir Alec Douglas-Home was of course the Conservative Prime Minister of Britain from 1963 to 1964.⁴

There is only one named native-born English character in "The Courter." This is a British peer and Field Marshal, "an old India hand and friend of the family who was supporting my application for British citizenship." His name, we are told, is Sir Charles Lutwidge-Dodgson. As the Maharaja's pseudonym is minimally distinguished from the name of the Prime Minister by the absence of a hyphen, so the addition of a hyphen transforms the name of the man better known as Lewis Carroll into the name of Rushdie's "old India hand." Other small details point variously to Carroll/Dodgson himself and to the fantasy worlds he invented: the Field Marshal's housekeeper is called Mrs Liddell; he himself is known as "the Dodo"; he has a passion for chess; and his cottage in Beccles, Suffolk, features a rose-garden, croquet hoops, and "sepia photographs" (191).

Apart from the names that characters claim for themselves — whether to conceal an old identity or invent a new one — or

that their author bestows on them, characters generate a number of nicknames for one another. Such, of course, is “Mixed-Up.” The narrator and his siblings inventively and irreverently ring the changes on several other names, too — truncating, extending, generally de-mystifying. They call Superman “ole Supe” (179), as we have seen, and their infant sister, Scheherazade, “Scare-Zade” (182, 202). To Mary the ayah, Durré awards a punning portmanteau name, “Jumble-Aya” — “it’s Jumble-Aya who’s fallen for Mixed-Up,” she cries (181) — linking Mary and Mr Mecir not only romantically, but as akin in their confusion, *jambalaya* being famously a multi-ingredient creole dish akin to the *mélanges* and hotchpotches Rushdie values so highly.⁵

The narrator’s insistence that “Aya” is what “we had always called Mary, palindromically dropping the ‘h’” (178) is at first puzzling. What effect can “dropping the ‘h’” possibly have on this word?⁶ This dropped “h,” which has nothing to do with the way the word is said, seems to have an imaginary status comparable to the “invisible accents” the children imagine in Mr Mecir’s name — and this in fact is the clue. The invisible, imaginary excess in each of their names hints at some possibility in them that exceeds the confines of naming, language, and the narrow identities these define. In each case, moreover, names are reversible — the palindromic “Aya” and the comic-book Mxyzt-plk/Klptzyxm — a sign of the transformations these two elderly people will undergo. The jumbling and mixing-up of language, rearrangements of the elements of names and the metamorphoses these entail — “the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations,” as Rushdie puts it in the passage quoted earlier — are what this story is about.

Other new names are coined in a different spirit from the young people’s antic word-play. The porter sees the ayah as anything but Jumble-Aya:

He began thinking of her as Certainly-Mary because she never said plain yes or no; always this O-yes-certainly or no-certainly-not. In the confused circumstances that had prevailed ever since his brain, his one sure thing, had let him down, he could hardly be certain of anything any more; so he was stunned by her sureness, first into nostalgia, then envy, then attraction. (176)

Mary's way of speaking earns her Mr Mecir's admiration and a new name. And the ayah in turn gives Mr Mecir a name that transforms him — but this is done inadvertently, not as a conscious renaming but as a consequence of her difficulties with English.

At the fault line where different languages — or even different varieties of the same language — meet, communication is beset by hazards. Even when meaning is successfully transmitted, there are inevitable mismatches between two different ways of carving up and labeling the world, and the message conveyed may be quite different from that intended — with potentially disastrous consequences. "Abba," the father of the family, goes to the pharmacy to buy supplies for his infant daughter and is slapped in the face when he asks the large-breasted shop assistant if she has any nipples. "[H]ere they call them teats," explains Durré, ever-knowledgeable at fourteen. "But how shameful!" protests her mother, blushing, "The same word as for what's on your bosoms?" (184). In Indian English, "teats" are made of flesh — and the word is accordingly taboo — while the rubber substitutes on baby bottles are known as "nipples"; in England the reverse is true. (In the US "nipples" applies indifferently and immodestly to either.) "[I]n the general hilarity," the narrator confesses, "I was able to conceal the shaming truth that I, who had been in England for so long, would have made the same mistake as Abba did." He admits that he too

had trouble with the English language. My schoolfellows tittered when in my Bombay way I said "brought-up" for upbringing (as in "where was your brought-up?") and "thrice" for three times and "quarter-plate" for side-plate and "macaroni" for pasta in general. As for learning the difference between nipples and teats, I really hadn't had any opportunities to increase my word power in that area at all. (185)

Mr Mecir has his own difficulties with English, those that may be due to his own Slavic first language compounded by the effects of his stroke. When he first rings the doorbell, carrying a bunch of roses, he explains haltingly, "I, to see Miss Mary, come, am" (186). And the illiterate Mary herself finds English considerably more of a challenge than do her educated employers:

English was hard for Certainly-Mary, and this was a part of what drew damaged old Mixed-Up towards her. The letter p was a particular problem, often turning into an f or a c; when she proceeded through the lobby with a wheeled wicker shopping basket, she would say, "Going shocking," and when, on her return, he offered to help lift the basket up the front ghats, she would answer, "Yes, fleas." (176)

But if encounters in the contact zone between languages are hazardous, threatening to dissipate or distort meaning if not to annihilate it altogether, exposing one at least to mockery, at worst to violent assault, these encounters can also serendipitously reveal unexpected correspondences across languages: words and meanings can fuse as well as fissure. "Mixed-Up" Mecir watches the tiny Mary toil up the front steps of Waverley House and thinks of mountains — thinks at first of Alps and then makes an effort to think of the mountains that would be familiar to Mary, retrieving finally "from a schoolboy atlas long ago, when India felt as far way as Paradise" the right word:

"Ghats," he said proudly. . . . "Western Ghats, Eastern Ghats, and now Kensington Ghats," he said, giggling. "Mountains."

She stopped in front of him in the oak-panelled lobby. "But ghats in India are also stairs," she said. "Yes yes certainly. For instance in Hindu holy city of Varanasi, where the Brahmins sit taking the pilgrims' money is called Dasashwamedh-Ghat. Broad-broad staircase down to River Ganga. . . ." (175)

The porter's metaphoric image equating mountains and stairs is an intrinsic part of Hindi, where *ghat* refers to both; in his aleatory association between the two, he sees the world as it is seen through the medium of Hindi.

And then, of course, there is the mispronunciation that gives the story its title and Mr Mecir a transformative new identity. Mary's vagrant p's — that "knew their place" in Hindi and Konkani, but turn into /f/ and /k/ sounds in English — metamorphose the porter into a "courter." Thanking him for his help with the shopping basket, she calls out through the elevator grille, "Oé, courter! Thank you, courter. O yes, certainly" (176). Her accidental renaming, with its "unintentional but prophetic overtones of romance" (178), stirs him:

So: thanks to her unexpected, somehow stomach-churning magic, he was no longer porter, but courter. "Courter," he repeated to the mirror when she had gone. His breath made a little dwindling picture of the word on the glass. "Courter courter caught." Okay. People called him many things, he did not mind. But this name, this courter, this he would try to be. (177)

In Bakhtinian terms, Mary's "hybridizing" of an English word generates that "interillumination of languages" which is at the heart of "novelness"⁷ (not only Bakhtin's concept of the heteroglossic qualities that define the novel, one might add, but Rushdie's "newness"). Mistakes and mispronunciations — English words hybridized by the habits of a foreign tongue — not only dissipate and fracture meaning, but can generate a surplus of meaning, can even engender a new meaning and a new reality. In this story, both people and the elements of language "shift location," do not know "their place" (as with Mary's p's), undergo metamorphoses — linguistic changes and transformations in human identity reciprocally influencing each other. A crucial element in this process of creating "novelness" is Mr Mecir's receptiveness to "interillumination," his willingness to be re-defined by Mary's hybridized speech.

As their romance blossoms, the ayah spends her afternoons off with Mr Mecir. He shows her London, and they share tea and crumpets in his lounge. They watch the Flintstones on television; Mary compares Fred and Wilma Flintstone to her employers, the "Sahib and Begum Sahiba," and the courter suggests that he and the ayah are like Barney and Betty Rubble (189, 190) — a connection echoed in the notion that "his mind [has] turned to rubble" (193) and other images evoking confusion and dissolution. The narrator, however, notes, "they were not really like Barney and Betty Rubble at all. They were formal, polite. They were . . . *courtly*" (190; Rushdie's ellipsis and emphasis).

Mr Mecir trounces the narrator at chess:

"Who are you?" I demanded, humiliation weighing down every syllable. "The devil in disguise?"

Mixed-Up gave his big, silly grin. "Grand Master," he said. "Long time. Before head." (192)

An older identity here emerges from beneath the layerings of names: the courier, Mixed-Up, Mr Mxyztplk from the Fifth Dimension, the “devil in disguise,” is a Grand Master whose name is recorded in the chess books. He teaches Mary to play — she too defeats the narrator — and between the elderly couple chess becomes a “private language. Old Mixed-Up, lost as he was for words, retained, on the chessboard, much of the articulacy and subtlety which had vanished from his speech” (194).

Meanwhile, the narrator’s own quest for romance — and sex — is unsuccessful. He survives mumps. Both maharajas are avoiding vengeful pursuers: the sporting young Maharaja of P— has gambling debts; the “older, uglier” (189) Maharaja of B— is being tracked down by the protectors of one of the women with whom he has had an appliance-assisted encounter. The porter, left to fend the pursuers off with lies about the maharajas’ whereabouts, is assaulted by the thugs who are after Prince P—; the more urbane types on the track of Prince B— leave an ominous message. There is violence within the narrator’s family, too: his eleven-year-old sister Muneeza engages in dreadful battles with her father, the two of them sharing the same “black rage” (201). “As I witnessed their wars,” the narrator reflects, “I felt myself coming unstuck from the idea of family itself.” He dreams of the British passport that will enable him to get away from his father; “At sixteen,” the older man who looks back on the boy comments, “you still think you can escape from your father” (202).

Then comes the dramatic climax of the story. The wily strategists on the track of the Maharaja of B— see two Indian women returning to Waverley House with a toddler and apparently assume these are the womenfolk of the maharaja — though in fact they are the narrator’s mother and Aya Mary, with Scheherazade. The men, who have Beatles haircuts, ignore the mother’s blushing denials (she is flattered to be taken for a maharani) — “Incognito, eh,” one says with a wink. “Your husband seeks ladies, madam,” they inform her, “Most assiduously, may I add” (204). “One of the ladies he sought out was our ward, as you might say,” says the first, and the other interrupts, “Your husband . . . damaged the goods. Do you hear me, Queenie? He

damaged the fucking goods." A knife is produced, and racist venom spews forth:

"Fucking wogs," he said. "You fucking come over here, you don't fucking know how to fucking behave. Why don't you fucking fuck off to fucking Wogistan? Fuck your fucking wog arses. Now then," he added in a quiet voice, holding up the knife, "unbutton your blouses." (204)

A false identity has been imposed on the two women, whether because the thugs actually do take the mother for the Maharani or because they are willing to accept any Indian woman as their target. Because the Maharaja is alleged to have injured the prostitute for whom these men are pimps — to have "damaged the goods," as they chillingly put it — their intention is evidently to damage the Maharaja's "property" in return: they are not content simply to stab the women, but insist that they unbutton their blouses, presumably so that their breasts will be exposed to the knife, either so that the pimps can replicate the "damage" caused to their "ward," or simply for the purpose of sexual humiliation.

At this point the porter rushes out, trying desperately to speak, but at first for all his "agony of effort" producing only "raw, unshaped noise." Then

something happened inside old Mixed-Up; something popped, and in a great rush he gabbled, "Sirs sirs no sirs these not B— women sirs B— women upstairs on floor three sirs Maharaja of B— also sirs God's truth mother's grave swear." It was the longest sentence he had spoken since the stroke that had broken his tongue long ago.⁸
(205)

The "Beatles" retreat; instead of the women, it is the porter who receives the knife and is left bleeding on the ground. (He will recover, but will be "no longer himself" [209].)

There has been a double substitution: the racist and sexist logic of the pimps selects the mother and Mary to receive the vengeance due the Maharaja; because he loves Mary, the porter — the courter — risks himself in their place. The dangerous sexual proclivities of a maharaja, the perverted workings of two pimps' scheme to punish him, a love engendered by an errant phoneme in the fractured English of the beloved — all these

are links in the chain of events leading to the moment when Mr Mecir lies bleeding on the pavement. At the beginning, he looked into a mirror and imagined himself a courier; Lutwidge-Dodgson's cameo appearance later in the text reminds us that one may pass through a mirror, transcending the self reflected there, to enter another country. Like Mr Mxyztplk, the porter is propelled by a change in his name into another dimension.

Lutwidge-Dodgson helps the narrator pass through a mirror into another country, too: by the end of the story he has his British citizenship.⁹ Shortly before this, he found an American boy at his school weeping over President Kennedy's assassination. "When the President dies, the nation is orphaned," weeps the American; "I know how you feel," the narrator responds. "My father just died, too" (208). He is, he says, lying — and indeed his father is still alive. Yet there is a complex underlying truth here. A British passport is linked in his mind with escaping his father, as we have seen: forsaking one's nation means both literally and metaphorically severing links with one's family, too.

Mary develops heart trouble, says she is homesick, and returns to Bombay. The narrator has his own theory of what ails her:

was it that her heart, roped by two different loves, was being pulled both East and West, whinnying and rearing, like those movie horses being yanked this way by Clark Gable and that way by Montgomery Clift, and she knew that to live she would have to choose? (209)

He himself feels the same pulls. Writing now — on the last page of the story and the book — not as a teenager, but as an adult looking back on his life, he concludes:

the passport did, in many ways, set me free. It allowed me to come and go, to make choices that were not the ones my father would have wished. But I, too, have ropes around my neck, I have them to this day, pulling me this way and that, East and West, the nooses tightening, commanding, *choose, choose*.

I buck, I snort, I whinny, I rear, I kick. Ropes, I do not choose between you. Lassocs, lariats, I choose neither of you, and both. Do you hear? I refuse to choose. (211)

And so ends this story of East and West, of love and hate, of layered and fractured and mistaken identities, of cross-cultural

conflict and communication and caring, of the hazards and the transformative potential of an English remade by other tongues.¹⁰

That, at least, is a first reading. "The Courter" is an uncharacteristically sentimental work for Rushdie. Its charm is hard to resist: the affirmation of hybrid and divided migrant identities, the innocent love between two outsiders who communicate in faltering English, the transformative mispronunciation, Rushdie's own resonant refusal, on the last page, to choose between East and West.¹¹ More than the story itself, it is the position Rushdie has assigned it that requires us to reexamine it. Within the collection *East, West* "The Courter" concludes the third and final section, whose bidirectional title "East, West" is also the title of the book. "The Courter" thus stands doubly under the sign of this conjunction of opposites, and its position in the volume presents it as the last word on East-West relations.¹²

Not choosing East *or* West, but both East *and* West: so proclaims the volume, its final section, "The Courter" as a whole, and — and most ringingly — the authorial refusal to choose on its last page. But the linear sequentiality of language conveys a different message: the title "East, West" and the tripartite structure of the book say *first* East, *then* West. The East is where things begin: the West is where the future unfolds. Spatial constraints are relevant, too: one cannot be in two places — East and West — at the same time. The "East" stories are set in India late in the twentieth century. The three "West" stories, however, are widely dispersed in space and time.¹³ Significantly, the "East, West" stories are all set in England (except for the final episode — three pages out of the story's twenty-three — of "Chekov and Zulu"), though most of the main characters are Indians.¹⁴ This "East, West" section, that is, is specifically about the East *within* the West.

Reexamining "The Courter," one notes some fault lines. Alas, a linguist would find the actual pronunciation "courter" implausible, given what we know of Mary's speech patterns.¹⁵ The leap on the last page from Mary's bucking heart to the imagined ropes around the narrator's own neck seems a sleight of hand — even, cynics might charge, a manipulative attempt

to gain sympathy for the schoolboy by piggy-backing his plight onto the ayah's. Each of these two does in effect make a choice between East and West, after all, and his is the opposite of hers. Mary chooses to return to Bombay, where she lives to be at least ninety-one (210). The narrator, by contrast, becomes a British citizen, amazingly, at the age of seventeen. In neither the ayah's case nor the boy's, moreover, do we have any sense of what it is in the East that tugs at the heart.

There is in fact barely a trace of "the East" — of India — in this story. Mary tells Mr Mecir about the Ghats, and we know she wears a sari;¹⁶ we learn fleetingly that Chandni "was training to be an Indian classical dancer, Odissi as well as Natyam" (187) — and, what's more, she is described in a hybrid simile invoking an Indian goddess: "She was a teenage dream, the Moon River come to Earth like the Goddess Ganga" (188). That is the sum of Chandni's mythic Eastern significance, however — otherwise, she wears "tight black jeans and a clinging black polo-neck jumper" and hangs out at a folk-music joint (187) — and of direct allusions to the East. Against these faint traces, there are a wealth of other cultural references: The reading matter in Abba's office consists of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and *Reader's Digests* (183); besides Lewis Carroll and his Alice books, there are references to *Gulliver's Travels* (191), to the statue of Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens (188), and to the Minotaur (183). London shops are named — "Barkers and Pontings and Derry & Toms" (188) — advertisements on the Underground escalators quoted (186), and brands named — Rolex (189), Johnny Walker Red Label (182), Coke (187), Ford Zodiac (210), Studebaker (196).¹⁷ The family even celebrates Christmas, with a decorated tree and carols; it must be said, however, that the celebration is not so much an index of assimilation to British culture as a special gesture to comfort the ailing Mary, who is a Goan Christian ("It was so odd to see a Christmas tree at our place that I realised things must be fairly serious") (207). There isn't a single reference to the most popular contemporary signifier of Indianness — Indian food:¹⁸ no chutneys or curries or samosas, no koftas or kormas or jalebis. (Characters eat carry-out Chinese dumplings [176], sandwiches [187, 209], and

toasted crumpets with "chimpanzee tea" [188].¹⁹) References to popular culture are pervasive: the Flintstones, Elmer Fudd, Superman, the film *The Misfits*, and various sports — football games (187), rugby teams (207), tennis whites (189). The early sixties make their mark in details of hair and clothing, among others: the fourteen-year-old Durré has a beehive (180); one pair of thugs sport Beatles haircuts and collarless jackets (203); the other two "have long hair . . . like Mick Jagger's" (198). The pop songs of the time thread their way through the story: little Scheherazade is serenaded with "recent hits by Chubby Checker, Neil Sedaka, Elvis and Pat Boone" — Durré having decreed "No nursery rhymes" (180), and the appellation "Jumble-Aya" comes from the song the siblings launch into — "we segued right into a quick me-oh-my-oh; son of a gun, we had big fun" (181). The narrator knows how the Four Seasons felt singing *She-E-rry, won't you come out tonight?* (188) and shares Sam Cooke's "Saturday night" lament — "how-I-wishing I had someone, etc., and generally feeling in a pretty goddamn dreadful way" (197). At least a dozen popular songs and singers are named or quoted.

What then of "hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs," to repeat Rushdie's clarion call for "newness"? There is intermingling in "The Courter" — notably of high and popular culture, of influences from Britain and the US — but "the East" figures only minimally in the mix. Let me stress that I have not carried out this bizarre enterprise of tallying up cultural references to launch a criticism of "The Courter" in itself. None of this affects the story's appeal, and it would be ludicrous to suggest that it would be a better story if, say, Mary cooked gulab jamuns or Durré played the sitar. Such thinking would reintroduce on another level what Rushdie has called "the bogey of Authenticity . . . the respectable child of old-fashioned exoticism" ("Commonwealth Literature" 67) — renouncing the demand for pure, authentic, indigenous culture only to demand that the hybrid hotchpotch include culturally authentic ingredients. What can be questioned is the placement of the story, the title "East, West"

— of section and book — that labels it, and the ideological freight this positioning assigns to it. “The Courter” remains a story of border-crossing, of complex identities, of transformation: what it does not seem to be, in any convincing sense, is a story of either the union or the duality of East and West.

And yet: There is one site at which the East does emerge frequently within “The Courter,” and this is in its language. Most names are of course distinctively un-English (with the notable exception of “Mary”²⁰), as are associated titles and modes of address: “Abba” and “Amma” (repeatedly), “Sahib and Begum Sahiba,” “baba,” “Chhoti Scheherazade,” “the Maharani Begum” (189, 195, 202, 204). Beyond this, the speech of several characters is marked by languages other than English. The narrator’s mother exclaims “Hai! Allah-tobah!” (183) and places “but” in sentence-final position: “She has been having heart trouble. Palpitations. Not all the time, but” (207). The English of the Maharaja of P — is choppy, almost entirely without articles (“You have printed rate card? Please. Also a two-foot ruler, must be wooden. Frilly apron, plus.” [190]), and peppered with expressions in his native tongue (“Suno,” “samajh liya,” “accha” [198]). Apart from her errant p’s, Mary’s English is inflected in other ways by her linguistic background; she uses a number of Indian English locutions (“What is it, na?” [193], “a big-big discovery” [195], “God knows for what-all we came over to this country” [209]), and under stress falls out of English altogether: when her sari gets caught in an escalator, she cries out “O BAAP! BAAPU-RÉ! BAAP-RÉ-BAAP-RÉ-BAAP!” (186), and in response to an anti-immigrant diatribe on television she flaps her hand and says “Khali-pili bom marta” (189).

There are then traces of the East — of India — throughout the story, not in cultural artifacts and practices, but in the very stuff of which it is made, its language. The paucity of other signs of “the East” means that language takes on even more significance than was initially apparent: language in “The Courter” is the prime site not only of change, but also of hybridity. To set this in perspective, we should remember that the story is told entirely in English; except for these traces, all the dialogue is in

English, too.²¹ In location and in language, the substance of the story is unquestionably English — but the traces of other languages spread their tinge through that substance, so that it is an un-English Englishness, an English made new.

This un-English English is central to Salman Rushdie's achievement as a writer. The boy who was mocked at Rugby for such Indianisms as "quarter-plate" became a writer who would disrupt and transform the English language. He would of course learn the word "side-plate" along with all the other nuances and conventions of standard, formal, and literary English — but he would not forget "quarter-plate" or "Hai! Allah-tobah!" or "Khali-pili bom marta"; in his fiction he would consistently make imaginative use of such tokens of linguistic alterity, capturing the distinctive speech of speakers of many languages and engaging in a variety of creative wordplay. That Rushdie has extended the English language is attested by the inclusion of twenty citations from his work in the OED (eleven of these in the second edition, and further nine in the new edition available online). In "The Courter," however, Rushdie implicitly claims not only that the language of migrants and foreigners can change the English language, but that it can change the world.

As Eagleton points out, in this story "textual violence" — violating the conventions of standard English — "can issue in the real thing": Abba's nipples question invites an assault, "and a more sinister racial violence is to follow." But this is not the only way in which language has material consequences in the world: in the love between Jumble-Aya and Mixed-Up Mecir, there is also the hopeful vision of broken English engendering new and positive realities, of the transformative power of the Bakhtinian interillumination of languages. Among all the boundaries that divide East and West, the language barrier seems here to be the most permeable; it is language that best allows one to be in two places at once, that holds out the hope of bringing together East and West, that enacts the possibility of transnationalism.²²

NOTES

¹ Viney Kirpal, editor of *The New Indian Novel in English: A Study of the 1980s*, identifies Rushdie as the "new talent" for which the Indian novel in English had

been waiting and sees his breakthrough *Midnight's Children* as making "a tremendous impact on a whole generation of writers," stimulating a "creative outburst" (Introduction xiii, xix). Una Chaudhuri acclaims Rushdie's "recognition and enactment of the specificity of a certain kind of consciousness: Indian, post-colonial — 'mine'"; she notes that "other writers have joined Rushdie in showering with more and more details the field he has laid out," while "South Asian readers . . . have begun to soak up these details, to collect them into the themes, motifs, and patterns they will use to negotiate their own experience." (More negative reactions to Rushdie's work come from such South Asian critics as Feroza Jussawalla and C. J. S. Wallia.) Meanwhile, writing on "The Contemporary Novel" in the weighty *Columbia History of the British Novel*, Michael Wood declares that "The 1980s witnessed an astonishing rebirth of storytelling in British fiction" and continues, "This shift cannot be attributed to a single writer, but if it could that writer would be Salman Rushdie, whose *Midnight's Children* (1980) effected a massive, garrulous liberation in British fiction" (977). For Michael Gorra, Rushdie's literary achievement and that of V. S. Naipaul — both British citizens who have spent their adult lives in Britain — point to the need for "redefining 'Englishness'" and English "literature as a field of study" (8). Other critics see Rushdie's influence extending across national boundaries; *Midnight's Children*, says Bruce King, "showed Australian, Indian, and African novelists how post-modernist fabulation and self-reflexivity could be given national political dimensions and used allegorically" (13). Yet others posit a new category of "transnational" writers; in his survey of "the new Anglophone fiction" John Skinner, for instance, creates a special classification for the migrant writers who do not fit his national categories; his list of transnational migrants "culminat[es] with Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, in so many ways an exemplary text" (25). Rushdie's work has also been considered under other rubrics independent of national identity — for instance, as magical realism, satire, and, for Linda Hutcheon, the postmodern genre of historiographic metafiction. (Vinay Dharwadker, however, contests Hutcheon's categorization of Rushdie, insisting that "the literary paradigm-shift in post-colonial countries is *not* the same as the transition from modernism to post-modernism in First World societies" [71].)

- 2 For biographical information I rely particularly on Ian Hamilton's "First Life of Salman Rushdie." (Cundy, Goonetilleke, and Harrison also include information on Rushdie's life.) Hamilton does not record whether an ayah accompanied the Rushdies to London, though he repeatedly cites "The Courter" as an authoritative source of information on this period of the author's life. He does inform us of the existence of an ayah called Mary, who attached herself to the infant Salman in much the same way that Mary Pereira did to the infant Saleem in *Midnight's Children*: "Mary Manazes, a worker in the Bombay hospital where [Rushdie] was born, took one look at him and decided that she would become this baby's ayah: in effect, his 'second mother'" (90).
- 3 There is after all a diacritical mark in her own name. (And what can this signify? Her name is not English but Urdu; is the diacritic transferred from the Perso-Arabic script used for that language? This "acute accent" is not part of English orthography; it is used in Spanish to mark stress, in classical Greek to indicate rising tone, and in French to specify a particular quality of the vowel *e*. In fact it seems likely, on the basis of the exclamations that he represents as "Ohé!" and "Arré baap!", that Rushdie is following the convention of the French *accent aigu*.)
- 4 As it happened, the Conservative government of the early '60s was plagued by its own sex scandals, leading ultimately to the party's defeat at the polls in 1964. The "Home" in the Prime Minister's name — and the Maharaja's pseudonym — might be considered significant; like some other British aristocratic

names, however, it violates the rules of English pronunciation more flagrantly than many foreign names, being pronounced "Hume."

- 5 An anonymous reviewer of this article prompted me to say more about "jambalaya," suggesting as "gloriously appropriate" to my thesis not only the dish in itself, but the etymology of the word given in the second edition of *Webster's Dictionary*: "Origin uncert.; perh. a Negro corrupt. of French *jambon* ham." (*Webster's Third*, however, refers neither to "Negroes" nor to "corruption," recording the word's origins simply as Louisiana French, from Provençal *jambalaya* — with which etymology the second edition of the OED concurs.)
- 6 To my knowledge, this "h" is an artifact of the English spelling of the word "ayah," unrelated to its pronunciation — an exoticizing touch to mark the word's foreign origins (etymologically, according to the 1992 *American Heritage Dictionary*, its source is "Hindi *aya*, from Portuguese *aia*, nursemaid, from Latin *avia*, grandmother"). This final "h" occurs also in other English spellings of words of Indian origin, such as *nullah*, *pariah*, *wallah*, and *maharajah* — from the last of which Rushdie "drops the 'h'" without commentary.
- 7 Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist explain this *interanimation* or *interillumination* as "The major relativizing force in de-privileging languages. When cultures are closed and deaf [*gluxof*] to one another, each considers itself absolute; when one language sees itself in the light of another, 'novelness' has arrived" (Glossary, Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination* 430).
- 8 Rushdie uses punctuation — or its absence — to indicate the pacing of speech: earlier, three commas chopped up Mr Mecir's halting seven-word-long sentence "I, to see Miss Mary, come, am" (186); here, the complete lack of punctuation in this twenty-six-word-long utterance reveals its speed. Elsewhere Rushdie makes ingenious use of spacing (or the lack of expected spaces) to the same effect.
- 9 In *The Satanic Verses* Saladin Chamcha (another character who shares much of Rushdie's own experience) sees moving from India to England as passing through a mirror: "he had begun to hear, in India's Babel, an ominous warning: don't come back again. When *you have stepped through the looking-glass you step back at your peril. The mirror may cut you to shreds*" (58; emphasis added).
- 10 These are not quite the last words, however: the last few lines of the story report the narrator's return to Waverley House a "year or so after we moved out." "Where's Mixed-Up?" he asks the stranger in the porter's lounge, who replies, "I'm the porter, sir, . . . I don't know anything about any mix-up" (211). And on this note the story ends — its hero Mr Mecir, agent and locus of its most generative "mixing up," having disappeared without a trace.
- 11 It would be pedantry here to insist on the separation between Rushdie the author and the alter ego who narrates "The Courter": this is Rushdie speaking.
- 12 While all six stories in the "East" and "West" sections had been previously published, the three in "East, West" were published in this collection for the first time. One wonders whether Rushdie consciously set out here to contest Kipling's famous "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet."

For the record, Kipling did go on to specify the circumstances under which his generalization could be overridden, but these hardly hold out much hope: "border," "breed," and "birth" are all rendered irrelevant "When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth!" ("The Ballad of East and West" [1889]).
- 13 "Yorick" is a riff on both *Hamlet* and *Tristram Shandy*; the substance of the third story is apparent from its title, "Christopher Columbus and Queen Isabella of Spain Consummate Their Relationship" (*Santa Fé*, AD 1492); and the middle

story, "At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers," takes place in a "post-millennial" future, in a Saleroom that could be anywhere in the world but seems most likely to be in the United States (94).

- 14 The wife of the narrator of "The Harmony of the Spheres" is from Mauritius, though of Indian descent. The story is mainly about Eliot Crane, a Welch scholar of the occult who teaches the Indian-born narrator about Indian mysticism — "A mystical teacher in English translation" (138).
- 15 Elsewhere, Mary's attempts to produce the English /p/ sound like /k/ only between vowels (*shocking, nickels*); at the beginnings of words her /p/ sounds like /f/ (*filgrims, fleas, flenty, fuzzles*) — a plausible alternation conditioned by context. This pattern would produce /f/, not /k/, at the beginning of *porter*.

An anonymous reviewer of this article (the same reader mentioned in note 5 above) resisted this point:

the "p" of "porter" by the rules of consistent logic should be an "f." But *language* (and its creators!) doesn't limit itself to the purity of logic. As was earlier pointed out [footnote 4] the spelling of Lord Home's name offers no clue to its pronunciation! And it is pronunciation (the language in the liquid throat of the maker of it, not in the static dictionary) on which so much of the story and the article's reasoning turns.

However, something other than "the purity of logic" is at stake here. Yes, people can break the rules of a language in quirky and sometimes creative ways; yes, the spelling system as enshrined in the "static dictionary" is surely an artifice. But language is not infinitely malleable; parts of it, including the contextually determined distribution of variant pronunciations (what linguists call "allophones"), are deeply systematic and operate well below the level of conscious awareness.

- 16 On her "first date" with Mr Mecir, Mary's sari gets caught in an escalator and begins to unravel. Catherine Cundy sees in this episode "a contemporary re-playing of the attempted stripping of Draupadi" in the *Mahabharata* (4). Given that the point of the story in the *Mahabharata* is that Draupadi's garments magically renew themselves, continually unwinding but leaving her always clothed, the link is not entirely convincing. In Mary's case, "It was Mixed-Up who saved her by pushing the emergency stop button before the sari was completely unwound and she was exposed in her petticoat for all the world to see" (186).
- 17 This is, to be precise, an imaginary Studebaker: "On the radio, people were always singing about the joys of being sixteen years old. I wondered where they were, all those boys and girls of my age having the time of their lives. Were they driving around America in Studebaker convertibles?" (196). As such, it illustrates the potent influence in the global cultural imaginary of popular culture originating in the US.
- 18 Rushdie has of course made good use of food imagery elsewhere — chutneys and pickles in *Midnight's Children*, spices in *The Moor's Last Sigh*.
- 19 "Chimpanzee tea" is Mr Mecir's term, in quotemarks within the text. Presumably he has in mind a more conventional label than "chimpanzee," but I cannot guess what it is.
- 20 Reed Dasenbrock in "Intelligibility and Meaningfulness in Multicultural Literature" notes that what seems least remarkable to metropolitan readers is often precisely what most stands out as alien in an Indian context; his example is a character in R. K. Narayan's *The Painter of Signs* called "Daisy," a name that, just like "Mary," signifies a Christian faith that is anomalous and suspect to most South Asians. Both the name Mary and the Christmas celebration in "The Courter" fulfill this function of recontextualizing and making strange what at first seems reassuringly familiar to Westerners.

- ²¹ This is a fundamental difference between this story and *Midnight's Children*, a novel set entirely on the Indian subcontinent. We assume that most of the dialogue in *Midnight's Children* is in Hindi/Urdu — and indeed, that the narration is likewise, since the novel is read aloud to the illiterate Padma — though, as I show in the chapter "The Magic Radio" of my dissertation *Breaking English*, attempting to determine the language of the novel leads to significant complications.
- ²² Since writing this article, I have discovered Cynthia Carey-Abrioux's article on "The Courter." Carey-Abrioux too celebrates the linguistic dimensions of the story, arguing that it shows "the demise of the English language as an authoritarian and absolute system which is in the process of being dispossessed, dismantled and re-inflected" (315).

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