

SALMAN RUSHDIE AND THE METAPHORS OF POSTCOLONIALISM

One of the basic co-ordinates of post colonial literature is the position of the subject. In case the basic subject, the author himself, lives in exile, at enforced distance from the country to which his emotions and memory are inalienably bound (as in the case of Salman Rushdie), he sustains a duality within his single author (itative) self. A sense of loss and a stance of criticism combine in such an author's view, of his homeland of the mind and spirit. Distance creates this unique perspective. Salman Rushdie had described this phenomenon in "Imaginary Homelands" in 1982 when he wrote:

Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes, we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools—but however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy¹

When Rushdie describes the identity of an author like him as 'plural and partial', I am reminded of the image of an elaborate Indian tapestry (Gujarati mirror work to be precise) with hundreds of tiny mirrors creating bright patterns. These numerous mirrors reflect reality in its 'partial', fragmented form, distorting the whole picture and yet the sheer range or 'plurality' of such reflections creates a dazzling view simultaneously. This holds true in the case of Rushdie's works. In his own image, one who straddles two worlds is a titanic figure, or a demi-god, like Hercules. An author empowered to view the world like this has both the central or metropolitan culture and the native or indigenous lifestyle at his disposal to continue arranging them in different kaleidoscopic (the broken mirrors of the Indian tapestry in a scientifically correct *avatar*) permutations and combinations. Again, when he characterized himself as both an outsider and an insider, as one straddling two worlds and yet missing a secure berth to rest upon, it reminds us of a person in limbo.

In the literary world, for many authors aspiring for acceptance in the so-called First World countries, this could well mean catering to their expectations by producing a spicy fare out of the mundane reality of the motherland. Such authors miss authenticity twice: once by distorting native history and next, by pampering a select foreign audience.

And even then there still remains the problem of proper presentation of the sentiments of the erstwhile colonised people to the West. Leela Gandhi reminds us

¹ Salman Rushdie, "Imaginary Homelands" *London Review of Books* (7-20 Oct. 1982), 18.

that incidents and facts “central and foundational in the non-West”, count as merely ‘marginal’ in the West even now.(p. ix)²

Even if an author in the post-colonial world is assumed to have bridged this gap between the First and Third worlds as in the case of Rushdie, the means adopted to do this remains suspect. J.M.Coetzee in *Stranger Shores* has an essay on Rushdie’s novel, *The Moor’s Last Sigh* where he points out the basic weaknesses in Rushdie’s writing: “When it comes to political infighting in India, or to the Bombay social and cultural scene ... jokes are being made, satiric barbs being cast, which only an insider will appreciate” (p. 205)³ thereby indicating unsuccessful communication in this instance.

Coetzee further anticipates defenders of Rushdie by saying that according to them Rushdie operates within a “double narrative tradition: of the Western novel... and of Eastern story cycle.” Coetzee finds that these Eastern story cycles are chains of “self-contained shorter narratives” and therefore to Rushdie’s supporters he remains “a multi-cultural writer not merely in the weak sense of having roots in more than one culture, but in the strong sense of using one literary tradition to renew another”(page 209), a view that he refutes by analysing sections of Rushdie’s novel in detail to show that these shorter narrative units within a novel are not properly interlinked or followed to their expected logical conclusion.⁴

Another charge levelled against Rushdie’s inability to acknowledge properly the role of hybridity and racial mixture comes from Loretta Mijares in her article “You are an Anglo-Indian?” in *JCL* where she

examines the role of racial mixture in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, with due attention to the Anglo-Indian community in India. This reveals how racial mixture in the literary imagination often becomes a metaphor for something else, and in this process of metaphorisation is alienated from the history from which it originates.(p.125)⁵

² Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1998).

³ J.M.Coetzee, *Stranger Shores: Essays 1986-1999* (London: Seeker and Warburg, 2001).

⁴ Coetzee, 209-211.

⁵ Loretta Mijares, “‘You are an Anglo-Indian?’ Eurasians and Hybridity and Cosmopolitanism in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*.” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Vol. 34, no.2 (2003). In addition, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in ‘Reading *The Satanic Verses*’ finds Rushdie

adopting the two opposite means of presenting the postcolonial identity in the same work and this can create an effect of ambiguity about one’s historical and political orientation too: *The Satanic Verses*... has rather an aggressive central theme: he

Taken together, these critical ideas present Rushdie's fictional world as an odd mixture of heterogeneous narrative and thematic elements that do not seem to cohere. Then, does Rushdie really fail to present an 'authentic' feel of the postcolonial experience through his writing in spite of the brilliant metaphors and linguistic pyrotechnics that dazzle? Rushdie himself has given some indications about the possible answers to this question.

In a talk delivered in Calcutta on Dec.9,2004, Rushdie describes a scene from James Ivory's film Bombay Talkie in which a reporter visits a typical Bombay movie set that has a giant typewriter with girls dancing on the keys and the director explains that "the typewriter is the typewriter of life, and we are all dancing out our stories on the typewriter of life." Rushdie comments approvingly that sometimes quite naturally, sometimes jerkily we move on this typewriter of life and various types of experiences appear together in an admixture of different emotions and evocative and provoking scenes in movies and in fiction, as in life itself. Therefore Rushdie reaches this conclusion:

I thought there is a real clue here: if you can find out how to do this, you can find an interesting way to tell stories in prose form which break the rules, and yet, in fact, increase people's pleasure by doing so rather than decrease it.⁶

Extravagant though the image and the explanation might appear to be, Rushdie is pointing out an essential quality of his writing here, that he views life as so multifarious and colourful that in order to present it properly "you don't do that by telling one simple beginning-to-end story. You tell a crowd of stories. And you allow your central story to push it's way through the crowd."⁷

If this tells us about the conscious choice made by Rushdie in adopting post-modern, metafictional, magic realistic narrative modes and also serves as a reply to Coetzee's charge of narrative discontinuity, then in the rest of this talk he also

postcolonial divided between two identities: migrant and national. As migrant, the postcolonial may attempt to become the metropolitan.... The postcolonial way, also, to keep himself completely separated from the metropolis in the metropolis as the fanatic exile. The postcolonial is not only a migrant but also the citizen of a 'new' nation for which the colonial experience is firmly in the past *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (Routledge,1993) rpt. in *A Practical Reader in Contemporary Literary Theory*, Ed. Peter Brooker and Peter Widdowson. London and New York: Prentice Hall, 1996. 478-79.

⁶ Salman Rushdie, "The Typewriter of Life." *Telegraph* [Calcutta] 20 Dec. 2004 :18.

⁷ Rushdie, "Typewriter" 18.

discusses why it is impossible for him to present his viewpoints as a narrator as anything but an uprooted person with a partial, plural, fractured identity. He calls it a kind of “literary good fortune” that writers like Faulkner or Narayan could remain “deeply rooted to a given patch of the earth and... mine that patch... through out their lifetime without exhausting it.” He laments that as a writer he has been “knocking about in various countries” and therefore does not “have the luxury of that certain patch of ground under my feet.” Rushdie proclaims that as a consequence he has to “work out the meaning of the ground, create the ground.”⁸

One of the corollaries of this activity of having to break new ground is that this can have a number of repercussions in one’s fictional world, some good and some bad. But without a value judgement of this sort, we can follow Rushdie’s words to understand the dynamics of his writing better.

According to Rushdie, the emerging subject that authors worldwide are being made to deal with

Is the question of the shrinking world, which is of course given to me by a life of successive acts of migration which have brought me into collision with a number of different kinds of life in parts of the world—India, Pakistan, England, America. The story of everywhere is now part of the story of everywhere else.⁹

Transcultural references and telescoping of distances have become inevitable and possibly, have also added to the obscurity of postcolonial writing in general. Another reason Rushdie offers as to his coverage of both the postcolonial moment and the burden of history behind it is that

The space between the public and private –has shrunk and shrunk and shrunk. Now the public and the private smash up against each other every single day. And that has problematic implications for the novel because to try and include contemporary public events in fiction is a very dangerous game. You run the terrible risk that when those events lose their immediacy, the novel also loses its immediacy.¹⁰

Rushdie’s enumeration of the list of problems a contemporary author faces, posits him as a postcolonial figure, an individual sensitized by life itself to the experiences of dislocation—both spatial and temporal. And at the end of all, what he asks for is a

⁸ Rushdie, “Typewriter” 18

⁹ Rushdie, “Typewriter” 18.

¹⁰ Rushdie, “Typewriter” 18.

little more tolerance, a little opening up to view the world not only through one's own eyes, but by sharing the sight and insight of others located differently. Rushdie feels that this is what all great art does, and the responsibility of a great artist is to make this opening up possible for the audience.

It opens the universe a little more, makes it possible for you , ... to feel something, or think something or understand something just a little bit beyond the limits of what you previously felt and knew and understood. And the way you do that is not by sitting in the safe middle ground and telling stories which don't push the frontier. You do it by going to the edge and pushing.¹¹

I feel that Rushdie follows this precept and pushes at the edge, against convention, against those pushing back in the name of status quo, to open up the universe a little. And this makes him an anomalous writer whose (dis)location appears to add to his difficulties in fulfilling the artistic aspiration of recording a fictional history of negotiating the universe anew, especially since Rushdie's images describing an author's identity crisis, ultimately, situates the author-in-exile as subject within a distorted, disrupted framework of history.

For an author who is haunted by a sense of "not-belonging"¹² it is impossible to endorse any centralized narration of history. At the most, what can be presented is Rushdie's "chutnification of history"¹³ according to *Midnight's Children*(1980), by a central narrative persona. Through the rambling, metafictional narration of personal and Indian history by Saleem, Rushdie's highly individualized fragments of historical discourse, preserved like pickles (with spices and preservative added to the raw material), present in language and content, both an

¹¹ Rushdie, "Typewriter" 18.

¹² The other side of Rushdie's image was described by Edward W. Said like this in "Reflections on Exile," *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays*, New Delhi : Penguin Books India, 2001, pp.176-7 in associating nationalism with exile:

Nationalism is an assertion of belonging in and to a place, a people, a heritage. It affirms the home created by a community of language, culture, and customs; and, by so doing , it fends off exile.... All nationalisms in their early stages develop from a condition of estrangement.... Triumphant, achieved nationalism... justifies, retrospectively as well as prospectively, a history selectively strung together in a narrative form.... In time, successful nationalisms consign truth exclusively to themselves and relegate falsehood and inferiority to outsiders.... And just beyond the frontier between " us" and the "outsiders" is the perilous territory of not-belonging....

¹³ Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, New York: Bard-Avon, 1982, p.548.

'abrogation' and 'appropriation'¹⁴ of the centralized imperial discourse. The term 'chutnification' itself is an indigenous alternative in 'english' to the totalizing narration of our nation in (and by the) English.

Linda Hutcheon in *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989) discussed Rushdie's novels in terms of what she chose to call 'historiographic metafiction'. She wrote that

like fiction, history constructs its object,... events named become facts.... The past really did exist, but we can only know it through its textual traces, its often complex and indirect representations in the present: documents, archives, ... also photographs, paintings, architecture, films, and literature.¹⁵

Rushdie's references to historical incidents are complemented by the snapshots and pen-pictures he presents of an idiosyncratic view of Indian colonial and postcolonial history in his novels. In an 'indirect' and 'complex' manner, they reconstruct the past in the present. But even these magic realistic views may be deemed as valid means of representation of a historical construct, according to Hutcheon's theory.

In Rushdie's novels, we find traces of the unusual, the metaphorical, in the sense that in a metaphor, the relationship between two different objects or situations is implied, not stated clearly, and in Rushdie's fiction, too, an individual's history or experience acts metaphorically to represent national history. The careers of twins—Saleem and India—is a famous example. There are, of course, other examples of such parallel existence. For one, Saleem's audience in *Midnight's Children* is Padma, who "can't read", and for her Saleem harbours a lot of sympathy because of the name. Though 'Padma' actually means the lotus-goddess, the unenviable reference to the origin of a lotus in dung, Saleem finds, has soured Padma's life.

Padma could well present, metaphorically, Rushdie's real audience—us', the Indians, born from the dark entity, fertile as dung, called a colonized India (which has yet blossomed like the lotus itself in a postcolonial era). Similarly in *Shame*, we have Rani Hyder's 18 shawls acting as a metaphorical representation of repression and debauchery (reasons to blush and feel 'shame' for) in her country.

¹⁴ In *The Empire Writes Back* 38-9 we read:

Abrogation is a refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of normative or 'correct' usage, and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning 'inscribed' in the words. It is a vital moment in the de-colonizing of the language and writing of 'english'.... Appropriation is the process by which the language is taken and made to 'bear the burden' of one's own cultural experience....

¹⁵ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, London: Routledge, 1989, pp.65-78.

In *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995) we have a Saleem-like figure— Moraes Zogoiby, the 'Moor'. Like Saleem, he has an accelerated life. Since he has completed the stipulated period of gestation (nine months) in half the time, the 'Moor' metaphorically becomes the perfect means of representation of India's history since 1498, the coming of Vasco da Gama. From 1498 to 1947 and after is a long span. In order to compress so much of Indian history the Moor's accelerated life was necessary, since his family history remains entrenched in a magic realistic view of national history. The Moor's mother, Aurora da Gama (belonging to a family that claimed wrong-side-of-the-blanket descent from Vasco da Gama himself) as a girl of thirteen, had resorted to "nocturnal odysseys"¹⁶ as a protest against a repressive grandmother, and an uncle and an aunt, by opening up window-shutters, glass-casements, and even the fine-meshed net that protected the house from flies and mosquitoes. Her protest against the repression by certain family members, however, becomes a metaphor of larger historical significance when her opening of windows brings in not only nagging insects but also the troubling issues of "Communist troublemaking and Congresswallah politics, the names Gandhi and Nehru, the rumours of famine in the east and hunger strikes in the north,...and the heavy rolling Sound...of the incoming tides of history"¹⁷ into their imperialistic, hitherto unperturbed, cognizance. Feeling disturbed, they retaliate by accusing the servants in the house of all wrongdoing. To save these innocent victims of their wrath, when Aurora confesses her crime, she is locked up in a room for a week, and her house-arrest turns out to be an image of the travails of nationalist leaders like Gandhi and Nehru in prison (such leaders repeatedly emerged from solitary confinement fortified with a renewed spiritual vigour, and a reflection of the fruits of their self-purifying meditation, in the form of spiritual autobiographies). Aurora populates the walls of her prison with a "hyper-abundance of imagery"¹⁸ revolving around the fantastic pictures of her cruel, despotic family members getting kicked and punished by their wronged servants and historical incidents which made the subaltern's agony clear. The world of historical truth—of cruelty, treachery, the game of power and colonization—and the world of the colonized people's dream-come-true is mediated in her picture by the figures of Indian freedom fighters. This picture anticipates the metaphor of Aurora's experience in the palimpsest 'The Moor's Last Sigh'. As Rushdie describes her work: "she had put history on the walls,"¹⁹ so he himself had put history on paper—not in its undiluted factual form, but in the garb of metaphorical representation.

¹⁶ Salman Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, London:Vintage,1996, p. 7.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p.9.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p.60.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p.59. Aurora's picture breaks all barriers of chronological progression by making St.

Rushdie uses images from diverse fields to present his views about the history of India. In *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999), when Sir Darius Xerxes Cama goes out to participate in a cricket match in Bombay, the cross-currents of emotions in the lives of the British and the different segments of the Indian community become evident. Sir Cama himself feels:

The country's imperial overlords, observing the bawdiness of the populace, could only feel disappointed at the continuing backwardness of these over whom they had ruled so wisely for so long. Sir Darius Xerxes Cama, walking out to bat, wanted to cry aloud, "Brace up! Do yourselves justice! The British are watching."²⁰

In our post-Lagaan cultural scenario, this could well mean giving a good account of oneself on the battlefield called the cricketing pitch. But then, the opposite point of view also prevailed. When Sir Cama was on the pitch as an opening batsman for the Parsis in a Pentangular Tournament which also saw the British, Hindu, Muslim, and 'The Rest' (comprising Bombay's Christians, Anglo-Indians, and Jews) competing, and the crowd included a band of nationalist sympathizers. They chanted:

"Don't be wicket.... Ban communal cricket." Sir Darius Xerxes Cama was aware that Mahatma Gandhi and his followers had denounced the Pentangular Tournament as a communally divisive, anti-national throwback, in which men of colonized mentality performed like monkeys for the amusement of the British and gave unhelpful assistance to the policy of divide-and-rule.—if he could only persuade the great man to don flannels and learn the basics of the game, the Mahatma was bound to be persuaded of the tournament's value in honing that spirit of competition without which no people can take its place at the forefront of the world community.²¹

Each viewpoint is so persuasive! The cricket pitch truly becomes an arena to toss and strike different ideological concepts about nationalism, imperialism, colonialism, and patriotism.

Thomas the Apostle, Ashoka, the mutilated masons who had built the Taj Mahal synchronic with Gandhi Nehru and herself. This therefore becomes a magic realist view of the all-embracing, all-devouring Mother India herself.

²⁰ Salman Rushdie, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, London:Vintage,2000, p.28.

²¹ *ibid.*, p.29.

The crucial idea expressed through the whole cricketing metaphor is, however, the colonized citizens' attitude towards their lot. Where fostering a spirit of healthy competition can help in the progress of a country so also can it be deemed as behaving like circus-animals to entertain the imperial masters. If the latter is true then the roots of Indian colonization (or for that matter, any country's colonization) lie in what we may call the 'imperial gaze' directed towards the natives with greed and snobbery—greed for a nation's treasures, and haughtiness with which to suppress the native's protesting voice when s/he is looted by the masters—these two aspects are crucial to every history of colonization.

In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, the nature of such colonization becomes clear. Through a pervasive use of the metaphor of pepper, Rushdie makes the history of India's (or any potential colony's) fate evident. At the very beginning, the Moor stuns the audience by saying:

And to begin with, pass the pepper... for if it had not been for peppercorns, then what is ending now in East and West might never have begun. Pepper it was that brought Vasco da Gama's tall ships across the ocean.... English and French sailed in the wake of that first-arrived Portugee, so that in the period called Discovery-of-India --- but how could we be discovered when we were not covered before?--- we were 'not so much sub-continent as sub-condiment', as my distinguished mother had it. 'From the beginning, what the world wanted from bloody mother India was daylight-clear,' she'd say. 'They came for the hot stuff, just like any man calling on a tart.'²²

This again reminds me of the writer in limbo who sells his literary fare to the West by producing what it seeks from the East—something spicy. It also raises a question about the nature of all postcolonial writing, especially if we remember Edward Said's discussion of Rushdie's ideas in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). Said mentions that the erstwhile imperial power groups lament the fact that their former colonies in Asia and Africa have reverted to the state of their original barbarity and ignorance. Instead of acknowledging their greed and its consequences for the colonies, the West continues to demand homage for its "unappreciated magnanimity."²³ Said pointed out that their feeling seemed to be: since the natives have made a mess of their lives again after we have given them independence, shouldn't we have held on to the colonies? If the West continues to feel this was in the postcolonial era, then we should return to Rushdie's metaphors of the colonial era with a new understanding of the politics of post colonial history. On the one

²² *The Moor's Last Sigh*, p.4.

²³ Edward W.Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, London:Vintage, 1994, pp.23-4.

hand, in a postcolonial society, there is really scope for soul-searching about our nature, and prospects of constructing a glorious national identity by eschewing servility or fostering a competitive spirit in the international arena (the cricket pitch metaphor). On the other, Rushdie's metaphors, with all their 'plural' and 'partial' view of reality, could well present the real state of any erstwhile colony like India, precisely because the monstrous, cruel imperial power has defaced this nation so badly that its unrecognizable face can only be represented through metaphors of ambiguity, distress and distortion.

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