

MULTICULTURALISM IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *THE MOOR'S LAST SIGH*

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Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1996) is a natural extension of the techno-thematic predilections set by him in *Midnight's Children* first published in 1980. *Midnight's Children* restructures the first seventy five years of the twentieth century India along socio-political and cultural dimensions whereas *The Moor's Last Sigh* presents before us the India of post *Midnight Children* era. Rushdie is tortured by the developments that took place in eighties and nineties in the social set ups and political preferences that determined the fate of the country that has a direct and immediate correlation with his identity. The novel first published in 1996 created the ripples of controversies across the country for a number of reasons and it was banned in Indian by the Congress government and later the ban was lifted and the book was available to critics and readers. The parallel between *Midnight's Children* and *The Moor's Last Sigh* is inevitable as the latter offers a natural continuity of the thematic contents of the former.

India, for Salman Rushdie has always been definable in terms of multiculturalism, pluralism and differences. He firmly asserts that there can be no single way of being an Indian. 'For a nation of seven hundred millions to make any kind of sense,' he says, 'it must base itself firmly on the concept of multiplicity of plurality, of tolerance, of devotion and decentralization wherever possible' (Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, 44). It is also noticeable that the chief function of the novels of Salman Rushdie knit around the India idea is the relocation of the multicultural ideals that are now on the brink of deterioration. He envisages India as a multicultural identity structured through a unique fusion of all racial, ethical, regional and even linguistic differences. He makes the idea more clear in his essay- "In God We Trust," and says;

After the terrible partition riots, it was plainer than ever that if India's remaining Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Christians, Jews and Harijans (untouchables) as well as the Hindu majority, were to be able to live together in peace, the idea of godless State must be elevated above all of 330 million deities. (Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, 385)

The above quoted excerpt from the famous essay of Rushdie makes it clear that he keeps the nationalistic ideals defined in terms of multiculturalism above any of the religions practiced in the country.

Midnight's Children in its essence has been a pronounced representation of the ideals, Rushdie has idolized about India. The growing threat to the pluralism and multiculturalism has been personified in the character of Shiva who is the destructive force responsible for the brutal suppression of the minorities during the Emergency. He also represents the power of state sponsoring atrocities on the minorities. *The Moor's Last Sigh* in this respect presents a natural and organic continuity to the theme of *Midnight's Children*. The deteriorations in the multicultural ideals of the country have been on the foci of the thematic structure of the novel. The confession of the protagonist in the cadence of antiheroic nodes brings into attention the fact that the novel begins where the *Midnight's Children* ends. The protagonist says;

Mine is the story of fall from grace of a high born cross breed; me Moraes Zogoiby, called Moor, for most of my life, the only male heir to the spice-trade-‘n’-big business, crores of de Gama, Zogoiby dynasty of Cochin, and of my banishment from what I had every right to think of as my natural life by my mother Aurora de Gama. Most illustrious of our modern artists and, a great beauty who was also the most sharp-tongued woman of her generation handling out the hot stuff to anybody who came within range. (Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, 05)

The symbol of spice is another very important aspect of the narrative. It is aptly metaphorical to the cultural synthesis of India eventually culminating into multiculturalism in India. Moor's consequent detachment from the 'spice –trade-n-big- business' leads to mean the decay of multicultural set up and the predominance of the singular ethnicity and pervasion of religious intolerance.

Moor's confession makes it clear that he is the first person narrator of the novel who renders a shape and form to the narrative through reflections and recollections. Rushdie restructures the Dickensian array of characters in *David Copperfield* the protagonist/ narrator who imparts shape and order to the narrative by reordering his own recollections. The view of Percy Lubbock captures our attention. He, commenting on the nature of the narrative of David Copperfield, says;

Dickens' only care was to represent the wonderful show that filled his hero's memory. The whole phantasmagoria is the subject of the book, a hundred men and women populating David's past and keeping his pen at full speed in the single minded effort to portray them. (Lubbock 133)

The narrator Moor begins to narrate from the family history of and like the narrator of *Midnight's Children*, Saleem Sinai, he draws a close parallel between the family history of de Gama, Zogoiby dynasty with the politico-cultural history of India. He confides;

What was true of history in general was true of my family's fortunes in particular-pepper, the coveted black gold of Malabar was the original stock-in-trade of my filthy rich folk, the wealthier spice, nut, bean, and leaf merchant in Cochin who without any evidence save centuries of tradition claimed wrong-side-of-the blanket descent from Great Vasco de Gama himself. (Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, 06)

The elements of multiculturalism creeps into the narrator creeps in the narrative as the birth of the protagonist is attributed to the visit of the Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru to his mother. The narrator confides;

Turn back the clock four and half months of my birth, and you return to the event at Lord's Central House, Motheran and what may have been

the last occasion on which my parents made love. But let the clock travel a further four and half months in reverse, and there is Aurora Zogoiby in Delhi, entering a ceremonial halt Rashtrpati Bhavan, and being received by Punditji himself. (Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, 175)

The above quoted excerpt ratifies the bond between India and Moor. The protagonist and the spatio-temporal matrix have a common progenitor, Nehru. It is remarkable that the reference to Nehru as the maker of the protagonist and the nation indicates that flowering of multicultural ideals in the country. Rushdie takes Nehruvian era to be the 'noblest part' of Nehru/ Gandhi dynasty, 'its most idealistic phase.' (Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, 48) It is also remarkable that Moor's confession that his is the 'story of fall from grace of a high born cross breed,' quoted above is an implicit reference to the decay of multicultural ideals and growing predominance of fundamentalism and religious sectarianism. The house image has always played a defining role in the narratives of Salman Rushdie right from the first novel- *Grimus*. In which the 'House of Rising Son' is delineated with tremendous metaphorical significance. Similarly the 'Methwold Estate' in *Midnight's Children* bears obvious parallel with the multicultural set up of India. 'Nishapur' in *Shame* symbolizes the author's contempt for the ethnic and traditional conservatism. Uma Parameswaran rightly points out that 'in all three novels, a house associated with the protagonist shares certain common characteristics and exerts similar force.' The views of Uma Parameswaran makes it clear that the house image used in the novels is a natural extension of the sensibilities associated with the leading characters. She further points out that all of these three are 'sprawling mansions with endless spaces in which the protagonist gets lost.' She ratifies the metaphorical worth of the houses used by Rushdie in the narrative saying that 'each has a life of its own and as it were and exerts a potent force' Parameswaran 68). It is interesting to note that views of Uma Parameswaran hold perfect significance in the delineation of the house image in *The Moor's Last Sigh*. The narrator confides;

There she found a grand old mansion in the traditional style, with many delightfully interlinking courtyards of greeny pools and mossed fountains, surrounded by galleries in the rich in wood carving, off which lay labyrinth of tall rooms, their high roofs gabled and tiled. It was set in rich man's paradise of tropical foliage ; just what the doctor ordered, in Epiphania's opinion, for though her early years had been relatively penurious she had always believed she had a talent for magnificence. (Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, 15)

The sprawling dimensions of the houses in *Midnight's Children* and *The Moor's Last Sigh* draw a very close parallel with the cultural magnanimity of India where various faiths and beliefs coexist with harmony and peace. In both the novels the protagonist escapes from the huge and sprawling areas and entered the congested family setups and this escape again draws a close metaphorical parallel with the decay of multicultural elements and the consequent narrowing of the cultural dimensions realized in terms of the growing intolerance in the cultural set up of the country.

The house image used in the narrative draws a close parallel with the family residing therein. The eldest in the family is the matriarchal figure Epiphania 'whose personal mosquito net had over the years developed a number of small but insignificant holes which she was too myopic to notice' (Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, 07). The holes in the mosquito net foretell the infiltration of the new forces in the cultural set up of the country. The novel is structured on the pillars of parallel and contrast. The marital conjugation of Francisco and Epiphania constitute

first such pair of contrast. Francisco invite a very close comparison with Dr. Adam Aziz of *Midnight's Children*. He grows into a metaphor of nationalist spirit as he first 'became the disciple of Bertrand Russel 'and then of 'increasingly fervent nationalistic politics of the Theosophical Society of Mrs Annie Beasant' (Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, 17). The contrast between Epifania and Francisco is perpetuated in the two children of the couple. Aires, defying his father 'took his mother's side,' whereas in Cameons, Francisco 'found his ally inculcating in him the virtue of nationalism, region, art, innovation and above all, in those days, of protest' (Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, 18-19). He grows into a quiet but rebellious intellect who 'became a congresswallah, a Nehru man,' and followed from a distance all the great events of ensuing years' (Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, 32), and Aires, on the other hand spent his evening playing Bridge at Malabar Club where his presence was vouched for.' The contempt of Aires for the Indian National Movement is evidenced in the name of his English bulldog, who, 'to provoke Cameons' was named 'Jawaharlal' (Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, 50). It is clear that the expository part of the novel structures the world of national and pluralist ideals in the family through a method of contrast.

The disaster in the family business and consequently the escape of the family to Bombay draws a parallel with the decay of nationalist and pluralistic values in the socio-political set up of the country. The growing congestion of the characters in the narrative contributes to the making of the new milieu in the novel. The narrowing of the corridors, through which the major characters walk along, becomes more evident in the making of Aurora's famous painting-*The Kissing of Abbas Ali Baig*. The narrator confides that the painting is based on an 'actual incident that occurred during the third Test Match against Australia at Bombay's Braibourne Stadium' in which Baig's half century, second in the match, enabled the home side to force a draw. The narrator further confides that 'when he reached 50, a pretty young woman ran out from the upper crust North stand and kissed the batsman on the cheeks' (Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, 228). The hue and cry on this masterpiece is an apt illustration of the growing fanaticism and intolerance in the Indian cultural set up. The story of *The Kissing of Abbas Ali Baig* also brings into the narrative the character of Raman Fielding who later acquires tremendous metaphorical significance from the point of view of the delineation of the theme of the novel. The episode, on one hand illustrates the growing fanaticism and intolerance in the country and at the same time it also serves to portray the consequent exploitation of the situation by the political giants of the country. It aptly serves the monitorial nexus between so called fundamentalist and ones liable to fall prey to the growing intolerance. How much? She asked. And Maiduck named his price. (Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, 279).

Rushdie associates the character of Fielding with the symbol of frog picking it up from the famous idiom frog in the well, which aptly illustrates the narrowing of the world there around. Fielding aptly represents the growing fanaticism and the meteoric rise in the power of the Bajrang Dal, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the BJP and other such forces living on the principle of Hindu fundamentalism. Fielding is the character subjected to mockery and ridicule as religious fundamentalism has always been on the foci of Rushdie's contempt. The name-Fielding, itself is a masterstroke of irony and ridicule. The name owes its origin to the name remark of CK Naidu who jokingly tells the 'cricket mad father' of Raman 'my little just one fielding' after recognizing him from the 'old days at Gymkhana.' The narrator further reveals that 'the fellow was always known as J O Fielding and proudly accepted the name as his own' (Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, 230). The narrator seems very consistent about the use of the image of frog in association with the character of Raman Fielding. Raman Fielding draws a very close parallel

with the character of Shiv Sena supreme Bal Thackeray as the two share a number of elements of history with each other. Fielding, like Thackeray, started his career as a cartoonist who always signed his caricatures with a little frog, usually shown making snide comments in the edges of the frame' (Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, 229). Rushdie himself admits the resemblance between the homo fictus Raman Fielding and the homo sapiens, Bal Thackeray, but denies the confinement of the character to him. Thackeray is, Rushdie admits, 'one of the sources for the character,' but he further elaborates that 'there are many other sources.' He further confides that 'some of the sources are from outside India.' (Rushdie, *Frontline*, 3 May 1996; 46). Rushdie also elaborates the common past of Raman Fielding and Bal Thackeray and says;

Although in the novel why I preserve the idea of a cartoonist is not so much to lampoon Thackeray as because the novel is about artists, and I wanted to make this contrast between the great artist and the cartoonist. (Rushdie, *India Today*, , 30 September 1995, 100)

It is another noticeable observation that Mumbai Axis in the novel is a recreation of Shiv Sena the political party headed by Bal Thackeray. Rushdie in the same interview with *India Today*, points out;

In the novel, it is behavior and political intervention of party called Mumbai Axis, that is probably based more on the Shiv Sena than the character of Raman Fielding is based on Thackeray. (Rushdie, *India Today*, 30 September 1995, 100)

The character of Fielding is delineated with the paradoxes that ratify the pervasion of hypocrisy in the political techniques employed by him. He is conspicuous for 'non Hindu tastes' which include 'lamb (which was mutton), mutton (which was goat), keema, chicken, kababs.' The narrator further reveals;

Bombay meet eating Parsis, Christians, and Muslims-for whom, in so many other ways he had nothing but contempt- were often applauded by him for non-veg cuisine. (Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, 279).

The irony in delineating the character of Raman Fielding continues to grow sharper and acquired violent proportions in the third book of the novel- "Bombay Central." This part of the book also encapsulates the tremendous rise in the power of the Raman Fielding, as, 'the MA had taken political control of the city,' and he was 'Mayor Mainduck now' (Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, 308). The third book of the novel revolves around Abraham- Fielding plot which is a recreation of the Isky- Raza plot in this third novel *Shame* (1983). The growing power of Fielding reprimands Abraham and Abraham is a constant threat to Fielding. The contrast between the two mafia heads is illustrated best with the help of Nadia Wadia and Fielding again falls prey to the onslaughts of irony by the narrator. He recalls 'a Smita, a Shobha, a Rekha, an Urvashi, an Anju and a Manju.' Besides these, there was a 'striking number of non Hindu ladies; slightly soiled Dollies, Marias, and Gurinders, none of whom lasted for long' (Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, 310). The reference to non Hindu preferences of Raman Fielding makes it clear that the fanaticism practiced by Fielding has demeaned political purpose which gets diluted in the circumstance of personal preferences. Thus Fielding preaches fanaticism but practices multiculturalism to satisfy his senses.

The participation of Nadia Wadia imparts essential fictive value to the narrative at this part of the novel by intensifying the conflict between Fielding and Abraham. The triological set up of Fielding, Nadia and Abraham reminds us of the same trilogy of Iskandar Harappa, Pinkie Aurangzeb and Raza Hyder. The views of Rushdie, expressed in a conversation with the noted

film maker Saeed Mirza capture out attention. He opines that the ‘relationship where a man is a protégé of another man and becomes his executioner,’ is completely Shakespearean.’ He further reveals that Shame has ‘structure of a high tragedy but the low grade figures.’ They are rather ‘clowns and gangster’ (Rushdie, *Gentleman*, April 1984; 66) Rushdie’s views on the structure of Shame hold perfect relevance in connection with the structure of *The Moor’s Last Sigh*.’ The decay of multicultural elements determine the course and nature of the action in the middle of the novel. The growing fanaticism and intolerance account for the hike in the violence. No other novel has as much of violence as *The Moor’s Last Sigh*. it is for the first time that the reader finds the protagonist himself engrossed in violence. The narrator/protagonist admits;

I do not exempt myself. I have been a man of violence for too long, and on the night when Raman Fielding insulted my mother on TV, I brutally put an end to his accused life. And is so doing called a curse upon my own. (Rushdie, *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, 365).

The sudden hike in the violence in the middle of the narrative demonstrates the sudden and unpredictable decay in the multicultural set up of the country. The narrator makes clear the predominance of violence in the narrative by alluding to the most successful movie star (probably Amitabh Bachchan) and says;

Go sit in a movie theatre and take note that the guy getting the biggest cheers is no longer the loverboy or hero-it is the guy in the black hat, stabbing, shooting, kickboxing ad generally pulverizing his way through the film! O, baby, Violence today is hot. It is what people want. (Rushdie, *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, 279).

The chief practitioner of violence in the novel is Abraham who offers a direct contrast to the character of Rasman Fielding. It is noticeable that Fielding opts for violence with a political motif whereas Abraham’s preference of violence is apolitical which cannot be attributed to any kind of politics. He draws parallel with the non political gangsters like Dawood Abraham. The disentanglement between Abraham and Aurora leads to the complete withdrawal of the latter from his participation in the domestic matters and this draws a close parallel with the rise of his power in the crime world. The narrator exclaims; Would it shock you that within the months of his arrival in Bombay he had begun to trade in human flesh (Rushdie, *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, 182).

The rise in power in the crime world leads to the growth of satanic omnipotence in character of Abraham as the narrator calls him ‘shadow Jeevohah,’ or ‘anti Almighty’ or ‘black hole in the sky’ (Rushdie, *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, 336-337). The stains of blood pervades the length and breadth of this part of the narrative. There are a number of minor characters who play significant role shaping the narrative. The elements of melodrama rule over the narrative fabric as the novel reaches the climax. The stains of blood become more thick and are spashed all along the course of the narrative. there are a number of secondary characters who emerge or re-emerge in the narrative after a long suspension only to add blood to the action of the novel. Vasco Miranda is unambiguously a character, who, in the begining of the novel is delineated with Dalinean eccentricity and later acquires synanimity with violence as Dalinean eccentricity is transformed into the suicidal impulses of Vincent Van Ghogh.

Blood stains spread across the front and rear of his Moo’s pantaloons, and fell to his knees splashing in his own, and fatal pools. There was bloodand more blood, Vasco’s blood mingling with Avi’s , blood lapping at my feet

and running away under the door to drip downstairs and tell Abraham's X rays the news. (Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, 432).

The secondary characters of the novel serve to perform the same functions of delineating time- space continuum. A number of secondary characters in the novel play decisive role in culminating the ideal of growing fanaticism and intolerance in Indian politico-cultural set up. The predominance of lust and greed are also treated as natural follow up of the decay of cultural values in India. The characters of Jamshed Cashondelivery and Dilly Hormuz are few instances that ratify the cultural decay in the country. Lamaza Chandiwala and Samy Hazare are also metaphorical to growing violence in the country. They remind us of the two characters- Tassio and Cleamenza of Maro Puzo's *The God Father*.

The most significant revelation of the decay of multicultural values comes from the most controversial image used by Rushdie in the novel—for which it was banned for some time after its publication in 1996- and it is the use of the canine image. Rushdie makes use of the image of English Bulldog named Jawaharlal and it is seen that the dog comes into existence as a result of Aire's contraption to provoke nationalist and scholarly soul of Cameon. The controversy caused by the image of English bulldog named Jawaharlal was mainly due to the misunderstanding of the image and it was taken for granted that the image of English bulldog named Jawaharlal is nothing but Rushdie's contemptuous lampooning of the first Prime Minister of India. It is clear from a close study of Rushdie's non fictional works that Nehru's political ideology enshrines all the political ideals of Salman Rushdie, thus taking it for granted that by structuring this image he aims at ridiculing Nehru does not convince us. The genesis of the image can be attributed to the Rushdie's fondness for the similar canine image used by Saul Bellow in his celebrated novel – *The Dean's December*. He writes;

There's a beautiful image used by Saul Bellow in his latest novel, *The Dean's December*. The central character, the Dean Corde, hears a dog barking wildly somewhere. He imagines that the barking is dog's protest against the limits of the dog experience. 'For God sake,' the dog is saying, 'open the universe a little more.' And because Bellow is, of course, not really talking about dogs rage, and its desire is also mine ours, everybody's. 'For God sake, open the universe a little more!' . (Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, 21)

It is clear that Rushdie's fondness for the image used by Bellow eventually inspired him to recreate the same image in a new context. The appendage of the name of Jawaharlal further enriches the figurative implications of the image. The recreation of images has always been an important tool in the technical paraphernalia of Rushdie. The image of Jawaharlal the bulldog was use early as a symbol of a section of the society who nurtured contempt for the flag bearers of Indian National Movement but after a prolonged suspension, the same image reappears in the narrative when Jawaharlal the bulldog is the lone companion of the protagonist in his final escape. It is also note worthy that the image reappears with new shades of meaning and experience in the renewed context. The image, which in the earlier phase of the narrative, symbolized hatred of a section of Indian society for the leaders of Indian National Movement, now comes up with new symbolic worth and figuratively symbolize the decay of Nehruvian values to unsubstantial documentation which now seems to have lost its glory and relevance. 'It is,' the narrator confides about the renewed identity of Jawaharlal the bulldog, 'the former Prime Minister of India, metamorphosed into a canine form.' (Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, 365). It is also remarkable that there is a perfect fusion of Nehru's political ideology and the

realization of the predicament of the dog. The image thus embodies appalling rupture of multicultural ideals and the ideals of a perfectly democratic order which constitutes the need of the socio-political system of the country. Rushdie's confession about the post Midnight's Children developments in India makes the ideal more clear. He admits;

I remember that when *Midnight's Children* was first published in 1981, the most common Indian criticism was that it was too pessimistic about the future. It is a sad truth that nobody finds the novel's ending pessimistic any more, because the what has happened in India since 1981 is so much darker than I had imagined. If anything the book's last pages with the suggestions of a new more pragmatic generations rising up to take over from the midnight children, now seems absurdly, romantically optimistic. .
(Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, 33)

It is clear from the above discussion that *The Moor's Last Sigh* offers to our scrutiny a very natural and organic continuity of the thematic and technical exuberance, set into motion by *Midnight's Children*. The two novels, in their epic structure, cover the whole of the twentieth century along socio-political and cultural dimension. The close of *Midnight's Children* puts forth a threat to the multicultural ideals prevailing in the Indian social setup and defining it and the emergence of Shiva in the narrative offers and threat to the survival of these values and *The Moor's Last Sigh* finally announces the crumbling of the structure that once nurtured the glory of pluralism and differences along all the dimensions of human existence.

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The Moor's Last Sigh is the fifth novel by Salman Rushdie, published in 1995. It is set in the Indian cities of Bombay and Cochin. The title is taken from the story of Boabdil (Abu Abdullah Muhammed), the last Moorish king of Granada, who is also mentioned frequently in the book. The spot from which Boabdil last looked upon Granada after surrendering is known as Puerto del Suspiro del Moro ("Pass of the Moor's Sigh"). The mother of the narrator and an artist friend of the mother's each make a painting The Moor's Last Sigh (Spanish). A ferociously witty family saga with a surreally imagined and sometimes blasphemous chronicle of modern India with peppery soliloquies on art, ethnicity, religious fanaticism, and the terrifying power of love. Moraes "Moor" Zogoiby, the last surviving scion of a dynasty of Cochinese spice merchants and crime lords, is also a compulsive storyteller and an exile. "The most complete and gratifying work to emerge from Salman Rushdie's imagination" The Moor's Last Sigh is an exotic story, in its setting, in its characters, in its punning extravagance, and in its deeply human core. It is an extraordinary family saga full of wonderful characters, and the insight born of genuine reflection. A remarkable spell of creativity. The Moor's Last Sigh returns to India, but to a different India from that of Midnight's Children (or The Satanic Verses). This is Spanish/Portuguese India, with a different colonial history; the echoes here are not of The East India Company, Amritsar, Mountbatten, and the Raj, but of Vasco da Gama, the Alhambra, and multicultural Goa with its Jewish and Christian communities. Recommend this book. Email your librarian or administrator to recommend adding this book to your organisation's collection. Salman Rushdie. Damian Grant. Online ISBN: 9781786946331.