

## **Assimilation or Elimination of Diasporic Sensibilities: Rushdie's Hypothesis**

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There is a substantial difference between the term diaspora of the third century B.C. and that of twentieth and twenty-first century diaspora. The term has been metamorphosed into a concept, a theory. In earlier centuries diaspora meant only "a dislocation from the nation-state or geographical location of origin and a relocation in one or more nation-states territories or countries."<sup>1</sup> In the present century diasporism means not only relocation of people but also relocation of culture, relocation as well as dislocation of sensibility. The very outlook has been transformed. George Stener's widely discussed essay, "Our Homeland, The text" similarly proclaims "a diasporist sensibility seeking to locate the Jewish homeland not in the enclosed territory of a nation-state but in the deterritorialized idioms of rabbinic spiritual and discursive traditions."<sup>2</sup> Postcolonial diaspora theories present the displaced subject as a bearer of radical political sensibility. Postcolonial diaspora theory is a revisionist discourse. The term diaspora is very often applied interchangeably with migration; it is normally invoked "as a theoretical device for the interrogation of ethnic identity and cultural nationalism....Not surprisingly diasporic thought finds its apotheosis in the ambivalent, transitory, culturally contaminated and border line figure of exile caught in a historical limbo between home and the world."<sup>3</sup>

"The new narratives of diaspora have revised the classical meaning of diaspora as a condition of "catastrophic" loss and dispersion to be lamented and if possible avoided altogether."<sup>4</sup> Diaspora is now being used as "an alternative site of sociality and belonging, marked by mixed cultures, transgressive poetics/politics, and decentered subjectivities".<sup>5</sup>

Diasporic communities are characterized by their movement. Their movement is not only from a place to many places but continues, if not within a single generation then by its successor generation. A first landing becomes a new point of departure for a regathering elsewhere. Diasporic communities actually are the marginalized people who used modes of cultural production to resist. They try to manage their ethnic and national identities in relationship to the homeland as well as the place of settlement. They use the means of cultural production to represent themselves in the public sphere.

Elleke Boehmer defines diasporic writers as "the descendants of migrants."<sup>6</sup> Actually they are indigenous writers and they attempt to show that despite long years of depredation and deprivation "the past is all about us and within."<sup>7</sup> Diasporic literatures are in the hands of those who are oppressed by the prevailing arrangement of power. Diasporic literature becomes political instrument with which such writer call into question important aspect of metropolitan, political and cultural hegemony. Salman Rushdie sums up the entire project of diasporism in a single phrase "the empire writes

back with a vengeance”, provided an organizing metaphor for this line of thinking early on. Boehmer says:

...revising and reimagining the center is nowhere perhaps more forcefully in operation than amongst diasporic writers whose works map a pathway from displacement to the always qualified decision to belong to their adopted city or nation.<sup>8</sup>

Diasporic writing like postcolonial writing is often understood as a displaced deregulated practice. Therefore, diasporic writing is associated with metropolitan, migrant and multicultural. Diasporic writers are cosmopolitans and cosmopolitans belong to more than one world but to no one entirely. This unbelongingness also adds another species in diasporism as Bharti Mukherjee asserts: “dislocation is not an impoverishment but an expansion of cultural and aesthetic experience.”<sup>9</sup>

Salman Rushdie is a diasporic writer, though not fit in the definition of Boehmer according to whom diasporas are the children of migrants. He describes his identity as an Indian writer in England as being “made up of bits and fragments from here and there.”<sup>10</sup> In his brilliant treatise *Imaginary Homelands* (1991) Rushdie asserts “that literature is an expression of nationality” and “books are always praised for using motifs and symbols out of the author's own national tradition ... and when the influences at work upon the writer can be seen to be wholly internal to the culture from which he springs.”<sup>11</sup> This very idea influenced all diasporic writers worldwide. Living in one country and writing about their own has been the primordial purpose of diasporic writers. Nationalist in thoughts, native in cultures and indigenous in languages are the main instruments of diasporic writings.

For Rushdie being an immigrant is bliss. He says in the aforesaid treatise that the immigrant who loses his roots, language and social norms “is obliged to find new ways of describing himself, new ways of being human.”<sup>12</sup> Rushdie clarifies what the fictional preoccupation of these writers is:

“... exile or emigrants or expatriates are haunted by some sense of loss, some argue to reclaim, to look back even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge-- which gives rise to profound uncertainties--that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost, that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.”<sup>13</sup>

Rushdie is very suspicious of history that is why, after all, he is interested in a third world counter narrative. He presents history in his fiction not historically or as a historian or historical novelist does but magically. He fictionalizes reality with the help of fantasy and becomes magic realist.

For Rushdie “History is always ambiguous. Facts are hard to establish and capable of being given many meanings.”<sup>14</sup> Rushdie claims to prefer the mode of fairytale which eschews direct reference to actual historical events. He thinks that realism can break a writer’s heart.

All Rushdie fictions, from his Booker winning novel, *Midnight's Children* to the last one, *The Enchantress of Florence* are riddled with migrant terminology. Several parents father Saleem Sinai, the protagonist of the *Midnight's Children*, the case of Omar Khayyam, the hero of *Shame* is almost the same. Though these two novels are more political than fictional, their characters are the representatives of the subalterns and marginal. At the time of writing these novels, Salman Rushdie himself was being mothered by second mother, Britain metaphorically not literally. Rushdie himself in the words of Nayantara Sahgal is a "Schizophrenic author." She goes on to explain Schizophrenia as "a state of mind and feeling that is firmly rooted in particular subsoil but above ground has a more fluid identity that doesn't fit comfortably into any single mould."<sup>15</sup>

*Midnight's Children* "exploits a range of literary and cultural resources from allegory, satire and surrealism to Hindi cinema, Hindu mythology, science fiction, detective novel, American 'westerners' political slogans and advertising jingles."<sup>16</sup> The novel runs from the infamous Amritsar Massacre to the inauguration of the sovereign socialist and democratic republic of India with Nehru as its first premier, the language riots of 1950s, the Indo-China war of 1965, the Indo-Pakistan war of 1971 and finally the dark midnight of Indira Gandhi's Emergency imposed in 1975. In this way the novel proves right the controversial claim of Fredrick Jameson that Third World texts are "national allegories". The story of *Midnight's children* is the story of Salman Rushdie's mother country.

*Shame* (1993) is the story of Rushdie's first exiled country that is Pakistan. It is also an allegorical novel as Rushdie himself says. "The country in this story is not Pakistan, not quite. There are two countries, real and fictional occupying the same space or almost the same space."<sup>17</sup> The story is knitted around an unwanted girl child, Sufiya Zinobia, who is the embodiment of shame, and her 'peripheral hero-husband Omar Khayyam, embodiment of shamelessness. Like their union, Pakistan as "Peccavistan" is for Rushdie itself an amalgamation of shame and shamelessness. *Shame* is a better diasporic expression than his earlier novel *Midnight's Children*. As Priyamvada Gopal opines, "*Shame* which breathes its favorite air in Pakistan, nevertheless, finds home across cultures and spaces, across the geography of human emotions."<sup>18</sup>

In *The Moor's Last Sigh* Salman Rushdie has shown his "experience of the plural and 'partial' tensions of diaspora that has encouraged a rigorous rethinking of nation, nationalism, resistance and representation... that above all stresses the ambivalence that characterizes the site of national contestation. The novel rewrites national space as a space of complex heterogeneity in which cultural differences articulate and produce imagined "constructions" of cultural and national identity."<sup>19</sup>

*The Moor's Last Sigh* is a hybrid novel that carries forward the legacy of *Midnight's Children*. It is a story of miscegenation and cultural intermingling. "Christians, Portuguese, and Jews, Chinese tiles prompting godless views, pushy ladies, skirts-not saris, Spanish shenanigans, Moorish crowns..."<sup>20</sup>

*The Ground Beneath Her Feet* is a novel about other world "a world like ours but different"<sup>21</sup> a world "that is like ours but set quite differently within those other heavens."<sup>22</sup> Its writing is "crazily plural and fizzingly demotic," because it "jiggles every

metaphor further than you thought it could go, letting it mean new thing throughout the novel.”<sup>23</sup>

*Shalimar the Clown* (2005) gives evidence of Rushdie’s cosmopolitanism and his international historical consciousness. In this fiction Rushdie “puts the past into present tense.”<sup>24</sup> He addresses “the past to come to terms with social and political present of-not one nation but the entire world.”<sup>25</sup>

In this novel, the oppression over Kashmiri Pundits is voiced. The novel rewrites Indian epic stories using codes of modern thrillers, adventures, stories political satires, folk stories and slapstic comedies. Rushdie seems to share India’s position as an insider/outsider. Though the novel is set in Kashmir, Rushdie voices the concept of borderless world and its implications:

“Everywhere was now a part of everywhere else. Russia, America London, Kashmir. Our lives, our stories, flowed into one another’s, were no longer our own, individual discrete. This unsettled people. There were collisions and explosions. The world was no longer calm.”<sup>26</sup>

In *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008), he “regurgitates all his other old concerns--magic realism, religion, power structures, globalization, colonization, history exile to name a few.”<sup>27</sup> This novel is a travelogue of Rushdie that extends from Venice to India of Mughal Period. Thus, the story runs from white to black that is from Occidental to Oriental. The novel deals with the plights two prominent diasporic characters namely Qara Koz who is an émigré to the west and Mogor dell’ Amore comes to India carrying a letter from Queen Elizabeth. The novel is an attempt to show how Rushdie negotiates the complexities of the diasporic experience in his various novels. *The Enchantress of Florence* may be validly considered his latest instance on the diaspora but from reading of this novel, it is clear that the two main protagonists of the novel Mogor del’ Amore and Qara Koz embody the diasporic experience. Interestingly Mogor del’ Amore’s journey is towards East while Qara Koz’s journey is towards the West – and East and West both accept the migrant at first and then rejects. It is best to sum up the paper in Rushdie’s own words: “Western civilization has been no more than a veneer; a native remains a native beneath his European jackets and ties.”<sup>28</sup>

And this perhaps explains why he or she resists assimilation.

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