

# MIGRANT EXPERIENCE IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S FICTION

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The latter part of twentieth century has witnessed a significant phenomenon of migration for various reasons ranging from anti-imperialist conflict, economic hardship to political turmoil. Writers from once colonized nations moved to European metropolises in search of better fortunes. This phenomenon of shift/ displacement from a peripheral province like Africa, Caribbean Island, India or Trinidad to European metropolis is one of the major concerns of Third world writing.

Living in a metropolis, the migrant individual feels estranged from his native land through his withdrawal is voluntary or a forced one. He is distanced from his home country, his people, his language and his culture. In a metropolis, the sense of un-belonging or displacement compels him to create his own 'space' in an alien environment. The creation of a space and shaping of his own identify becomes a highly complicated issue because of his antagonistic relationship with the metropolitan centre. The migrant has chosen his

present residence, from which once the colonizer subjected him for a long time. The oppressive presence of colonial masters in his home country not only succeeded in appropriating the native political system but also assumed control over other spheres like culture, language, education and literature. This leads to the disfiguration of the native scene ultimately resulting in the disjunction of native individual from his immediate environment. The situation has not changed altogether, even after the departure of colonial masters. Then how does the colonized migrant justify his presence in the metropolis of colonizer?

The migrant seems to be doubly displaced from his surroundings, i.e. once by colonial usurpation and secondly by his exit from his homeland. Therefore the condition of the colonized and the migrant are interrelated. It is also possible to argue that, the condition of migrancy is similar to the crises of modernity in the early twentieth century, as both are concerned with the disjunction

of past and search for cultural moorings. Meenakshi Mukherjee analyzing the nature of exile and migration recognizes a specific phenomenon of the 'exile of mind' in colonized societies<sup>1</sup>. Due to the long term subjugation, the writers and intellectuals remain outsiders in their own country without being physically separated which leads to the displacement of mind.

It is suggested that migration or expatriation impoverishes the artist as he is severed from his language and culture. The converse is also true that because of the dislocation itself his perceptions are sharpened and his bonds with the native soil are strengthened. The intense longing for his nation prompts him to travel back to his origins and reclaim his past. It is in its desire to reclaim the past that, the migrant writing exhibits obsessive concern with roots, nostalgia and a tendency to mythicize the lost country.

Broadly speaking, the reclamation of past is a major concern of the Third World writing, but the migrant writer's retrieval of past confronts a specific problem because of its ambivalent relationship with the metropolis of the colonizer. The longstanding presence of the colonizer has made such deep inroads into native societies that elimination of the colonizer has become an impossible task. Even after the liberation, it has become inevitable to the colonizer to exist with his

master's continuing legacy. Aspects of colonial culture such as, bureaucratic administration, English language, comforts of modernization, railways, rationality and other have rooted themselves with traditional values and systems in colonized societies.

In such a situation the migrant writer's project of a retrieving the past is compelled to acknowledge the coexistent social pattern of alien and the native. Discussing the shaping of independent local identities in post colonial writing, Hellen Tiffin refers to the inevitable dialectical interaction between the European and peripheral systems<sup>2</sup>. It should also be noted that since the recovery of pre-colonial purity is not possible in the post-liberation situation, the colonized individual must assimilate the alien and establish a synchronic hybrid identity. This is precisely the condition of migrant writer also. In migrant writing, the dual process of assimilation of the foreign and the construction or retrieval of the native self go simultaneously, resulting in creating a complex synchronic identity. The works of V.S Naipaul, George Lamming, Wole Soyinka, Derek Walcott, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Anitav Ghosh and others can be seen as attempts to understand the dominant concerns of migrant writing. However, the bunch of names do not represent a homogenous group. The different nationalities to which they belong to such as West Indies, Caribbean Islands,

Africa and India and their specific/peculiar colonial experience distinguishes each other in their approach to the condition of migration.

Meenakshi Mukherjee in her essay “The Exile of the Mind” considering different categories of exile, argues that for an Indian migrant writer in English the transplantation is not linguistic but also geographical<sup>3</sup>. Before his expatriation, the writer has already made his choice to write in English. In her estimation, his migration to an English country is more of a home coming rather than expatriation. However, most of the Indian migrant writers continue to negotiate with Indian reality to rediscover their roots, which may have been lost in the long spells of absence from home country. Kamala Markandaya’s works are mainly preoccupied with Indian setting and Raja Rao’s fictional imagination continues to be obsessed with Indian ethos and spirituality, deliberately excluding the western categories of experience from the fictional world. It is in this context, Salman Rushdie’s observations on migration and his fictional experiments based on such ideas, radically depart from the established notions of migration, identity, home and belonging. The remaining part of this paper attempts to analyze his views on migration and their relationship with his two major works.

To consider Rushdie as an Indian emigrant writer seems to be a farfetched idea, because of his early expatriation to Britain at the age of 14. His family migrated to Pakistan in 1964 but returned to India because of political uncertainty and economic hardship. This makes Rushdie’s sensibility more complex. That is why he constantly negotiates with both Indian and Pakistani realities. Now Rushdie remains in England as a constant fugitive because of the *Fatwa* of Ayotulla Khomeini.

It is suggested in the beginning that, the crisis of dislocation can be traced back to modernist search for roots. Elleck Bohemer observes that modernism is the beginning of global transculturation<sup>4</sup>. It is curious to study how the avant-grade modernists like Eliot, Joyce, Pound and others, all of them exiles for various reasons, confronted the problem of dislocation. In spite of the acute sense of loss of cultural continuity, writers like Eliot shaped their perception drawing from wide variety of sources. His **The Wasteland** can be a best example of trans-cultural representation.

Though Rushdie’s imagination suffers from cultural displacement resulting from migration, it refuses to accept the notion that the loss of inheritance weakens the creativity of an artist. In his book *Imaginary Homelands* (1991), the migrant has the pleasant freedom of choosing his parents!<sup>5</sup> In his second novel *Shame* (1983), the narrator with

his characteristic sarcasm, says that the idea of roots itself is a conservative myth designed to keep the individual confined to his place <sup>6</sup>. He confidently asserts that migration is a liberating experience by saying “We have performed the act of which all men anciently dream, the thing for which they envy birds, that is to say we have flown” (S,85).

This is not to say that the disjunction of past, culture and other anchors as a result of migration has not at all affected the mind of the writer. When the migrant writer urged by the sense of loss, makes an effort to reclaim his past he realizes that the total reclamation of past is not possible. The physical alienation has made his vision fragmented. It is only with the help of a fractured imagination that he can reconstruct his homeland. As Rushdie puts it in his *Imaginary Homelands*, “...he is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost”. In Rushdie’s view it is not possible to recreate a real homeland but he can only construct Indias of mind, imaginary homelands making the entire process an imaginative act.

Rushdie further observes that, because of the longstanding stay of the colonizer in colonized societies and the migrant writer’s conscious affiliation with the West, shaping his own identity becomes a highly complicated issue. He is of the view that both the colonial rule and migration have invalidated the categories of East, West, native,

alien and so on. Thus he has no hesitation to declare himself as a “mongrel self” and a “bastard of history” <sup>7</sup>. His fiction confidently assimilates the structures of East-West, native-alien and celebrates hybridity. He takes the popular Hindi hit, “*Mera Joota hai Japani, Ye patloon Inqlistani, Sar Pe lal topi Rusi, Phir bhi dil hai Hindustani*” as a theme song to define his major characters in *Midnight’s Children* and *The Satanic Verses*.

This confident and often polemical assimilation should not be considered as a mere gimmickry of facts. This has deeper political overtones also. By confidently assimilating the structures of East and West, Rushdie tries to break the inferiority of East and the long cherished superiority of the West. Since the total erasure of colonial ideas and the rediscovery of pre-colonial purity is impossible, the resultant cultural hybridity, commingling of notions is the only way to define the migrant experience. This mixing of mutually antagonistic categories helps him to reject the authoritative position of the master and breaks the distinctions of centre and periphery. Thus he asks “...and talking about Postcolonial attitudes, one of the things we have to do to liberate ourselves from, is the idea that we must exclude western culture, if we are going to be free. That in itself is a colonial attitude. Why should we?” <sup>8</sup>. It is in it context that Rushdie considers the migrant experience as a liberating force.

Two important works of Rushdie can be taken to illustrate the above ideas. In *Midnight's Children* the momentous historical events of pre and post independence India such as, Jallianwallabagh massacre of 1919, Independence of India, death of Mahatma Gandhi, language riots, Indo-Pak war and the declaration of emergency coincide with the family history of Dr. Aziz, Ahmed Sinai and Saleem Sinai. In a way the personal history of Saleem's family becomes the allegory of India's political upheavals. Rushdie continuously synchronizes the nation's past/present history and establishes an intertwining relationship between them. Elsewhere it is suggested that Saleem Sinai, whose birth coincides with the birth of the nation is modeled upon Rushdie himself. In spite of his prolonged stay in West, Rushdie continues to consciously associate himself with his nation's historical and political events.

By synchronizing the nation's history with the personal story of Saleem Sinai, Rushdie attempts to construct history through individual perception. History is not seen as a chronology of events rather it is filtered through individual experience. In a way, the individual's construction of historical process is similar to that of migrant writer's effort to reconstruct past. It is also possible to argue that the novel's effort to reconstruct the nation's historical/political process by way of

individual experience itself can be considered as the migrant writer's attempt to retrieve his past.

As Rushdie himself has suggested earlier, since it is not possible to recall the disjuncted past totally, it can only be constructed in fragments. That is why when Dr. Aziz meets his future wife Naseem Ghani, a perforated sheet similar to *pardah*, is held between them. Through the perforated sheet, Dr. Azeez sees different parts of her body, i.e. in fragments and falls in love with her. The legacy of Dr. Aziz's fragmented viewing of Naseem Ghani recurs in Saleem Sinai's life which condemns him to see his life and the history of his nation in fragments. The perforated sheet becomes an appropriate metaphor, by which the novelist defines the fragmented reality of the novel. The fragmented vision of the perforated sheet can be seen as the legacy of displacement, which symbolizes migrant writer's reconstruction of experience in fragments. Like Ahmed Sinai, who carves an image of Naseem Ghani bit by bit, the migrant constructs his experience only by connecting the fragments of memory.

His next novel *Shame* chronicles the historical and political incidents of Pakistan. The narrator confesses that he has learnt Pakistan only in slices. Therefore he says "I think what I am confessing is that, however I choose to write about over there, I am forced to reflect that world in

fragments of broken mirrors.... I must reconcile myself to the inevitability of the missing bits” (S 69). Since the vision of his country’s reality is fragmented, the writer can reclaim the past with various source like history, memory, newspaper, old films reports, jokes and the like.

Both *Midnight’s Children* and *Shame* present some interesting instances which can be considered as paradigmatic of the mixed, hybrid nature of Indian at Pakistan societies. In *Midnight’s Children*, at the precise instant of India’s arrival of independence on August 15 two children Saleem Sinai and Shiva are born. Shiva is actually the child born to the illicit relationship between the Englishman William Methwold and the street singer’s wife Vanita. When both the children are born at the midnight hour, the nurse Mary Pariera swaps them, thus Saleem grows in Vanita’s slum and Shiva in Saleem’s household.

The swapping of babies, which twists the fates of children, creates such a situation that the “midnight children” grow with parents who are not really their parents! In *Shame*, Omar Khayyam who is the symbolic representation of Pakistan does not know who his parents are but he was born after the first ever party hoisted by Shakil Sisters for some English officers. The exchange of babies and the mixed inheritance of principal characters in the novels illustrate the cross cultural, hybrid nature of

India and Pakistan. By presenting the examples of bastardy, Rushdie makes it clear that the notion of pure native past itself is a myth. Thus there is no attempt to mythicise the past in Rushdie. Since it is not possible to define the native reality in exclusive terms, the cross cultural composition must be acknowledged in any effort of reconstruction of past. Post colonial theorists call this cross cultural condition as the result of “colonial bastardy”.

However, this cross cultural phenomenon is not confined to thematic level only. The form of the novel reflects the rich cultural matrix represented in both the novels. The structure of the novel becomes a site upon which different genres and different attitudes are assimilated. Both the novels draw upon the generic features of realism, allegory, fantasy, satire, autobiography and oral narratives to mediate between different experiences. Though they chronicle the historical events of the nations like realist novels, they can be read as the autobiography of protagonists. For Rushdie, the mode of fantasy in *Midnight’s Children* gives immense imaginative freedom to forge a relationship between the past and the present. Rushdie’s adoption of fantasy narrative, which develops simultaneously with the realistic narrative, allows him to establish a historical continuity between history and the individual. The overlappings between realist and fantasy narratives make the novel a hybrid text. The fantasy narrative proves to be a means of ‘form

giving” which combines the incoherent categories of nation and the individual.

The choice of fantasy in Rushdie is not just a mere imitation of Gabriel Gracia Marquez as it is pointed out by many critics. Fantasy is the prominent mode of literary expression in East. Arabian Nights, Aesop’s fables, Jataka tales, Pancha-tantra, Devaki Nandan Khatriji’s trilogy *Chandrakanta* are the best examples of fantasy narratives. The choice of fantasy links Rushdie with the age old narrative tradition and helps him to reaffirm his Indian ethos and cultural traits. It should also be noted that the rationalist model of realist narrative cannot accommodate the divergent reality of India. The shared reality of tradition-modernity, native-alien, urban-rustic can only be encapsulated in the mixed narrative forms and realism and fantasy.

In *Shame* Rushdie more explicitly refers to the issue of migrancy. In the novel it is not the individual who is affected by the problem of dislocation, rather the country of Pakistan itself suffers from displacement. Referring to the process of separation of Pakistan and subsequently Bangladesh from India, the narrator says that here the nations have migrated, not merely the individuals, which is the worst example of displacement. Owing to its disjunction from India, Pakistan suffers from historylessness and the loss of

inheritance. Thus Rushdie considers Pakistan as an incarnation of double shame, firstly by the denigration of colonialism and secondly by the secession from India. Because of this double sense of shame, as a corollary, Pakistan suffers from shameless political uncertainty.

The political critique offered by both the novels can be taken as potential observations on the native socio-political reality. In *Midnight’s Children* Saleem Sinai, who is the very embodiment of India’s independence, degenerates into a non entity, which symbolizes the post independence disillusionment. Further the autocratic regime of Indira Gandhi during the emergency brings down all the hopes of nation. In *Shame* the political vendetta between Raza Hyder and Iskander Harappa, based on the fierce power struggle between Zia-Ul-Haq and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in Pakistan, leads to chronic instability in the country. By allegorizing the degenerative examples of native political systems, Rushdie suggests that the much denounced colonial oppression and the much trumpeted native political autonomy are one and the same. After the liberation from the clutches of colonialism, native political systems also proved to be highly repressive and dictatorial as exemplified by the regimes of Indira Gandhi, Zia-Ul-Haq and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. The degeneration of native political systems shatters the myth of purity, and integrity of native societies.

That is the reason why Rushdie's imagination does not suffer from acute sense of loss and nostalgia for the lost country. It confidently moves forward to assimilate the foreign. It is in this sense that Rushdie's representations of past are devoid of mythicization and nostalgia which are commonly found in migrant writing.

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