

The Themes of Exile, Expatriation, Identity Crisis and Alienation in the Stories of Salman Rushdie, “East, West”

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Abstract

In modern art and literature, the theme alienation is often explored to focus on the individual's feelings of alienness towards the society, the family and towards himself. Sometimes this alienness becomes worse or pathological through a confrontation with the foreign culture. The dictionary meaning of the word 'alienation' is to make hostile where previously friendship had existed'. Therefore, in the case of the expatriate this would imply a sort of hostile distancing from the homeland as well as from the adopted country. In the case of the writers, the style and content of their writings have been greatly influenced by the extent to which they have been able to identify and adapt to their surroundings. As Gurbhagat Singh says, "Expatriate writing in its theory and practice, is

the work of the exile who has experienced unsettlement at the existential, political and metaphysical levels. With this experience, he/she has unsettled the philosophical and aesthetic systems".¹ The feeling of alienation in their adapted country makes them write about people and events typical of their country. So those who have been able to 'identify' with their new host country are blessed with bi-cultural perceptions that enable them to write from a wider and more exciting angle. The word 'identity' means 'to identify, 'to become identical' which means becoming the same as or essentially alike, the word 'identity' is further explained as assimilation. It can be on many levels psychological, sociological, linguistic, cultural, and emotional. Though the words immigration and expatriation seem to be synonyms, there is a thin line of difference between the two words. The term expatriation focuses on the native land that has been left behind, while the word immigration tells about the country into which one has come to settle down and to make his home. According to Stainslaw Barnezak, the word "Exile" and "Expatriate" and "emigrant" are sad prefixes that conjure "state of exclusion".² The expatriate lives on his ex- status while the immigrant celebrates his present in the new country and tries to establish well in his host country. Rushdie in his "East, West", implicit his own experiences as exile through the protagonists in nine stories very effectively.

Keywords: Salmon Rushdie, Exile, Expatriation, Identity Crisis, Alienation, Short stories, "East, West"

Introduction

The stories of Salman Rushdie in, "East, West" depict the themes of Exile alienation, expatriation and assimilation. But his depiction of alienation and expatriation is somewhat different. Robert Coover comments "There are nine stories in this volume, three each in each section, with 'thesis (East), 'antithesis', (West), and final synthesis, (East, West), where in the twin do meet".³

Just as tolerance, liberty and freedom are noted with the west so too are illiberalism, misunderstanding impute to Islam. His publication of Satanic Verses has led a great agitation among the Muslim countries. On February 14, 1989, Khomeini issued a Fatwa that condemned Rushdie to death and called for his execution. Prior to Fatwa, he made his living as a mere writer, as Blythe Will says,

"Rushdie wrote bawdy. Outsize, polyglot novels, comic, contentious investigations of exile, displacement and home of what happens when a person is translated from one culture to another. Formerly undulated to the fiction of Sterner, Swift, Kafka, Grass, Gar is a Marquez and de Assis, they were brassy bud, raucous books, hymns to mineralization that stated their claim to the world's attention by literary-anyway shouting".⁴

Rushdie, whether one likes it or not, commands the spotlight by having become the living embodiment of his works and themes. He has been cast into the exile not just from his first life as a Muslim born in Bombay but from his adopted life as an Indo-Anglican writer educated at

Cambridge, living in London. It is at this juncture his first collection of short stories "East, West" was published. It was a call as to how to make a home for oneself in a state of exile. Though the theme is familiar, his treatment of it is fresh and appealing. Will Blythe, I rightly comments on these stories as, "The stories in this volume are warm, quiet, tender and endearing composed by a refugee leafing through ancient photographs of a homeland the through time and distance has come to seem as impossible as a miracle. But then, that must be how Rushdie feels about the life he enjoyed before Feb 14th 1989." ⁵

The first part 'East' comprises three stories set in India and Pakistan. The first story "Good Advice is Rarer than Rubies" is about Miss Rehna, a would be immigrant to Hartford, London, refuses to go to London in favor of life in the East. She goes to the consulate to get visa to England. Her husband is more than twenty years elder than her and he looks stranger to her. Therefore, she does not want of leave India to Hartford, London. Immigration is a dream to the desirable, but not to the people like Rehna who is so independent and self-reliable woman. According to her East is the best and more desirable than the West. Her alienation from her husband is in contrast with her love for her own country.

In the second story, "Free Radio" Rushdie deals with the theme of alienation. The protagonist, Ramani, a rickshaw puller alienates himself from the village he has been living

from his childhood for two reasons. One is he has been cheated by the government. The government announced to give a free radio for all the people who undergo family planning operation. But unfortunately when Ramani has undergone the operation, the scheme is withdrawn by the government. Therefore, he develops a kind of dislike over his village, because he feels guilty, and thinks that everyone in the village will ask him about the radio. Another thing is that his friends have boasted him that he looks like Amitab Buchan and advice him to go to Bombay to try in cinemas. So he decides to leave the village for Bombay. Unfortunately, he never feels at home in Bombay. He writes a letter to the village schoolteacher boasting up of his success as a cine actor only to satisfy his sense of alienation from his native village. As the village schoolteacher comments,

*"They were wonderful letters, brimming with confidence, but whenever I read them, and sometimes I read them still, I remember the expression which came over his face in the days just before he learned the truth about his radio, and the huge mad energy which he had poured into the act of conjuring reality, buy an act of magnificent faith, out of the hot thin air between his cupped hand and his ear."*⁶

Thus the village schoolteacher only knows the feelings of Ramani and his longing to be in the village.

In the second set of the stories, "West" Rushdie comes out as one who is discontented with his adopted land. The three stories are satirical in tone, particularly "At the

Auction of the Ruby Slippers." Rushdie expelled his rigorous hatred against Khomeini who declared fatwa in a symbolic way. It reminds us of his great book Satanic Verses which is burnt in many Islamic countries. The story throws light on the multitudes of the world who gathered at the auction of the Ruby Slippers. Rubin Merle rightly says,

"The only firmly held values seem to be those of the market place on the one hand and religious fundamentalism on the other, as all bidders compete for a piece of Hollywood memorabilia. The fundamentalists openly stated that they are interested in buying the magic footwear only in order to burn it and this is not, in the view of the liberal Auctioneers, a reprehensible program. What price tolerance if the intolerant are not tolerated also?"⁷

The narrative of the story is set in the present tense, so that it clearly speaks of the mentalities of the contemporary society, and the writer's own predicament. "Exiles, displaced persons of all sorts, even homeless tramps have turned up for a glimpse of the impossible,"⁸ with a hope that one day they would be transported to their homeland. There is the tone of nostalgia for the lost world of the forties and the reverence on ruby slippers because the alienated, "believe they can make us invulnerable to witches (and there are so many sorcerers pursuing us nowadays); because of their powers of reverse metamorphosis, their affirmation of a lost state of

normalcy in which we have almost ceased to believe and to which the slippers promise us we can return."⁹

Rushdie's longing to be in his homeland with his family is clearly depicted in these words. He is optimistic that someday or the other his condition will be improved. To men like him, "Home' has become such a scattered, damaged, various concept in our present travails. There is so much to yearn for. There are so few rainbows any more. How hard can we expect even a pair of magic shoes to work? They promised to take us home, but are metaphors of homeliness comprehensible to them, are abstractions permissible? Or will they permit us to redefine the blessed world."¹⁰

All the people who want to buy the ruby slippers aspire to bring back their lost world. They longed that with the help of the slippers they would go back to their homelands. So also, Rushdie who has been exiled from his homeland wants to satisfy his sense of alienation by creating this surrealistic quality of the Ruby slippers.

The final section of the collection titled, 'East, West' deals with the Indian residents neither of India nor of England. They bring together the east, west, and focus on crossing between them. In "Chekov and Zulu" Rushdie introduces boyhood friends who share the companionship and interests in science and scientific fiction. They are too much interested in Star Trek. They are given the nicknames after the serial as Chekov and Zulu and the names have become the

central metaphor to the theme of the story. In this story, Rushdie presented his own interest in scientific fiction. Chekov and Zulu are two brothers, though they belong to two different tastes with different mentalities. Chekov is a bookworm and Zulu is interested in athletics. They continue to be friends in England as diplomats exploring new worlds and new civilizations. Both the friends have good jobs, one as acting Deputy High Commissioner and the other as an intelligence officer. The massacre after the death of Smt. Indira Gandhi gets in between them. Zulu, who is very honest and sincere in his profession, is alienated from both his profession and community. As a true officer, he hands over the information about the Sikh terrorists to Chekov.

In India, he sets up a private security service. Chekov too returns to India and joins in Indian government service. Unfortunately, he is appointed as special security to Rajiv Gandhi and is killed in bomb explosion. The terrorism here is homemade. It is not of the West or from London. The irony is that Zulu, who is alienated by his community and alienated by his profession, survives and prospers in life, whereas Chekhov, who has joined Indian Security service, is killed in the bomb explosion. As far as alienation is concerned Zulu and Chekov both are alienated, one is alienated from the profession and community and the other is alienated from the world itself.

The final story in "East West" is "The Courter", in which Rushdie presents a woman, who is 60 years of age. She is

transported to London as ayah to look after the children of an Indian based Muslim family in London. The narrator of the story is one among those children. She is called certainly Mary because she never says simple yes or no, but always uses "certainly" after yea or no. The liberty and freedom of alienation instigates her to strike up friendship with a widower, who is known to the family as mix-up, but his real name is Mecir, from Eastern Europe. The chess game has become their language of love. Mary, the Indian is not at home in the West. This alienness is suggested in the use of language. She is unable to pronounce 'p' in English, but not in her vernacular. In due course, she gets heart trouble. The trouble strikes the doctor, who finds nothing wrong with her general health. One day in summer, Mary announced she would like to go back to India. The reason for the attack she diagnoses is the homesickness and requests the narrator's father to send her back to India "... God knows for what all we come over to this country, But I can no longer stay. No Certainly not her determination was absolute." ¹¹

Mary does not feel at home in London that she is just like Rehna in "Good Advice is Rare than Rubies" who feels, happy and content only in her homeland. The narrator after he becomes a Youngman confesses that he refuses to choose. "... 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."¹² Will Blythe comments on this sentence, "Rushdie makes it explicit that he resides principally in a state of doubt.

Rootlessness, it seems, is his—and every intellectuals—Native country. But that has its compensations. The writer is entitled to the joy of the nomad, migrating from one land to another, blithely crossing artificial borderlines, at home everywhere and nowhere."¹³

It is similar to the position of Rushdie with the narrator of the story, who is alienated from his homeland and is not satisfied with the host country. In an interview with M.L.Pandit when a question is asked about being away from his homeland, he says, "My family was here till I was seventeen, and so India represents a very large piece of me. I am not so much nostalgic as I have a feeling of remaining connected and not wanting that connection to be broken. I am not very nostalgic about India, but I keep coming back, and there are things in India which...."¹⁴ He does not want to stay in the West and does not allow to enter the East. His longing for the homeland is unfulfilled and everlasting. In his own words, "When I started thinking of calling the stories East, West the important part of the title was the comma. Because it seems to me that I am that comma, or at least that I live in the comma."¹⁵

Conclusion

The collection of stories "East, West" is a call as to how to make a home for oneself in a state of exile. The protagonists in the first part of the collection are alienated from their families, society. Rushdie's sense of longing for the homeland and for his family is clearly depicted in the

stories in "West". Multitudes who gather at the auction place want to buy the slippers to go back to their homelands, so also Rushdie who has been exiled from his homeland wants to satisfy his sense of alienation by creating a surrealism aura around the ruby slippers. The final section of the *East, West*, deals with the protagonists of Indian residents of England who belong neither to India nor to England. They bring together the East and West and focus on the crossing between them.

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