

## **Plural Worldview in Salman Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence***

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### **Abstract**

Salman Rushdie's status as an immigrant to Britain but writing about the Indian sub-continent allows him to posit himself as both an 'insider' and an 'outsider' of both cultures. Rushdie's hybrid identity as an Indian, now migrated to Britain, very well suits the technique of magic realism in order to raise voice for those who are marginalized because of their language, religion, caste and nationality.

This research paper attempts to analyze Salman Rushdie's use of magic realist technique in his novel *The Enchantress of Florence* in order to depict a plural worldview. By using this technique Rushdie successfully blurs the boundary between fact and fiction. At the same time, this technique enables him to give voice to the historically marginalized

character Qora Koz, as the novel is his attempt to write history from below.

### **Keywords**

History, marginality, magic realism, postmodernism, hybridity, decolonization, Salman Rushdie, Dr. Nabarun Ghosh.

### **Introduction**

Salman Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008) weaves a multilayered, multcentred and multivocal story in which historical events and adventures of wonder promiscuously intermingle, defying any clear-cut boundary between reality and fantasy. Set in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, this historical novel mirrors contemporary sensibilities and apprehensions before the real and unreal were separated forever and doomed to live apart under different monarchs and separate legal systems.

The term 'magic realism' designates a mode of expression in which the realistic and the fantastic elements mingle together. In magic realist fictions magical things happen in a world of quotidian reality. And these inexplicable occurrences are treated by the writer as real as eating, drinking and other daily activities. Although the technique of magic realism is quite discernible in the earlier literary works like the 17<sup>th</sup> century work *Don Quixote* (1605) by Miguel de Cervantes, the early 20<sup>th</sup> century story "The Metamorphosis" (1915) by Franz Kafka etc., the Latin

American authors like Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Italo Calvino and others practiced it as a deliberate self-conscious technique. Other important writers of magic realism include Salman Rushdie, Toni Morrison, John Fowles, Gunter Grass, Angela Carter, Maxine Hong Kingston, Ben Okri, Andre Brink et al. They have incorporated the technique of magic realism in their works in order to represent the world and life in which magic and realism coexist and are felt and experienced by marginalized communities.

Magic realism was born and developed more or less side by side with literary theories that came up in contemporary times and critics do not deny its association with the theories like postmodernism, postcolonialism and feminism. One of the most important characteristics of magic realism is its subversive quality and it is this subversive quality which clubs magic realism with the aforementioned literary theories. In magic realism the marginalized and the dominated, either a character or a culture, finds voice to express itself. Magic gets equal importance like realism in magic realism. Thus, the essentialist ideology of the binary opposition, where magic is always inferior to realism, is made upside down which further relates magic realism to Bakhtinian 'carnavalesque'. Again the concept of subversion is the correlative here.

The much debated term postmodernism is generally considered to be in foremost association with magic

realism. One of the important characteristics of postmodernism is the multiplicity or fluidity which constrains postmodernist theorists to be clubbed into a particular school. This fluidity of postmodernism considers a text as a container of multiple meanings and truths, which are undoubtedly human constructs. In many magic realist texts it is found that the historical references not only contextualize a text in a particular time but also put a question mark on the truth content of the history. Like the postmodernists, magic realists also consider history to be coloured by individual consciousness. Therefore, according to them, there is no such textualized version of history which can claim it to be the only authentic representation of the historical facts. The versions of history that are available to us are created by the men of power in order to maintain their position of power. Magic realists break this hierarchy of power by their representation of history from the perspectives of the marginalized or the common human beings. Thus, they reject the 'grand narrative' and apply little 'micro-narratives' in order to give different versions of reality.

## **Plural Worldview**

Unlike the novels belonging to the initial stage of his career where he dealt with modern history, Rushdie, in *The Enchantress of Florence*, changes his settings to 16<sup>th</sup> century India and Renaissance Italy. It is his first novel where he has added a bibliographical source of the works that he has consulted to write the book. This novel talks

about the Mughal court of India and the Renaissance Florence through the magical tale of a European traveler named Mogor dell' Amore where he bridges the gap between the East and the West by an individual version of history that includes historical references and characters at the same time fictional and magical characters and incidents. It is important to note here that in this novel Rushdie uses magic realism to establish a plural version of history rather than to depict his postcolonial concerns about the orient.

Rushdie begins his story with a fairy-tale atmosphere and makes references to motifs such as the fountain of eternal youth as well as mythical characters such as mermaids. The novel opens with Mogor's arrival in Fatehpur Sikri in India and the city turns into a fairy-tale city from Mogor's point of view:

*In the day's light the glowing lake below the palace-city looked like a sea of gold....the legendary doorway to Paradise on Earth was somewhere close at hand? But when the sun fell below the horizon, the gold sank beneath the water's surface. Mermaids and serpents would guard it until the return of daylight. (Rushdie, 2009: 5-6)*

These opening lines suggest the fictionalized nature of historical texts where reality is only a perspective. Together with this fairy-tale nature of the text Rushdie blends the realistic element by introducing the historical characters such as the Mughal emperor Akbar, the Uzbek Shaibani Khan, and the Renaissance philosopher

Machiavelli. The historical existence of all the Mughal characters can be testified through the 16<sup>th</sup> century Memoir *Baburname*. In *Baburname* it is evident that Qara Koz, the enchantress of this novel, was the daughter of Makhdam Sultan Begum and Umar Sheikh Mirza. Rushdie, in this novel, brings this historically marginal character to the centre. The name Qara Koz is a modified version of the Urdu phrase *Qora Kagaz* which means 'blank paper'. The history of Qara Koz is like a blank paper in the official version of the Mughal history and Rushdie here intends to fill that blank paper by giving voice to her in his fictionalized version of history. Interestingly, whereas the real character Qara Koz has not been given a place in the official history, the imaginary character Jodha appeared in history. This suggests that history is nothing more than a story which is fictionalized by powerful history-makers. The first amendments on historical accounts are made in relation to the Emperor Akbar's imaginary queen Jodha. The court artists devise a physical appearance for her through their art that depicts Jodha's beauty as if she is real and the emperor grants her a place in historical records though she is a product of his imagination. While Jodha gets a place in history, Qara Koz is removed from history at her brother, Babar's order:

*In his fury Babar the Beaver cast his younger sibling out of history, decreeing that her name be stricken from all records and never be spoken by any man or woman in his realm. Khanzada Begum herself obeyed the order faithfully in spite of her great love for her sister, and slowly the memory of the hidden*

*princess and her Mirror faded. So they became no more than a rumour, a story half heard in a crowd, a whisper on the wind, and from that day until this one there had been no further word. (139)*

The accounts of these two characters (Jodha and Qara Koz) show that history is not only manipulated by the historians but also the history-makers.

Mogor's tale centres on the hidden Mughal prince Qara Koz who is believed to have magical powers and thus called the 'enchantress'. Here Rushdie marks feminine beauty as a magical power that can influence men. The character of Qara Koz contributes to Rushdie's magical realist intent through her historical origin and her magical power to enchant men. In addition to Qara Koz, Rushdie also portrays the imaginary queen Jodha with magical powers, endowing her with an enchantress image. With their extraordinary beauty and magical powers, these women characters lead people to transgress the boundaries between fact and fiction. While Jodha comes into existence out of Akbar's imagination, Qara Koz is reborn through Mogor's tale. Despite their lack of physical existence, both manage to influence masses and drag them into their fictional world through the speculations and the tales produced about their beauty and magical powers.

*By day the princes went out to walk the thronging streets [. . .] deliberately making herself visible as no great lady of Florence had ever allowed herself to be. The Florentines loved her for it....They threw flowers at her feet wherever she went. And slowly*

*her fearlessness shamed the city's young women of breeding into following out of doors. (350)*

Similarly, the imaginary character of Jodha is also depicted by Rushdie with the magical power of enchanting. Artists produce work of art inspired by her beauty while other queens start to feel jealous of her. As a result the concept of reality changes and the boundary between fact and fantasy is transgressed. The residents of Fatehpur Sikri get enchanted by these two magical women. Interestingly enough, Dashwanth, the court artist is so absorbed into his painting of Qara Koz that he finally falls in love with the painting itself and even one day he vanishes into one of the Qara Koz paintings (159).

In *The Enchantress*, Rushdie blends history and magic in order to problematize history. For example, Mian Tansen, the court musician and an expert in Hindustani classical music, ignites fire by the magical power of his music and his wounds are healed by the song of two girls.

*After Tansen sang the song of fire, the deepak raag, and made lamps at the house of Skanda run by the Skeleton and Mattress burst into flame by the power of his music, he was found to be suffering from serious burns....In Gwalior he was visited by two sisters, Tana and Riri, who were so distressed by his injuries that they began to sing megh malhar, the song of the rain. Soon a gentle drizzle began to fall on Mian Tansen even though he was lying in the shade. Nor was this was any ordinary rain. As Riri and Tana sang they removed the bandages from his wounds and as the rain washed his skin it became whole again. (245)*

This excerpt from the text, which depicts a purely magical event, shows that the magical music is as real as the historical events depicted in the text. Another example can be mentioned here regarding the infusion of magic to the narrative is the role played by Qara Koz on Bacha Saqaw's death.

*In her youth her brother Beaver King had been besieged in Samarkand by an Uzbek warlord named Lord Wormwood, who had demanded that she be given up to him as the piece of the Beaver's safe-conduct out of the city when he surrendered it. Then, to insult her, Lord Wormwood briefly gave her as a gift to his young water-career Bacha Saqaw, to use as he desired. Two days later Bacha Saqaw's body began to grow boils in every part, plague buboes hanging from his armpits and groin, and when they burst, he died. After that nobody tried to lay finger on the witch—until at last she yielded to Wormwood's gauche amours. (135)*

The passage shows how magic and reality are blended together in a hybrid world. Thus, Rushdie challenges the scientific and one-dimensional historical point of view.

Besides uniting the boundaries between the magic and the real In *The Enchantress*, Rushdie also blurs the cultural gap between the East and the West by using the technique of magic realism. Jodha and Qara Koz, representing the cultures of the East and the West respectively, are endowed with the magical powers of enchanting men. That is how Rushdie shows that magic is everywhere

depending on perspective. Jodha very aptly summarizes this point saying:

*Yes: this place, Sikri, was a fairyland to them, just as their England and Portugal, their Holland and France, were beyond her ability to comprehend. The world was not all one thing. 'We are their dream,' she had told the emperor, 'and they are ours.'* (60)

## Conclusion

The hybrid and heterogeneous nature of magic realism, being neither fully fantastic nor fully realistic, suits the hybridity of the contemporary realities that Rushdie tries to depict in his novels. His masterful yet innovative novel *The Enchantress of Florence* playfully mixes magical realism with biting social and political commentary. Rushdie's fiction has been strongly connected to readings of the hybrid and heterogeneous nation-state. In the novels of Rushdie, the national history, the society and postcolonialism are deeply researched. Many approaches to the novels of Morrison and Rushdie consider the representation of history and politics as primary to their novels, and see the magical element as wholly subordinate to this aspect. In fact, any attempt at reading a coherent political message into his novels must revise the suggestion that the magic is a force for reimagining national identity, for decolonization or for any kind of political subversion. *The Enchantress of Florence* represents a world where there are not one but multiple realities. In order to perceive these realities one must have a

pluralistic worldview where magic and realism exist side by side.

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