

Undoing the Sorcery of Nationalist Representations in History and Culture: A Neo/Transnationalistic Reading of Salman Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence*

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Nationalist representations, in the past, have proved to be the most powerful weapons against colonialism, realized in the form of national, emotive and cultural symbols; like the spinning wheel popularized by Gandhi as a symbol of *swaraj* in India. In the wake of postcolonial writings that emerged after Edward Said's *Orientalism*, the conflicting nature of nationalist representations, as signified in the history and culture of the ex-colonies were dissected/problematised. The very first cries of objection to the immutability of nationalist representations could be heard in the writings of theorists like Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson. Their denial to the very idea of 'nation' is purely postcolonial in motive, as they believe that the notion of 'nation' is Western in origin.

Benedict Anderson defines nation as "an imagined political community" (BP 68) and Ernest Gellner argues, "Nations like buildings are planned by people and built upon particular foundations - which also means that, like buildings, they can both rise and fall." (BP 68) John McLeod in his *Beginning Postcolonialism* observes: "a sense of mutual national belonging is manufactured by the performance of various *narratives, rituals and symbols* which stimulate an individual's sense of being a member of a select group." (69)

The idea of nation is perpetrated through the historical narrative of a nation and its cultural identity. Salman Rushdie in his *The Enchantress of Florence* cuts through the certainty of the historical narrative of a nation and the immutable assumptions of its cultural identity. It is indeed very typical of Rushdie to fight fundamentalism in every form. He adapts the most enchanting techniques to disprove histories' claim to a homogeneous truth and the affinity of a nation to an indigenous culture, neither of which make any sense in the postcolonial or neo-colonial milieu. Homi K. Bhabha in his *The Location of Culture* declares: "Nationalism is not what it seems and

above all not what it seems to itself... The cultural shreds and patches used by nationalism are often arbitrary historical inventions” (203).

Everything in *The Enchantress of Florence*, that entails the so-called spirit of nationalism and culture are projected in metaphors of dream and schizophrenia, those metaphors, that are characterized by Homi Bhabha as ‘ambivalence’ – “the narrative and psychological force that nationness brings to bear on cultural production and political projection is the effect of the ambivalence of the ‘nation’ as a narrative strategy” (TLOC.201) Jodha for example is narrated in the novel as Akbar’s schizophrenic creation, born out of his imagination as against the way history records her as a real princess. Akbar, actually, had also invented a religion, in his attempt to synchronize the best elements in all the religions in his empire. This act of creation or creativity is a pervasive aspect of the novel suggesting the flourishing period in art, and parallelly there is this ubiquity of magic equally felt in the depiction of the 15th century east and the west. So, like magic and art, nationalism, dynasties and the imperial culture are man-made. By such schizophrenic projections as Jodha or any other art, Salman Rushdie in his conversation with Jeffrey Eugenides, as stated in *The Enchantress of Florence*, suggests that any creation by humans for that matter, be it art, magic, nation or culture, is under the control of the creator till the moment of creation, after which the creator him/herself cannot control the way such thing as art, magic, nation and culture could evolve:

Well, this is the repeated theme in the book, about the created object or person or idea escaping the control of the person who creates that idea or person or object. And this is the thing I think which any of us who write are familiar with, that you’re not entirely— once you have set up your characters in a certain way, you’re no longer their master, you know, you have to serve the people you’ve created. You have to allow them to be them, rather than to be the person you want them to be, because you’ve already had your God-like moment in creating them, but after that, they’re them, they’re not you. (38)

Like Jodha the empires and nations are created by men, and cannot be controlled.

The historical narratives of a nation, too, are in a way, quasi-creations, that purely rely on the memory and idiosyncrasies of historians; in *The Enchantress of Florence* Akbar consults the older ladies in the family – his mother Hamida Banu and his aunt Gulbadan - to authenticate the tale of Niccolo Vespucci who calls himself Mogor dell’Amore: “When life got too complicated for the men of the Mughal court they turn to the old women for answers... - but before we take the next step we will ask the ladies, the Keepers of the Tales, who will let us know for sure” (EOF 129)

Historians are ‘the Keepers of Tales’. They differ among themselves like the women who climb the family tree, sorting out the branches of the genealogy.

All the enquiry is to verify whether Mogor dell’Amore (as per his claim) shares the Mughal lineage, whether he is born of the Dark Princess – Barbar’s sister who was taken as a spoil by Lord Wormwood (Shiban or Shaibani Khan), and later by the Persian King Ishmael and then by Ottoman.

Rushdie, himself, like a sorcerer builds a spell around the tale of Mogor dell’Amore - the yellow-haired foreigner, but means the narrative to be used to break the spell (himself), by his own craft. The many different interpretations on the younger sister of Babar are structured like an onion, one layer peeling out of the other, seeming to unravel the absolute truth. All this lead the reader into strengthening and not suspending his/her disbelief, about all kinds of narratives- be it art, or nation or magic, thereby deferring the possibility of absolute truth.

Akbar’s visitor claims that his mother was a princess of the true Chaghatai blood, a direct descendant of Genghis Khan, a member of the house of Timur, and the sister of the First Mughal Emperor of India, whom she called ‘the Beaver’ ... He knew nothing of dates or places, but only the tale as he had been told it... His mother’s name was Angelica and she was, he insisted, a Mughal princess, and the most beautiful woman anyone had ever seen, and an enchantress without compare, a mistress of potions and spells of whose powers all were afraid. (EOF134-135)

While Akbar, Birbal, Hamida Banu and Gulbadan think that the princess in question is princess Khanzada Begum who was returned to Babar, by the Persian King Shah Ismail, Gulbadan creates another ripple in the whirlpool, she says:

Allow me to remind you, O all-knowing king, that there were various princesses born to various wives and other consorts,’ Gulbadan said. The Emperor sighed a little; when Gulbadan started climbing the family tree like an agitated parrot there was no telling how many branches she would need to settle on briefly before she decided to rest... ‘There was Mihr Banu, Shar Banu and Yadgar Sultan.’ ‘But Yadgar’s mother Agha was not a queen,’ Queen Hamida interrupted haughtily. ‘She was only a concubine.’... ‘However,’ the queen added, ‘it must be conceded that even though Khanzada was first in years she was by no means first in looks, even though it was officially declared that she was. Some of the concubines’ girls were prettier by far. ...People said Khanzada was the pretty one because she was the eldest and it didn’t do to cross her in any way. But in truth the youngest princess of all was the great beauty and she had a pretty playmate and maidservant, too, a young slave girl who was just as beautiful and looked so much like her mistress that

people started calling her “the princess’s mirror”. And when Khanzada was captured by Shaibani the little princess and the Mirror were captured too, and when Princess Khanzada was liberated by Shah Ismail and sent home to Babar’s court the hidden princess and the Mirror remained in Persia (137-138)

The presence of the hidden princess (who later becomes the Enchantress of Florence, and who visits Akbar’s *khayal* meaning imagination or delirious vision), is both virtual/fantastic and real throughout the novel. Rushdie’s use of sorcery as a metaphor in characterizing the hidden princess can be but a warning against the truth claims of the historical and cultural representations which are retold from the enchanted past, the spell cast by either human error or design or the national narrative and hence has to be put to test.

The entire novel runs around the discovery of the truth behind the lineage of the yellow-haired foreigner, who claims that he is part Mughal, but the enchantress informs Akbar in his *khayal* that she is barren and leaves a hint that the foreigner might have been born of her maid servant, the Mirror: “I had a mirror, the hidden princess said. She was as like to me as my own reflection in water, as the echo of my voice. We shared everything, including our men. But there was a thing she could be that I could never become. I was a princess but she became a mother.” (EOF.441)

In the authorial narration marked off in italics font, the lineage of the foreigner (Mogor Dell Amore’s) is further complicated: “*Then a child is born, their child, the offspring of three parents, a boy with yellow-hair like his father.*” (EOF.429)

Rushdie’s ‘rag-bag narrative’ (Bhabha) or ‘narrative sorcery’ aims at breaking the spell, at undoing the sorcery, in the form of national narratives, historical truth and cultural identity; as they are all constructs of the human mind, which in all possibility is liable to be conditioned by extremely personal predilections, and also liable to change anytime, anyhow. Rushdie believes in the impermanence of things. The lake of the fabled, fertile Fatehpur Sikri goes dry overnight and is abandoned by Emperor Akbar:

He must abandon Sikri, must leave his beloved red city of shadow and smoke to stand alone in a place made suddenly dry, to stand for all time as a symbol of impermanence of things, of the suddenness with which a change can overtake even the most potent of peoples and mightiest of men. (EOF.437)

What is claimed to be the absolute truth can be but ‘shadow and smoke’, and Rushdie only hopes that we look through it and not at it.

The cultural plurality that Rushdie himself epitomizes (as a migrant) validates the depth of his belief in the open-endedness and liminality of nationalist representations, most powerfully endorsed in history and culture. Bhabha looks at Rushdie as, “the history that happened elsewhere, overseas; his postcolonial, migrant presence does not evoke a harmonious patchwork of cultures, but articulates the narrative of cultural difference which can never let the national history look at itself narcissistically in the eye” (241).

The neo-colonial implications in the novel mark the next important idea in the evolution of human knowledge and experience, one that involves human and ecology, which is way wider than the imperialistic and nationalistic thoughts that engaged the world ever since the industrial revolution. This ‘go-back-to-nature’ move, in line with the feudal outlook towards nature, completes the circle, and apparently eco-centric ideas address a wounded and depleted nature against the divinely abundant feudal surrounding. Akbar leaves Fatehpur Dikri, knowing it is going to dry up.

The court would move and many of its servitors and nobles would come too, but for the peasants there was no place on this, that last caravan to leave the caravanserai. For the peasants there was what there always would be: ‘nothing’. They would scatter into the immensity of Hindustan and their survival would be their own business. Yet they do not rise up to slaughter us, the emperor thought. They accept their paltry fate. They see us abandon them, they serve everyone still. This too is a mystery.

It took two days to prepare the grand migration. There was enough water for two days. At the end of that time the lake had emptied and there was only a muddy hollow where once that sweet water had glittered. Even the mud would be caked and dried in two days. On the third day the royal family and its courtiers departed on the Agra road, the emperor sitting upright on his steed, the queens lustrous in their palanquins. Following the royal procession were the nobles, and after them the immense cavalcade of their servants and dependants. Bringing up the rear were bullock-carts on which the skilled workers had loaded their goods - butchers, bakers, masons, whores. For such people there was always a place. Skills could transport, but land could not. The peasants, tied as if by ropes to land that was arid and dying, watched the great procession leave. Earlier in the novel, Rushdie, describes the Fatehpur Sikri, with water as the emperor.

Beyond the tower of the teeth, stood a great well and above it a mass of incomprehensibly complex waterworks machinery that served the many-cupolaed palace on the hill. Without water we are nothing, the traveller thought. Even an emperor, denied water, would swiftly turn to dust. Water is the real monarch and we are all its slaves. (EOF 9)

Rushdie homogenizes the world, irrespective of the East-West differences, by ending the novel on the note of ecology that sees the world as one, undivided, post-nationalistic, neo-nationalistic and trans-nationalistic. The world in the tapestry of history has different disconnected patterns, but on the whole they are indistinguishable, borderless. Rushdie's fusion of fact and fiction, in this book is a strategy he uses to suggest the trans-nationalistic evolution of the world. He merges the world of magic with that of material reality. He seems to believe that frontiers could be crossed; and he is one that lived and wrote across borders.

The enchantress in the fiction, is shown to have been lost forever, and the only time she (re)visits India is in Akbar's delusion, and this Enchantress of Florence is proved to be the lost Princess, Babar's sister, whereas the enchantress in real history and the lost Mughal Princess are not the same woman. The divisions in the political borders of the world, is also like the dream during which the enchantress visits Akbar. The colonial and the postcolonial ideology on space and frontier are pragmatic but ineffective when it comes to the universality of human lives and thoughts. They (historical and nationalistic representations of space and frontier) are like the supernatural creations humans create, but when left on their own, they become independent and start ruling the creator. So it may be that this is everyone's problem with gods that create them, and then they become too powerful for us to uncreate" (38).

Rushdie's use of art in both the Renaissance Florence and the age of Akbar, both of which had had a golden age for arts in the fifteenth century, suggests that art, like nature is invincible, which is his ultimate claim, that art is imperishable and unconquerable, empires are not so.

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