

**Review**

**Postcolonial Kitsch and writing History: Critical  
Inquisitions in Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*  
and *The Ground beneath Her Feet***

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The paper explores postmodern playfulness and blurring of boundaries vis-a-vis postcolonial re-writing history in Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* and *The Ground beneath Her Feet*. It shows the impossibility of locating the cultural network and social picture of "Mother India" for a stable nation and unified identity in colonial and postcolonial histories. It explores the residual effect of colonial domination and the transnational setting in the wide frame of Western and postcolonial culture, through abundant references to Greek mythology, European philosophy, contemporary texts, and at the same time mixes them with four decades' history of the growth of rock music and the stars of rock 'n' roll producing the effect of "kitsch". The paper also emphasizes the juxtaposition of personal and national narratives in the novels to expose the traumas underlying postcolonial Indian identities, the lasting influence of British culture, and the inaccessibility of a purely "Indian" past. Finally, it focuses on the significance of the postmodern devices like unreliable narrator, metafiction, pastiche, etc. in construction of the national history of India which is repressed in colonial violence.

**Key Words:** kitsch, writing history, postcolonialism, colonial violence, metafiction

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**INTRODUCTION**

The condition of postcoloniality has undergone considerable reallocation due to "global cultural flow" since 1990. It is equally transformed by neo-colonialism, transnationalism, and the "third-culture" that emerges from globalization and cosmopolitanism, and therefore, to "circle the downspouts of empire" in strictly pedagogical terms has become debatable. In recent times, the nation India, like many other countries, is dispossessing the idea of "imagined communities" to "imagined worlds" and in such conditions the idea of postcolonialism needs

reconsiderations (Ashcroft *et al*, 1995, p. 123). Postcolonial also overlaps with postmodernism. It is not only the matter of common prefix or the contemporaneity of the two enterprises but it rages debates whether the post-colonial is the postmodern or whether it is its very antithesis. Using the term postmodernism as a mode of describing art that is paradoxically self-reflexive and yet grounded in political and historical actuality can be one of the mode of submerging the two forms in one. The fiction of writers Salman Rushdie, Margaret Atwood, Marquez,

and Toni Morrison come in this category. Postcolonial literature, on the one hand, is "informed by the imperial vision" (p.172) it also "possesses a strong political motivation that is intrinsic to its oppositionality" (Hucheson, 1989, p. 150). Whereas postmodern fiction is politically ambivalent: its critique coexists with an equally real and equally powerful complicity with the cultural dominants within which it inescapably exists (p. 150).

The aim of this paper is to explore the embedded Indian history as recounted by Salman Rushdie in his novels *The Moor's Last Sigh* and *The Ground beneath Her Feet* by using postmodern devices succeeds portraying the contemporary situation of postcolonial nation in a globalized and multicultural world. Rushdie in both of his novels uses postmodern devices to the extent that the postcolonial becomes kitsch. The coalition of personal and national in the novels reveal the traumas underlying postcolonial Indian identities, the lasting influence of British culture, and the inaccessibility of a purely "Indian" past. The thesis of the paper is to explore the national history constructed through the postmodern devices like unreliable narrator, metafiction, pastiche, and semi-serious and semi-ironic quotations. It investigates the contribution of historical reference mixed with fantasy and imagination throughout the texts in postcolonial kitsch.

Kitsch, a German term, refers to a form of art that is considered as inferior, tasteless copy of an extant style of art or a worthless imitation of art of recognized value. The concept is associated with the deliberate use of elements that may be thought of as cultural icons. While making cheap mass-produced objects that are unoriginal, it also refers to the types of art that are aesthetically deficient (whether or not being sentimental, glamorous, theatrical, or creative) and that make creative gestures which merely imitate the superficial appearances of art through repeated conventions and procedures. The contemporary definition of *kitsch* is considered derogatory, denoting works executed to indulge in popular demands alone and purely for commercial purposes rather than works created as self-expression by an artist. The term is generally reserved for unsubstantial and gaudy works that are calculated to have popular appeal and are considered pretentious and shallow rather than genuine artistic efforts. In postmodernist literature it refers to anything seen as popular in taste.

Though, postcolonial and the postmodern are two different domains, but the fiction of Rushdie tries to underscore certain points of similarity, which undermines the humanist notions of subjectivity, self and identity. Hutcheon identifies three zones or areas of overlap between the postmodern and the post-colonial: "formal, thematic and strategic" (Hucheson, 1989, p. 151). The formal aspect is concerned with the use of magic realism, a technique used in postmodern and postcolonial fiction, challenges the genre distinctions and the conventions of

realism. The thematic part incorporates both the mutual grounding in and reaction to the project of the meta-discourse of modernity, that is, it challenges Eurocentric universal values. In other words, it rejects monolithic and homogenous for multiplicity, marginality, diversity and heterogeneity in history. The postmodern and the postcolonial also come together because of the predominant non-European interpretation of modernism as "an international movement, elitist, imperialist, 'totalizing,' willing to appropriate the local while being condescending toward its practice" (p. 152). Postmodernism and postcolonialism contest the imperialist devaluing of the "other". The "strategic" point of convergence between the postmodern and the postcolonial refers to "the use of the trophy of irony as the doubled or split discourse" that subverts the notion of authenticity or originality from within (p. 154). It is in this state, the novels "panders to the confusion which reigns in the taste" of the conventional reader and such condition give birth to 'kitsch'.

While applying it to postcolonial literature, especially to the fiction of Salman Rushdie, it refers to the contemporary issues that are dealt with in the post independence phase where cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism are everyday reality across the globe. Thus, in postcolonial literature, it refers to the contemporization of the representation of postcolonial states in recent times. Also, in postcolonial kitsch there is a deliberate use of social/ political icons to produce the required effects. Rushdie in both of his novels in recounting the history of India portrays its significance in a global and multicultural world.

*The Moor's Last Sigh* considered as the sequel to *Midnight's Children* narrates the history of the nation as a complex set of heterogeneity. The narrator Moor like Salim Sinai in *Midnight's Children* narrates his family history against the national backdrop and jostles the events of India's contemporary history *vis-à-vis* the historical accounts of Spain which runs in the background to delineate the multicultural, multiethnic, and multilingual situation of contemporary India. The novel investigates the gaps, slippages, and hidden secrets of Indian history and presents its impurity in all forms. Thus, revisiting the wounds remind the reader of the historical crises in the nation's history where the nation as family failed to hold its members together. It does so by bringing together the events from the nation's colonial past, communal strife, Indira Gandhi's Emergency, the rise of the neo-colonial elite to the current sectarianism. The narrator, Moor tells the story of four generations of his family from the last four decades of the nineteenth century right up to the narrative present of 1992 by tracing the fortunes of his family with the complex, allegorical relation to the fate of the Indian nation. As in the case of Salim Sinai, the genetically "impure" protagonist of *Midnight's Children*, the mixed identity of the narrator Moor is made parallel

the heterogeneous composition of the Indian nation. The narrative in the novel begins just after the independence to encompass the problems of growing authoritarian politics, corruption, illiteracy and “poverty associated with the post-independence history of India to the rise of Hindu fundamentalism in 1989 and its aftermath” (Mohit *et al*, 2006, p. 73).

In *The Ground beneath Her Feet*, Rushdie positions fabulous and improbable private lives on a large historical set as a metaphor for political and cultural events. Here, the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is retold as two Indian lovers who become international rock stars symbolic of recent Western and postcolonial culture. This is Rushdie's New World novel, half of it set in New York, with some major events in Mexico. The very first chapter of the novel is entitled as “The Keeper of Bees” explicitly hints to the figure of Aristaeus, the bees’ keeper in Virgil’s poem which embodies going back to the mythical Greek narration. The narrator Mr Umeed merchant, also known as “Rai” is the favourite friend, lover and official photographer, namely a “chum, shutterbug and image-stealer (Rushdie, 1999, p. 5)” of Vina Apsara, a forty year old rock star he knows and loves from his childhood in Bombay. The characters in the novel are often doubles like Rai who is the narrator and photographer performing the duties of an oral art and a visual art.

For doing so, he uses postmodern techniques like unreliable narrator, metafiction, magic realism, intertextuality and the like. As the narrator, Saleem Sinai in *Midnight's Children*, who presents his narration for fulfilling Padma’s demand of a linear story, the narrator Moor is forced to write his family story to fulfil the demands of the painter Vasco Miranda in the company of Aoi Ue, the Japanese painting restorer who shares captivity with him and hears his tale, “dragged [him] down to earth” (Rushdie, 1996, p. 421). Thus, in the both the novels the narrators justify their innocence about the digressions, gaps and the particular mode of narration which is an offshoot of their affected condition. In *The Ground beneath Her Feet* the narrator who proclaims to be “an event junkie” (1999, p. 14) recounts the events of past life of Vina Apsara to “generate new meaning from the putrefying carcass of what is the case” (p. 22). Thus, the very position of the narrator as unreliable, sanctions the discourses he creates in the novels. The narrator, moor, in the novel oscillates between the various images of nation and the reader. He uses different palimpsests to define himself as national spokesman in order to naturalize the nation as family metaphor. Challenges to this metaphor come again and again in the novel when the authority of the narrator as reliable is questioned. In *The Ground beneath Her Feet* the narrator who is a rival in love with the main protagonist for the same lady, Vina Apsara, appropriates his narration as he says “In this telling, therefore, nothing will be spared. Vina, I must betray you, so that I can let you go” (p. 22).

The second technique used by Rushdie in the novels is metafiction which aims to align the reader with the author at the expense of the fictional subject. This is done in the novels by employing diverse literary allusions and by regularly addressing the reader in a voice that does not quite match that of the ostensible narrator. In *The Ground beneath Her Feet* the narrator says “But I mustn’t get too far ahead of my tale.”(p. 36) and breaks the illusions of a realist narrative. In the same way the narrator in the novel *The Moor's Last Sigh* addresses the reader directly in anticipation of questions he or she is probably asking: “Control, please, your horses”( 1996, p. 70). The novel also reads Moor’s musings on what to believe about his past as an authorial remainder to the reader of his or her own choice as the narrator says “And so for the yarn of the moor: if I were forced to choose between logic and childhood memory, between head and heart, then sure; in spite of all the foregoing, I’d go along with the tale” (p. 85-86). In addition, the narrator’s cultural and social identity in the novel is of a “jewholic-anonymous, a cathjew nut, a stewpot, a mongrel cur... a real Bombay mix” (p. 104) who is born a decade after independence, represents the city itself. His own fantastical growth (he ages at the twice the average speed) mirrors the urban spread out:

I grew in all directions, willy-nilly. My father was a big man but by the age of ten my shoulders had grown wider than his coats. I was a skyscraper freed of all legal restraints, a one-man population explosion, a megalopolis, a shirt-ripping, button-popping hulk (p. 188).

Linda Hutcheon describes this mode of fiction writing as “histriographic metafiction” which refers to “those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” (Hutcheon, 1980, p. 5). Thus, when it applies to the fiction, it investigates the whole idea of fictionality or the discourse it tries to portray. The postmodern novelists provide reasoned arguments for “anachronism” and “chronotope” in their novels to counter essentialism of realist fiction, and outline the illusion of truth or demystify the authority of the “author-figure”. Rushdie, in both of these novels, attempt to write the history of the nation by employing these tools. *The Moor's Last Sigh* recounts the historical crises in the nation’s history, moments when the nation as family failed to hold its members together; it’s colonial past, interreligious strife, Indira Gandhi’s Emergency, the rise of neo-colonial elite to the present sectarianism. The novelist brings real life persons in his narration as a testimony to his historical account of the nation. In the novel Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Sanjay Gandhi, Suneel Dutt, Nargis, Raman Fielding (caricature of Bal Thackeray) as well as references to historical incidents like Babri Masjid demolition by Hindus and the following communal violence, the failure of first five year plan (five cut a bite in

the novel), the super success of the movie *Mother India*, imposed sterilization issued by Sanjay Gandhi and others take place. At the same time the narrator questions the authenticity of his own narration by saying "...had he really said that? Was it a false memory, or a half-forgotten dream? I was no longer sure of anything." (Rushdie, 1996, p. 413-414). Thus, this shifting of point of view from realist narrative to metafiction suggests the spatial difference between our own worldly happenings and those of the subject of the text. It also hints at the temporal disjuncture embedded in these shifting of narration. As in the novel, the narrator, Moor says,

had I slipped accidentally from one page, one book of life on to another—in my wretched, disoriented state, had my reading finger perhaps slipped from the sentence of my own story on to this other, outlandish, incomprehensible text that had been lying, by chance, just underneath? (p. 136).

These lines indicate at the collapse of the distinctions between narrator, author, and reader by escaping the questions of responsibility which occurs here as "accidentally" or "by chance". Then, how can one trust on the family history or nation's history, narrated by irresponsible narrator, the Moor who plays many roles in the narrative as artistic subject, national subject, and narrative subject. The narrator who himself is a participant in his narrative tells a series of stories in which the "romantic myth of the plural, hybrid nation" (p.227) gives way to "debauchery and crime" (p. 303).

*The Ground beneath Her Feet* creates alternative history of the 1960s, the growth of rock music through the eyes of the "unbelieving, half believing eyes" of the photographer narrator. The narrator " Rai is the typical Rushdian orator, expert in rhetorical devices, such as omniscience, intrusiveness, digressions, asides, comments, understatement; but also, prolepsis, analepsis, ellipsis and all sorts of temporal leaps; quite consciously reader- response oriented, linguistically creative, polyphonic and exuberant. That is to say, the usual fascinating, captivating and torrent-like authoritarian, though unreliable, teller of beautiful and truthful lies "( Mohit *et al*, 2006, p. 135). He digs the past through photography into memory as a means to see, read and understand "the metaphoric beneath the factual" (Rushdie, 1999, p. 449) and objects to the postmodern view that truth is unreachable.

The fiction of Salman Rushdie in its attempt of writing history exemplifies that history is not linear, developmental, logical or coherent. It contains within itself gaps and secrets, ghosts and holes. The novels *The Moor's Last Sigh* and *The Ground beneath Her Feet* portray history of the nation as a threat to the authenticity of presence, on one hand, and an indispensable means for recording, transmitting, or commemorating that presence, on the other. *The Moor's Last Sigh* tries to situate the cultural network of India in colonial and

postcolonial histories through the palimpsests of the early modern antecedents of its Jewish-Catholic protagonists, Moor, who like Salim Sinai in *Midnight's Children*, narrates his family saga against the national backdrop. He, while attempting to present the complete social picture of "mother India," underscores the impossibility of producing an image of stable nation and unified identity. In the similar way, *The Ground beneath Her Feet* narrates the residual effect of colonial domination. The novel embodies the transnational setting in the wide frame of Western and postcolonial culture, gives abundant references to Greek mythology, European philosophy, contemporary texts, and at the same time mixes them with four decades' history of the growth of rock music and the stars of rock'n roll.

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