

From Routes to Roots: Diaspora in the Novels of Salman Rushdie.

Janmejy Kumar Tiwari

Displacement has no replacement and this is the reality of diaspora. Since the inducement of humanity, people have been straddling throughout the world without having any theoretical knowledge of boundaries. He has always been suffering from the disease of alienation without realizing the actual outcome of migration. However, in the 20th century, the concept of coming and going was theorized and immigrants and migrants were compelled to be aware of the plight. India, once being the colony of the British Empire, has been suffering from her internal malady and misery. The plight and predicament of the native have also been miserable. Moreover, in the search of food and other necessity, they had to be dependent on their rulers and the later caught the nerve and exploited the former to the lees. The Indians had to migrate as indentured labourers for the sugarcane farming either in Caribbean countries or in South America.

The writers of the previous century have done extensive research in and into the diasporic field from external to internal, from geographical to psychological and from virtual to real. They have left no field unravished for literary enjoyment. Even in the era of global township, the home has become more significant than it used to be. Authors like Naipaul have been edifying houses for Mr Biswas and Rushdie has no home but imaginary homelands. Writers like them have left their homelands not once but several times and still breathing the same oxygen. Imagination makes virtual homes but the fact is that virtualism is not realism.

Salman Rushdie is the author who inaugurated the field of postcolonial diasporism with his debut novel *Grimus*, which was an experiment to show the plight of estrangement and alienation. The story deals with immortality, generated worlds, surreal things, other scopes both interior and exterior, and castaways. The story follows Flapping Eagle, a young Indian who receives the gift of immortality after drinking a magic fluid. Flapping Eagle, an Axona Indian, is ostracized from the society because of his fairer complexion. His mother perished just after few moments of his arrival in this mortal world. His sister Bird Dog sheltered him and offered him with the preparation of interminable life and after that, she evaporates mystifyingly from the terrestrial of the Axona. Flapping exiles from his people, and mooches the world for centuries in search of his sister and his identity and in this mission, after wandering for 777 years 7 months and 7 days; he falls through the fleapit in the Mediterranean Sea. Because of his eternity, he lands in an equivalent dimension at the preternatural Calf Island. People of this island are consecrated with immortality yet fed up with the monotony of life. However, they are disinclined in giving up their immortality and happen in a stagnant community under an understated and creepy authority. In the search of his identity Flapping is weary of the mundane reality of immortality hence wants to get rid of the Grimus effect. The novel apparently demonstrates that migrants have no future, neither on Mortal Island nor on immortal one. They could wander wherever they wish but without having their heart with them.

Midnight's Children, his tour de force, paved the path for postcolonial literature in India. Rushdie began to decolonize English from the English and his programme is still in furtherance by him as well as from others. Like Salman Rushdie, the protagonist Saleem Sinai wanders among three countries i.e. India, Pakistan and Bangladesh but is unable to find a proper place to live in. *Midnight's Children* is a narrative of displacement and rootlessness

that is caused by relocation. Many of its characters are migrants drifting from shore to shore in search of some “imaginary homelands” and obviously, the author identifies himself with his migrant personae. As Pramod K. Nayar opines:

Much of diasporic writing explores the theme of an original home. This original home as now lost—due— to their exile—is constantly worked into the imagination and myth of the displaced individual/community. (Nayar 191)

And,

Diasporic writing captures the two invariables of their experience: exile and homeland. All diasporic literature is an attempt to negotiate between these two polarities. The writings of exiled/immigrant writers undertakes two moves one temporal and one spatial. It is as Meena Alexander puts it, “writing in search of a homeland.” (Nayar 188)

Exploding the myth of home Salman Rushdie speaks of “imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind” (*IH* 10). In the process of searching the homeland, Rushdie as well as his characters lost their roots, routes and identity. All *Midnight's Children*, Saleem, Shiva, Padma, Parvati face a calamity of identity, disintegration of disposition, geographical as well as cultural dislocation. As Rushdie, clarifies:

When the Indian who writes from outside India tries to reflect that world, he is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost. (*IH* 11)

Cultural displacement has forced the immigrant writers to accept the provisional nature of all truth and certainties. It is almost impossible for migrants to be unable to call to mind his native place and nativity emotionally. Consequently, this displacement constitutes a double identity that is at once singular, plural and partial. In *Imaginary Homelands* Rushdie echoes:

Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures, at other time we fall between two stools. But however, ambiguous and shifting this ground may be it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy. (15)

In *Midnight's Children*, he pictures this trauma of fluid identity. In his first migrated country Saleem becomes a dog; a member of the Cutia Unit. Consequently, his body has gone fully numb, the only sense active being his sense of smell, “anaesthetized against feeling as well as memories” (*Midnight's Children* 353). His fellow soldiers start calling him ‘Buddha’ because there hung around him an air of great antiquity” (349), though he is twenty four year old at that juncture. Here Saleem Sinai is presented as the microcosm of all the diasporic generation; how they are treated in the newly inhabited territories; how the venom is thrown upon them and the current example of this venom throwing is Australia. Saleem, being the mouthpiece of his creator, expresses the feelings that Rushdie feels while living in an adopted land.

Shame, the most political adventure of Rushdie, exhibits the trauma of migration that he has been facing throughout his life. *Shame* is a novel about migration. At several places, Salman Rushdie emerges as the narrator and narrates the deplorable conditions of migrants; as he confesses in one of his interviews with Ashutosh Varshney:

It's a novel about the changes that happen to individuals and communities under the pressure of migration... I wanted to talk about the immigrant community in London particularly the South Asian immigrant community, and at that time what I wanted to say about it is, "Here's this enormous community of people who are, it seems, invisible—their concerns their lives you know, their fears, and so on, somehow invisible to the white population". (Herwitz and Varshney 19)

Like all migrants, Salman Rushdie has not been able to shake off the idea of roots and identity. Roots, as he says in *Shame*, are "designed to keep us in our place" (86). These roots help the migrant to be in touch of his nativity and the effect of these pedigrees could not be eradicated easily. One is bound to have an origin without that one's derivation is meaningless.

The theme of root, route and rootlessness has become an explicit and intricate part of Rushdie's plot. His novel delineates the psychological crisis resulting from the forfeiture of identity and roots and this happens to almost each and every diasporic and postcolonial author. In his authorial intervention in *Shame*, Rushdie depicts the actual position of migrants what they get and what they lose:

When individual come unstuck from their native land, they are called migrants, when nations do the same thing (Bangladesh), the act is called secession. What is the best thing about migrant peoples and seceded nation? I think it is their hopefulness... And what is the worst thing? It is the emptiness of one's luggage. I'm speaking of invisible suitcases, not the physical, perhaps cardboard, variety containing a few meaning-drained mementoes: we have come unstuck from more than land. We have floated upwards from history, from memory, from time. (86-87)

And Rushdie describes his own position in these words:

I am an emigrant from one country (India) and a new comer in two (England, where I live and Pakistan to which my family moved against my will). (85)

The core issue of this expat cognizance is the question of identity. As an immigrant moves from place to place, region to region, his identity becomes hybrid and fluid because of these geographical movements. The migrants may live in new places but that is only an imaginary homeland-- they never feel comfort in their newly occupied home/country. They live, as Bhabha states, "in between two geographical cultural locations, which is often perilous and marginalizing," and these "in between places provide the terrain of elaborating strategies of selfhood singular or communal—that initiates new signs of identity" (Bhabha 17).

Rushdie in this context of migration brings the theory of fantasy, according to him, all migrants like him are fantasist. For him fantasy is not only a part of reality but it helps him to rise above reality and it pronounces a seeming freedom of creativeness as the distinguishing feature of art. It not only hassles the fictive elements in the plot but also is, revelatory of the mind behind the work. Imaginary nation states are fabricated on existing ones. Imaginary and real countries, both have to deal with the question of history, and to some extent, they thrive in fluctuating it. A migrant writer's position has an attention-grabbing benefit as it affords him with conflict to cultural authoritarianism and its claim to speak the absolute truth, and thus to pull to bits a treatise of western historiography.

The Moor's Last Sigh is the first major novel that Salman Rushdie produced after "The Rushdie Affair". The novel narrates the story of last Muslim ruler of Spain, Boabdil who lost his empire to the Catholic conquerors Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain. *The Moor's Last Sigh* refers to a geographical point in Andalusia from where Boabdil looked at Granada for the last time before the conquering armies of Ferdinand and Isabella finally captured this legendary city. Commenting upon the diasporic nature of the novel Minoli Salgado remarks:

The novel appears to replicate the author's predicament by foregrounding a sense of banishment and impending death, opening and closing the eponymous Moor's narrative with his premature death in exile. Exile and death thus frame the rich narrative collage that constitutes this saga of Catholic-Jews Da-Gama-Zagoiby family, containing the events in a foreclosed temporal register that offers the cultural and historical density of text. (Salgado153)

The Ground Beneath Her Feet is the novel where Rushdie expresses his diasporic views ostensibly. The novelist is entailed in sketching a textual diasporism in the novel. All the three major characters, i.e. Ormus Cama, Vina Apsara and Umeed Merchant a.k.a. Rai experience the predicament of migration; as Rai describes:

Ormus, Vina and I: three of us came West and passed through the transforming membrane in the sky. Ormus, the youthful proselytizer of the here and now, the sensualist, great lover, the material man the poet of the actual, saw visions of the otherworld and was transformed into an oracle, a ten-year monk and an Art Decorated recluse. As for me, I must say at last that I passed through a membrane too. I became a foreigner. For all my advantages and privileges of birth, for all my professional aptitude, I was turned by the fact of leaving my place of origin into an honorary member of the ranks of the earth's dispossessed. (418)

Rai starts feeling that he has started becoming peaceful when he looks at his new house that he shares with three other photographers namely—Mack Schnabel, Aim'e-Cesaire Basquiat and Johnny Chow:

So this is what they feel like, I thought: roots Not the ones we're born with, can't help having, but the ones we put down in our own chosen soil, the you could say radical selections we make for ourselves. (414)

Like all migrants, these characters feel infatuation with their second country where they migrate Salman Rushdie himself Rai starts loving America:

...America below fourteenth Street, loosey-goosey and free as air, gave me more of a sense of belonging that I'd ever felt back home. Also, with the dream America everyone carries round in his head, America the Beautiful, Langston Hughes's country that never existed but needed to exist with that like everyone else, I was thoroughly in love. (419)

In spite of the blind love towards America, a man of exile is unable to forget his past. He feels nostalgic, as nostalgia is the measure sub-theme of theory of diaspora. In the migrated country one feels himself thrice removed from reality: 1—he is geographically removed and in this way he loses his cultural environment in which he was brought up, 2—he is removed from his language and is forced to adopt a different language, 3—he is dislocated

from his own mental territory. The love quoted in the above paragraph is textual, ephemeral and virtual not real. In reality, the situation is quite unlike:

...the day doesn't pass when I don't think of India, when I don't remember childhood scenes: Dara Singh wrestling in an open air stadium, Tony Brent singing, Sherpa Tenzing waving from the back of an open car outside Kamla Nehru Park. The movie *Mughal-e-Azam* bursting into color for the big dance-number. The legendary dancer Anarkali strutting her stuff. The non-stop sensory assault of that country without a middle register, that continuum entirely composed of extremes. Sure I remember it. It's the past my past. (416)

The point is that a diasporic man may become hilarious for a period only; happiness is not an everlasting one in an adopted country or rather for them, in the words of Thomas Hardy happiness is an occasional episode in the drama of pain. Rushdie feels this trauma in the land where he is living and he expresses his grieves through his characters. This is not only the story of the narrator Rai, Vina Apsara and Ormus Cama have the same sense of belongingness as they have left their birth places but unable to quit birthroots.

The Enchantress of Florence is Rushdie's last adventure where he gives the sketches of two kinds of diaspora, i.e. one immigrant and other emigrant. Both of them suffer with the same problems in their accepted countries. Mogor, who arrives India from Florence, declares himself a distant relative of Mughal Emperor Akbar. But later he was exposed and he had to flee. The case is the same with Qara Qoz; she leaves her home for the betterment for Europe but succumbs to several problems. Both the protagonists suffer the crisis for individuality. Against the popular belief, the novelist has introduced a white immigrant and given his experiences that he comes across in India. He makes sure that not only a colonized person suffers this trauma of estrangement but also the same is the condition with the so-called occidentalists.

The narrator of the novel Mogor himself is the first victim of identity crisis. He is a traveller from the Medici and his claim to have a blood relationship with the emperor of Mughals is in the phrase of David Gates "a literal manifestation of the connection between East and West". He adopts different names at different times. In Florence, he was Uccello di Firenze, which he abandoned like the "abandoned skin of a snake" and Niccolo Vespucci that he left at the time of his arrival to India and became self-styled Mogor dell Amore. And "this Mogor dell' Amore as defined by Father Acquaviva " is no name at all . . . It means a Mughal born out of wedlock. It is a name that dares much and will offend many. By assuming it he implies that he wishes to be thought of as an illegitimate prince" (93). Eventually, he proves his illegitimacy and as displaced has no vibrant future, he has to flee like the colonial empire; as Rushdie states in the voice of Akbar: "The English had no future on this earth . . . (and) would surely be erased from times record before very long" (98).

Being uprooted is one of the several aspects of postmodern era that fascinates Rushdie much. He celebrates the uprootedness of Mogor, disintegration of Qara Koz. As longing for belonging is one of the premier themes of diaspora and postcolonialism, all the characters of Rushdie loom between two worlds: one is indigenous and the other is adopted. Both struggle in their newly arrived countries and eventually both are compelled to leave their adopted countries.

Despite several miseries that are being faced by the immigrants and emigrants one fruitful result of this wandering is that, the boundaries that were existed between the countries have been demolished. Authors of this class have attempted to bring both the hemispheres

closer together .In the novel Argalia realizes the reason of Qara Koz's coming to the West, as he says:

She comes here of her own free will, in the hope of forging a union between the great cultures of Europe and the East, knowing she has much to learn from us and believing too, that she has much to teach. (276)

This dream of diasporic authors, to a certain extent, has come to be true. Now the wall of Berlin cease to exist and people are free to view the world according to their own perception and point of view.

Works Cited:

Rushdie,Salman. *Grimus*. London: Vintage Books, 1996.

---. *Midnight's Children*. London: Vintage Books, 2006

---. *Shame*. London: Vintage Books, 1995

---. *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*. London: Vintage Books,2000

---. *The Enchantress of Florance*. London:Jonathan Cape,2008

---. *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism,1981-1991*.London:Granta, 1991

Herwitz,Daniel &Ashutosh Varshney. *Midnight's Diaspora: Encounters with Salman Rushdie*. New Delhi: Penguin Books,2009

Salgado, Minoli. "The Policies of Palimpsest in *The Moor's Last Sigh*". *The Cambridge Companion to Salman Rushdie*. Ed. Abdulrazak Gurnah. Cambridge University, Press, 2007, 153-168.