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## Imagining Bombay and London: In Search of Post-Colonial Hybrid Identity in *Midnight's Children* and *The Satanic Verses*

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I was born in the city of Bombay... once upon a time. (Rushdie, pg 3)

Proper London, capital of Vilayet, winked blinked nodded in the night. (Rushdie, pg. 4)

To enter the Rushdian post-colonial space, the reader needs to be possessed of a vividly romantic and incisively theoretical imagination, for reading Rushdie is to imagine with him two different sets of post-colonial spaces—the homeland that is imagined through the medium of unreliable memories, and the Vilayet or the land of the white man, which is again, an imagined city of blinking and nodding dreams. In my paper, I have extracted the Bombay out of *Midnight's Children* and the London from *The Satanic Verses* to show how these two imaginary/ real locales become the sites where a post-colonial diasporic writer like Rushdie grapples with his hybrid cultural identity, the two cities posing post-colonial concerns that become necessary in understanding them, as well as in understanding the post-colonial subject's identity as defined by his relation to both. What I propose to do in this paper is to analyse the imagined Bombay and the idealized London, with the aim of trying to understand why imagining spaces is a major preoccupation of the post-colonial intellectual consciousness, and how the cities define and are defined by such concerns, all ultimately leading to the question of how the post-colonial subject locates his identity through the complex web of cultural hybridities.

It would be interesting to gain an entry point into this argument with the theorizing that Rushdie himself does on the subject in his essay *Imaginary Homelands*. He presents the dream Bombay and the dream London at the beginning and end of the same essay:

Bombay is a city built by foreigners on reclaimed land; I, who had been away so long that I almost qualified for the title, was gripped by the conviction that I, too, had a city and a history to reclaim... our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind... (Rushdie, pg. 10)

... In common with many Bombay-raised middle-class children of my generation, I grew up with an intimate knowledge of, and even sense of friendship with, a certain kind of England: a dream-England composed of Test Matches at the Lord's presided over by the voice of John Arlott, at which Freddie Truman bowled unceasingly and without success at Polly Umrigar; of Enid Blyton and Billy Bunter, in which we even prepared to smile indulgently at portraits such as 'Hurree Jamset Ram Singh', the 'dusky nabob of Bhanipur'. I wanted to come to England, I could not wait... ofcourse the dream—England is no more than a dream. (Rushdie, pg. 18)

As is evident by the explication of two imagined locales within the span of the same essay, Rushdie is haunted by a double-dream phenomenon—away from London, he dreamt of a Vilayet, which ofcourse, turned out to be quite different from the real location of London, and when he has almost become a foreigner to his homeland of Bombay, he is aware that he has created his own imaginary version of the city. Vijay Mishra says, '*imaginary homelands are constructed from the space of distance to compensate for a loss occasioned by unspeakable trauma.*' (Ashcroft, Griffiths,

Tiffin, pg. 449) In the case of Rushdie, who would identify himself as an exile, we could place the trauma of this rift from the mother –country, condensed in the city of Bombay, as the need for imagining Bombay. Analogously, we could argue that the colonial trauma leads the colonized subject to imagine the Vilayet– London of idealized dreams to come to terms with the violent history of colonization, as a process of erasure of trauma and replacing it with notions of the superior white space.

Methwold, obviously, is the symbol of the colonising power, whose fore– father had conceived of the reclaimed cosmopolitan city of Bombay, and his insistence on preserving his property exactly the way it was, even after selling out, becomes the metaphor for the lingeringly dominant post– colonial influence of the colonizer on the colonized subject. Bombay, thus, becomes the replicated site of London, an attempted copy of the colonial metropolis. The city, however, attains hybrid cultural roots that make any unilateral connection with its Indian or its colonial past, impossible, and in a way, Bombay, Rushdie, Saleem, Chamcha and Farishta are all determined by the heterogeneity of their collective history— they have no single history to reclaim that can restore their identities to them. To enter the argument via theory again, Stuart Hall, speaking on mixed diasporic heritages, seems relevant here:

Cultural identity... is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being.’ It belongs to the future as much as to the past... Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories... Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in the mere recovery of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within the narratives of the past. (Mongia, pg. 112)

Deriving from the unessentialised past that Hall speaks about in the diasporic context, Bombay, Saleem (both of whom are not diasporic people in the literal sense), Rushdie, Chamcha and Farishta are culturally hybrid subjects whose intellectual, political and spatial legacy cannot be traced back to one or even similar socio– cultural starting point/s. Pinning down a specific Bombay, which as much a hybrid character as Rushdie and his protagonists, inhabited as it was by fishermen, occupied by the Portuguese and given in dowry to the British, is necessarily impossible and hence, has to be imagined to indicate its plurality, its multiplicity, its cosmopolitanism, its power for being conceived variously. After all, there might be as many Bombays as there are Bombayites and the Methwolds who created it, and by extending Hall’s arguments to encompass the whole of post– colonial instead of just the diasporic, India, Saleem and Bombay fit into the space of multiple and apparently discordant origins that Hall charts out. Bombay, the post– colonial location, is the ‘*concomitant of difference, the continual reminder of the separation, and yet of the hybrid interpenetration of the colonizer and the colonized.*’ (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, p. 344)

This hybrid interpenetration of the colonizer and the colonized carries itself into the colonial metropolis, in this case, London. Frankenburg and Mani calls the diasporic peopling of metropolis the ‘*We are here because you were there*’ (Mongia, pg.348) syndrome. The Other is no longer without, but within the colonizing land itself. Self– evidently, it is because this diasporic shift or travel occurs that the concept of the homeland arises in the first place. Moving away from Bombay, we reach London in our theorizing business, much like Saladin Chamcha and Gibreel Farishta, who are hurtled on to the British shores in a spectacular act of immigration. The process of decolonization and attempted reverse colonisation begins from this point. It is through Chamcha’s decolonization, which can be achieved only through exorcising the colonized past– self, that we begin to trace the Vilayet that he had migrated into and had continued to live in till the time he fell across the skies into the English shores. Again, the decolonization cannot be completed in India, in the homely arms of Zeeny Vakil. According to Simon Gikandi, as McLeod tells us, the task of decolonization must be taken to the colonial metropolis, and the imperial myth has to be confronted

on its homeland in order that decolonization is effective and total. Pamela speaking of the Vilayeti dreams of the Anglophile Chamcha, says to Jumpy Joshi:

Him and his Royal Family, you would'nt believe. Cricket, the houses of Parliament, the Queen. The place never stopped being a post-card to him. You could'nt get him to look at what was real. (Rushdie, pg. 181)

John Clement Ball points out that in many post-colonial texts, the colonial metropolis emerges as the site as well as object of resistance. He argues that London/ Vilayet becomes the synecdoche of the whole of the British colonial enterprise. Just as the colonists moved out of their homes into the colonial land, the post-colonial era is characterized by the former-colonised moving into the metropolis, in an act of appropriating and re-territorialisation. Relocation becomes the simple tool for this resistance—the writers writing in and about the metropolis, like Rushdie, re-inscribe the metropolis by 'writing' it. The London of the Britons, thus, gets re-invented through the imagination of the diasporic intellectual. The stages in this process can be traced through the two novels—in *Midnight's Children*, we see Methwold who lives in India as the superior coloniser while the protagonist Saleem grapples with the post-colonial dilemma in Bombay, in *The Satanic Verses*, Chamcha and Farishta make the move to London to encounter the colonial myth in its homeland. De Certeau, as McLeod tells us, divides the post-colonial London into the 'Concept-City' of official discourse and the 'metaphorical' city, which gets created in the proliferating imaginations of the post-colonial diasporic subjects. John McLeod begins his book *Post-Colonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* by posing the question of how the cultural energies of the immigrants have helped to reimagine London. Later he says:

In writing of London I am engaging with a location which might be conceptualized as inseparably tangible *and* imaginary. As Julian Wolfreys defines... London 'is not a place as such' but also '*takes place*' in the representations made of it. My approach to London... is similarly informed by a sense of the city simultaneously as a physical location 'as such' and also produced, experienced and lived imaginatively. (McLeod, pgs. 7,8)

Rushdie said in an interview after the publication of *The Satanic Verses* that he was '*writing about a sense of the city as an artificial, invented space which is constantly metamorphosing. It doesn't have roots, it has foundations.*' (McLeod, pg. 159) The attitude towards the Vilayet that is idealized in the pre-emigratory stage can be explained through what, as Mishra tells us, '*Zizek defines as the imaginary as the state of "identification with the image in which we appear likeable to ourselves, with the image representing what we would like to be."*' (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, pg. 448) The colonial masters establish the hegemony of a superior white race, and it is in this image that a migrant like Chamcha would like to cast himself, and see himself as. London becomes the location as well the means for this acquirement. In order to reinvent himself, render his own person with an identity which actually does not exist, Chamcha has to imagine a locale where this can take place successfully and homogeneously. This would not be possible in the real London, where he, as the colonized subject, would be described in zoological terms, as Fanon explicates—he would always be to the former-colonizers, a beast with horns and a phallus, a creature to be contained and ostracised, and whose literal turning into a bestial human does not surprise the white men because he knew all the while that the colonized is nothing but a savage.

The naming of London, *Elloven Deeowen* attains significance because it becomes a tool to appropriate London, to 'write' the location by the post-colonial subject. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin describe this process of capture and appropriation through naming:

In this sense the dynamics of 'naming' becomes a primary colonizing process because it appropriates, defines, captures the place in language. (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, pg. 345)

The naming process also becomes an act of reverse colonization—the colonial masters had used cartology and nomenclature as tools to assert their rights of property over land, and conversely,



when the child Chamcha chants *Elloven Deeowen*, he claims the trans-national space of London for his own, a place he will migrate to, in order that he may add to the heterogenous polyphony of the metropolis, his own undefined voice. The tropicalisation of the weather by Farishta becomes a definitive act in this reverse colonization process, aimed at the ultimate British identity marker, the weather. Homi Bhabha, as McLeod tells us, opines that the actions of Farishta indicate the stubborn presence of the migrant in the metropolis who has come to change the history of the nation.

Rushdie places his fiction in the dual space from where the diasporic writer/ subject looks at two directions— ‘*towards a historical cultural identity on one hand, and the society of relocation on the other.*’ (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, pg. 425) Bombay and London are specifically the two places that Rushdie, the post-colonial diasporic writer looks at, the sense of home being a split consciousness in him. The picture atop Saleem’s bed, of Raleigh being pointed out something (the East, perhaps?) by an old fisher-man, becomes a significant image—the white man looks out towards what he would occupy and colonise, and when the Baby Saleem is dressed in the garb of Raleigh for a birthday party, it seems to be like an emphatic statement which says, ‘I will colonise you right back’, fore-telling the diasporic appropriation of the colonial metropolis, and forming the prototype for Chamcha and Farishta in the later novel.

While it is the post-colonial issue that we grapple with in *Midnight’s Children*, in *the Satanic Verses*, it is post-colonial diaspora. Theoretically, the former book foregrounds the latter, and it is through analyzing one with respect to the other, can we completely comprehend the places and the spaces created by and through the colonial metropolis and the colonized metropolis, drawing a continuous line of connection. Bombay, the home, and London, the Vilayet, interpenetrate each other in creating the Saleems, the Chamchas and the Farishtas, and in turn imbibing what each impose upon both places. Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin talk about the diasporic tendency to create, construct and reconstruct identity, not only by identifying with some ancient lost place, but through the very act of travelling. It is through this process that the split in the diasporic consciousness occurs— as Bhabha theorized, from what Davies and Sinfield informs us, there is a desire to remain the same, yet different. In Rushdie, the sameness is to be drawn from the imaginary homeland, and the difference has to be negotiated in terms of one’s exchange with the Vilayet. Mishra adds that ‘*the nation state as an “imagined community” needs diasporas to remind it of what the idea of homeland is.*’ (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, pg. 449)

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