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The Enchantress of Florence: An Open-Ended Postcolonial Discourse

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Salman Rushdie has been the most controversial writer and the subject of scathing attack especially in the Muslim world. An Indian born novelist, he seems to have experimented with different genres and written short stories, essays and criticism. He has explored variegated themes in these texts. His novels have been translated into a number of languages.

Rushdie's novel *The Enchantress of Florence* was published in 2008. Here he takes recourse to history and Magic Realism, thereby bringing back to life legendary and historical characters like Akbar, Birbal and Jodha. The novel moves between Mughal India and Machiavellian Florence mixing history, fantasy and magic:

He transformed gold coins into smoke and yellow smoke back into gold. A jug of fresh water flipped upside-down released a flood of silken scarves. He multiplied fishes and loaves with a couple of passes of his elegant hand, which was blasphemous, of course, but hungry sailors easily forgave him (Rushdie (15-16).

Rushdie's writings contain the elements of fantasy, history even as he cites other works of literature. He knows how to transgress the boundaries of fact, fiction as well as past and present in his works. Postmodernism can be best understood as breaking of the grand narratives of Western enlightenment. Rushdie's novels are all set in India and his characters and language are subsumed in "Indianness." Rushdie's fiction is an artifice of author's imagination and very often self-reflexive. Rushdie adapts all postmodern devices in *The Enchantress of Florence* like Magic Realism, irony, fabulation, pastiche and parody. Along with adapting these post modern devices, Rushdie deals with the theme of East and West in his novel---Mughal India and Florence are craftily bought together. Apart from this, the novel raises a number of postmodern questions concerning truthfulness in story telling and historical reality. The juxtaposition of the three techniques of myth, history and Magic Realism is what characterizes *The Enchantress of Florence* as a postmodern text. It contains the elements of fantasy, historical references, themes of incest and alienation. The stranger who visits Akbar's court and claims to be his long lost relative is actually born of incest. Jodha speaks about alienation and vacuum in Akbar's life inspite of him having so many wives. Another postmodern feature of *The Enchantress of Florence* is its temporal distortion as the author jumps forward and backward in time. The narration often oscillates between Mughal India and Renaissance Florence. Mogor dell Amore is shown narrating the story of his father Argalia and his two friends Ago and Niccolo in Renaissance Florence to Akbar, and then the narration shifts back to Akbar's court and then again to Qara Koz. Rushdie makes reference to various historical events and places in his novel. Being a postcolonial writer, Rushdie adapts the feature of hybridity in *The Enchantress of Florence* to create an open- ended postcolonial discourse. He draws together diametrically opposites like urban and rural as well as western and indigenous into a harmonious whole. Rushdie's discourse highlights the interplay between Florence and Mughal India:

'The Enchantress of Florence' is a metanarrative tale of the birth of cross cultures through travel, trade and desire in colonial times which shaped the postcolonial and the global world we know today (Dore 57-71).

Rushdie in *The Enchantress of Florence* brings back to life buried Indian history, historical places and characters. Although Rushdie has dealt with historical themes before in his earlier novels, yet what differentiates *The Enchantress of Florence* is his satiric and pungent attitude towards many historical characters. He no longer adopts the earlier bitter tone towards historical events and characters. In fact, characters like Akbar and Jodha evoke a mysterious awe in readers. The city of Florence and characters like Machiavelli are reincarnated:

‘The Enchantress of Florence’ (2008), Renaissance Italy becomes the mirror for Mughal India. The poetry of Petrarch, the paintings of Botticelli, the moral war between the Medicis and the cult of the Weepers, the politics of Machiavelli and the architecture of Florence find parallels in the music of Tansen, the wit of Birbal, the splendor of Fatehpur Sikri, the universal religion of tolerance that Emperor Akbar dreamed about and the feuds within his family (Dore 57-71).

History is resuscitated through the technique of Magic Realism. On the one hand, we have characters dealing with commonplace human feelings of jealousy and possessiveness as is evident from the love Lady Manbai has for Saleem and on the other hand we have the enigmatic love and strange presence of Jodha who is never seen in flesh and blood but only as a dream. Surpassing all these magical characters, we have the mysterious figure of Qara Koz. Then there is Mogor dell Amore who claims to be the son of the strange princess Qara Koz. And on his arrival at Fatehpur Sikri claims to be Akbar’s long lost relative. From the very beginning, Rushdie creates an atmosphere of magic by sketching a strange picture of Mogor dell Amore who claims to have three names:

He could dream in seven languages: Italian, Spanish, Arabic, Persian, Russian, English and Portuguese. He had picked up languages the way most sailors picked up diseases; languages were his gonorrhea, his syphilis, his scurvy, his ague, his plague (Rushdie 12).

Salman Rushdie has brought to life incidents from history and people like Babar and Akbar and amongst these real people the presence of Jodha permeates the novel. She doesn’t exist in blood and flesh but Rushdie caricatures history by making her an imaginary queen, despite the fact that she did exist in history. Rushdie lends a magical characteristic to the historical figure of Jodha. Akbar loves this imaginary Jodha in the novel most among all his queens who in turn are extremely jealous of Jodha:

She was an imaginary wife, dreamed up by Akbar in the way that lonely children dream up imaginary friends, and in spite of presence of many living, if floating, consorts, the emperor was of the opinion that it was the real queens who were the phantoms and the non-existent beloved who was real. He gave her a name, Jodha, and no man dared gainsay him (Rushdie 33).

Rushdie has sketched many encounters between Jodha and Akbar so realistically that the fact Jodha is an imaginary person in the novel often eludes the readers as she at times appears to be real:

Tansen wrote songs for her and in the studio-scriptorium her beauty was celebrated in portraiture and verse. Master Abdus Samad the Persian portrayed her himself, painted her from the memory of a dream without ever looking upon her face, and when the emperor saw his work he clapped his hands at the beauty shining up from the page. ‘You have captured her, to the life,’ he cried (Rushdie 34).

Songs and lyrics are being written for Jodha, and sketches are drawn. The love and admiration Akbar has for Jodha is never considered absurd. It is not just Akbar and his enigmatic love for Jodha that Rushdie portrays in the novel but the aversion, jealousy and hatred of his other wives towards Jodha. Rushdie, while portraying Jodha deals with the common feelings of jealousy and hatred thereby interweaving the real and magical:

Jodha's sisters, her fellow wives, resented her. How could the mighty emperor prefer the company of a woman who did not exist? When he was gone, at least, she ought to absent herself as well; she had no business to hang around with the actually existing. She should disappear like the apparition she was, should slide into a mirror or a shadow and be lost (Rushdie 56).

Conversations between Jodha and Akbar are chronicled in the novel. The character of Jodha and the conversations between Akbar and Jodha may be the symbolic representation of Akbar's alienation. The anguish and loneliness that Akbar faces is the hallmark of all postmodern literature. Rushdie presents this alienation through the device of Magic Realism:

The world was not all one thing. 'We are their dream,' she told the emperor, 'and they are ours.' She loved him because he never dismissed her opinions, never swatted them away with the majesty of his hand. 'But imagine, Jodha; he told her while they slapped down *ganjifa* playing cards one evening,' if we could awake in other men's dream and change them, and if we had the courage to invite them into ours. What if the whole world became a single waking dream? She could not call him a fantasist when he spoke of waking dreams: for what else was she? (Rushdie 60).

Rushdie again gives a magical touch to the character of Qara Koz. In fact, Qara Koz is portrayed so extraordinarily that the royal painter Dashwant is mesmerized by her beauty and vanishes while painting her:

The simple fact was that in spite of the almost constant scrutiny of his peers he had somehow managed to vanish. He was never seen again, not in the Mughal court, nor anywhere in Sikri, nor anywhere in all the land of Hindustan. His body did not wash up on the shores of lake, nor was it found hanging from a beam. He had simply disappeared as if he had never been, and almost all pictures of *Qara-koz-Nama* had vanished with him, except for last picture, in which Lady Black Eyes, looking lovelier than even Dashwanth had managed to make her look before, came face to face with the man who would be her destiny (Rushdie 158).

The story of *The Enchantress of Florence* moves from Mughal Empire to Florentine Machiavelli who died few years before Akbar's birth. Mogor Dell Amore brings Florence alive into Akbar's court and reveals to him the story about his father Argalia and two of his friends, Niccolo'II Machai and Ago Vespucci and also how he met the Mughal princess Qara Koz. He talks about Simonetta Cattanio who also possesses some magical powers:

Simonetta possessed a pale, fair beauty so intense that no man could look at her without falling into a state of molten adoration, and nor could any woman, and the same went for most of the city's cats and dogs, and may be diseases loved her too, which was why she was dead before she was twenty-four years old. Simonetta Vespucci was married to Macro but he had to share her with whole town, which he did, at first, with a resigned good grace that only proved his lack of brains to the citizens of that conniving, crafty locale (Rushdie 168).

The name of Qara Koz being erased from the Mughal records may be evident of the colonial differences between East and West that can never be bridged and Mogor dell Amore may be a symbolic representation of bringing these two poles together. Rushdie's narration is erotic and moreover the inclusion of a tale within a tale renders the novel very cumbersome. The Magic Realist elements are not confined to Mughal India but move to Florence as well. Rushdie introduces two other women with magical powers in Florence though they have no role to play in the main plot:

They had seen Alessandra's picture, of course, they had drooled over her image in a volume of miniatures, her long blonde hair evoking the memory of the departed Simonetta after whose death her deranged husband Horned Macro had unsuccessfully begged for admission to la Fiorentina's salon (Rushdie 189).

The historical character Tansen is also bought back to life by Rushdie. Again while bringing these characters to life, Rushdie one could say caricatures them. Tansen's music is shown to be so engrossing that he gets himself burned in the ecstasy of his performance:

After Tansen sang the song of fire, the *deepak raag*, and made lamps at the house of Skanda run by the Skelton and Mattress burst into flame by the power of his music, he was found to be suffering from serious burns. In the ecstasy of his performance he hadn't noticed his own body beginning to show scorch marks as it heated up under the fierce blaze of his genius (Rushdie 245).

Like all Magic Realistic novels, the element of fantasy is not questioned in *The Enchantress of Florence*. On the contrary, the technique of Magic Realism and supernatural or extraordinary events go hand in hand with these historical characters.

The creation of Qara Koz as the most beautiful character possessing uncanny magical powers leaves an impact on the reader. Men are shown falling in love with her as she bewitches and enchants all. She comes across as the woman who dares to defy her family in order to have her way. The princess we learn was first abducted by an Uzbek warlord, then by Shah of Persia and finally she becomes the mistress of Argalia:

The day she refused to return to the Mughal court with her sister Khanzada she had learned not only that a woman could choose her own road, but that such choices had consequences that could not be erased from the record. She had made her choice and what followed, followed, and she had no regrets, but she did, from time to time, suffer the black terror (Rushdie 323).

It is because of her defiance that her name is erased from Mughal history. Rushdie's portrayal of Qara Koz mirrors the struggle and plight of Indian women particularly Muslim women in case they upset or threaten the patriarchal status quo. Qara Koz is presented as the sister of the Mughal emperor Babar, with an independent spirit and the ability to carve a niche for herself even during those times when there were stringent laws for women in general and Muslim women in particular:

By the time Argalia and the Swiss giants returned to escort Qara Koz to her new home in the Palazzo Cocchi del Nero, the entire village of Sant' Andrea in Percussina had fallen under her spell, down to the last man, woman and child. Even the hens seemed happier, and were certainly laying more eggs. The princess did nothing, by all accounts, to encourage the growth of this adoration; yet it grew (Rushdie 340).

In fact, this Indian Mughal princess entices the whole city of Florence. Rushdie by showing Florence deeply influenced by this Indian princess shows the intensity and depth of her magical powers that enable her to conquer everything. It seems that through Qara Koz, he is actually showing that it is not always the West domineering the East, but that the East can also bewitch the West. The alluring beauty of Qara Koz may be the symbolic representation of deeper reality that Rushdie wants to present:

In short, Qara Koz unveiled –as ‘Angelica’ – had come into the fullness of her womanly powers and was exerting the full force of those capacities upon the city, misting the air with a benevolent haze which filled the thoughts of Florentines with the image of parental, filial, carnal and divine love. Anonymous pamphleteers declared her to be the reincarnation of goddess Venus. Subtle perfumes of reconciliation and harmony filled the air, people worked harder and more productively, the quality of family life improved, the birth rate rose, and all the churches were full (Rushdie 351).

In the beginning of the novel, it is Jodha that evokes in the readers a sense of mystery, beauty and awe by her enigmatic personality. Akbar too is a strange worshipper of Jodha’s spell, but when Qara Koz arrives on the scene Jodha pales into insignificance. The spell of Qara Koz is so engulfing that Akbar also comes in its grip and gradually Jodha loses that hold on him she initially had at the beginning of the novel:

Jodha no longer had the power to interrupt his musings. A different woman visited him instead. Qara-koz, Lady Black Eyes, the hidden princess: for a long time he refused to recognize her, refused to understand in which direction his heart was being drawn, for it was leading him towards impossibility, a passion that could never be consummated, that was, in every sense of the word, improper (Rushdie 388-389).

Through the character of Qara Koz, Rushdie yet again connects East and West. He limits the spell of Jodha to India in general and Akbar in particular but he makes the enchantment of Qara Koz overpowering and overwhelming. Furthermore, there is the maid servant of Qara Koz called Mirror. The two are inseparable from each other and share everything including their man:

Or perhaps it was Argalia the Turk who first worried about her, because for the first time in their romance she started turning away from his advances, asking the Mirror to pleasure him instead.(Rushdie 354)

The reason why Jodha loses control over Akbar and Qara Koz dominates his thoughts is not just for the magnetic beauty and magic she possesses. Akbar begins to respect and admire her for that strange pugnacity to write her own destiny and make her dreams come true. It is the propensity to dare that Jodha lacks:

No woman in the history of world had made a journey like hers. He loved her for it and admired her too, but he was also sure that her journey across the Ocean Sea was a kind of dying, a death before death, because death too was sailing away from the known into the unknown. She had sailed away into unreality, into a world of fantasy which men were still dreaming into being. The phantasm haunting his palace was more real than that flesh- and- blood woman of the past who gave up the real world for an impossible hope, just as she had once given up the natural world of family and obligation for selfish choiceS of love (Rushdie 418).

The narration of Rushdie is marvelous. In an exceedingly beautiful manner, he reveals to us the journey of Qara Koz and Argalia. The novel is an exotic blend of history and magic. Rushdie shows how Qara Koz and Argalia escape Selim's conspiracy and then in Florence they fall a prey to yet another conspiracy by Lorenzo de' Medici who has also come under the spell of Qara Koz. The inclusion of a magic mirror, through which the Duke can see the image of the most beautiful woman, gives fairy tale touch to the novel. These fairy tale like elements enhance further the atmosphere of magic in the novel:

According to legend the Medici family possessed a magic mirror whose purpose was to reveal to the reigning Duke the image of the most desirable woman in the known world, and it was in this mirror that the earlier Giuliano de' Medici, the uncle of the present ruler, who was murdered on the day of the Pazzi plot, first saw the face of Simonetta Vespucci (Rushdie 336).

By portraying the people of Florence as reducing Qara Koz to a witch and responsible for all the destruction, Salman Rushdie may be highlighting that aspect of history or that unsettled aspect of East and West's long colonial discourse that can never be bridged. Rushdie by first presenting Qara Koz as the most beautiful woman in Florence and then by presenting her as witch could suggest that the friendship between East and West is superficial. The deep rooted racial differences cannot be controlled and got rid of so easily.

All the facets of Qara Koz's character, beauty, magic, sorcery, mysteriousness and even witchcraft are dealt with in detail. As we go further we come across another facet of Qara Koz's character and that is barrenness:

'People wonder about your barrenness. Physicians, heal thyself.' 'Qara Koz began to rise. Lorenzo II's hand came down hard on her forearm, pinning it to the arm of her chair. 'How long will your protector protect you if you do not give him a son'? He asked. That is to say, if he even returns from wars.' (Rushdie 367- 68).

While reading this, one wonders, who the stranger claiming to be the son of Qara Koz is, if she is barren. These mysterious elements are introduced by Rushdie to sustain the interest of readers. Rushdie deliberately withholds the information for some time to create an atmosphere of suspense and fantasy. Magic Realist authors do create such an atmosphere of fantasy to enhance the magical effect in the novel. Rushdie again brings back incidents from history and blends them into his fairy tale. One such instance is a scene in which Niccolo Vespucci leaves due to some plot hatched against him as the river in Fatehpur Sikri vanishes. In fact, Akbar was forced to leave Sikri due to water shortage but in the novel Rushdie exaggerates the fact and Akbar leaves Sikri because the lake there vanishes as does the stranger Vespucci:

For the rest of his life the emperor would believe that the inexplicable phenomenon of the vanishing lake of Fatehpur Sikri was the doing of the foreigner he had unjustly spurned, whom he had not decided to take back into his bosom until it was too late. (Rushdie 437)

It is only towards the end of the novel that Qara Koz comes to Akbar and reveals to him the real parentage of Mogor Dell Amore. Qara Koz reveals to Akbar that she was barren and it was Mirror that gave birth to Angelica:

Who was the foreigner's mother, then, the emperor in wonder demanded. On the walls of the brocade tent the mirrorwork panels caught the candlelight and the reflections danced in his eyes. 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. (Rushdie 440-41).

The baby was raised by her parents and they are trapped into an unknown world. A strange world where there was no difference between father and husband and thus Angelica and Ago indulged in an incestuous relationship. The child that was born to Angelica as a result of this union was made to believe that he was the son of Qara Koz and the child was Mogor Dell Amore:

So the truth of it is this. Niccolo Vespucci who was raised to believe that he was born of a princess was the child of a Mirror's child. Both he and his mother were innocent of all deception. They were all deceived (Rushdie 441-42)

The other thing about Magic Realist novels is uncertainty. "Magic Realist novels leave the reader in uncertainty" (Quoted in Devi). *The Enchantress of Florence* leaves similar uncertainty in the mind of the reader regarding the forbidden passion that has found room in Akbar for Qara Koz. Akbar is aware of the fact that what he felt for her was a crime yet he represses this disturbing thought with the consolation:

But she was forbidden to him. No, no, she could not be forbidden. How could what he felt be a crime against nature? Who would dare forbid the emperor what the emperor permitted himself? He was the arbiter of the law, the law's embodiment, and there was no crime in his heart (Rushdie 442).

At the end whether Akbar would go for or against his feeling is uncertain, as is with the ending of most Magic Realist novels:

'I have come home after all,' she told him. 'You have allowed me to return, and so here I am, at my journey's end. And now, Shelter of the World, I am yours.' *Until you're not*, the Universal Ruler thought. *My love, until you're not*. (Rushdie 442-43)

The novel ends in an eerie, nostalgic and fantastic atmosphere of magic and beauty. Even when the novel has ended the strange, and beautiful enchantment that Qara Koz is an owner of lingers in the minds of readers.

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