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Transcultural Glory in Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*

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Abstract:

In a world society where many borders are increasingly becoming permeable and are replaced by interactive networks, border locations are seen as places of potential interaction and hybridity, points of contact and transition between neighbouring territorial entities. Identity and belonging are indeed concepts that are interminably in a crisis. If 'identity' is elusive 'belongingness' can only be managed in a position somewhere in-between. This journey would defy closure or completion, as it includes desire, pain, frustration, hope and arguably disconnectedness. Globalization has multiplied and strengthened these tendencies, by weakening the sovereign nation-state and by employing transnational processes that create porous 'open' borders, multiple forms of identity and belonging, or even borderless, 'virtual' forms of (non-) belonging.

Keywords: Globalization, identity, hybridity, in-between space, transnationalism.

Globalization and migration are products of a significant reconfiguration in the global system that has also led to indigenization, ethnification, and the emergence of globalizing elite identities based on the axiom of cosmopolitan hybridity. Transnationalism as a source of social transition has its outsets in the globalization of domestic civil society and its branches are expanding the private domains of globalization. Notions of a 'borderless world' and political 'de-territorialization' are seen as signaling a 'new world order', in which there is less significance to the territorial component in world affairs. The notions of territory and borders are conceivable in two ways: in a 'pluralist' vision in which states remain dominant and the state sovereignty retains political and legal primacy, and through a vision of solidarity, which views cosmopolitan values and universal norms weaving together a new global order. Apparently, territory or border is dynamic as the territorial change creates new spatial realities.

The symbolic dimensions of territorial attachment experienced by residents of specific territories, the issues of border location or resource utilization is only secondary to the withdrawn feelings of 'belonging' and 'rootedness' within specific places and spaces. They are ready to defend their 'homeland' territories to which they lay claim through historical priority or duration. Heterogeneity, hybridity, mixing and fusion are the only acceptable options for our present. If immigration and exile have contributed to shape and transform the world and our societies, it has been made possible by eroding and erasing the frontiers that have defined nations with territories. Cross-border movements are an integral aspect of globalization, transnationalism and migration and are consequently a fundamental feature of the contemporary moment. Therefore, the journey of a transnational migrant subject must be narrated in the context of globalization. This migrant subject opens the confined boxes of sovereignty and the nation-state.

Salman Rushdie, unarguably a subcontinental literary figure in the West today, has unfolded a renewed and redesigned representation of the Indian subcontinent in and by the West. Considering the many migrations Rushdie has undertaken and the profound impact that it has left on him, it would not be surprising that the phenomenon of migration, which has become a 'global phenomenon', is explored in great depth in his novels.

Rushdie's migrations have always created credence of non-belonging and outsideness. In the work *Step Across This Line*, he recorded his exilic experiences that furnished him with the compelling knowledge "about displacement, about rootings, about feeling wrong in the world" (317). He explained his belief that "such out-of-place experiences lie at or near the heart of what it is to be alive in our jumbled, chaotic times" (317).

Intrinsically, migration is associated with frontier-crossing, geographical, linguistic and cultural frontiers and almost any frontiers of the mind. Rushdie believes this tendency is fundamental to all beings: "In our deepest natures, we are frontier-crossing beings" (408).

D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke opines, "Rushdie is the kind of cloven writer produced by migration, inhabiting and addressing both worlds, the East and the West, the world of his mother country and that of his adopted country, belonging wholly to neither one nor the other" (16).

For a multitude of people around the world; Cubans and Mexicans in the USA, Indians and Pakistanis in Britain, Canada and the USA, Chinese in Southeast Asia, Indians in Mauritius, Fiji, and the Caribbean, the notion of 'home' is a fragmented and flawed concept.

Indeed ‘home’ and the assumption of belonging is sometimes an obsession with place. Rushdie uses a hyphenated phrase, “belonging-to-your-place” (55) in the text, which is the new logic of (post) modernity as the condition of “living here and belonging elsewhere” (311) as exclaimed by James Clifford.

Territorial borderlines and their functions of dividing, separating, containing and reinforcing strike out possibilities of consistency and relevance encountered with spontaneous flows along the network. Boundaries or, rather, their permeability in-forms Rushdie’s liminal figurations of identity as interconnecting native and foreign, self and other, margin and centre, east and west: as he declares, “I have been crossing frontiers all my life – physical, social, intellectual, artistic borderlines...” (*Step Across This Line* 99)

The Ground Beneath Her Feet was crafted after Rushdie’s emigrated to the USA in 1999. The novel focuses notably on the condition of the outcast, the emigrant and specifically on the probability of a rootless existence. Rushdie seems to seek a reconciliation in his post-national migrant identity along with the archetypal American immigrant identity: his presumption of the primal fragmentation of the Third World immigrant’s life in a First World metropolis with the absurd superfluity of peoples and cultures found in contemporary New York. Rushdie endeavours to represent the effects of globalization, phenomenally transforming the native spaces in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*.

In this novel, the phantasmic geography becomes cultural geography, as the text inscribes with relish in the world of rock ‘n roll, stardom and fan hysteria. The three main characters, Umeed Merchant, otherwise named Rai and also the narrator of the novel, Vina Apsara and Ormus Cama, exemplify the upward mobility of capitalism operating in the music business. The novel opens with the death of Vina Apsara, a celebrity of the international music scene after being shook by an earthquake in Guadalajara, Mexico. Her life story and subsequently her death are told to us by Rai, an internationally acclaimed photographer who was smitten by her on their first encounter. Born to a Greek American mother and an Indian father, Vina had left the USA at the age of twelve, and come to Bombay. Later, in a record store, she meets Ormus Cama and the two are instantly attracted to each other. They are separated for a while but they meet again in England, where Ormus works at an off-shore pirate radio station. The two decide to be “high-tailing it out of the British Empire” (330) and relocate themselves in the US, not because it is the hub of the international music business but because it still holds out the promise of the melting pot. To convince Ormus that he should leave Britain for the United States, Vina offers him a choice:

You can either stay and I don't know immigrant the rest of your life away... or you can cross the mighty ocean and leap into that old hot pot. You get to be an American just by wanting... (331)

Vina's neologism registers an attitude towards immigrant life in Britain. Rushdie elsewhere establishes this attitude as an indication of the colonial-immigrant experience: servile and suffocating. America, by comparison is authoritative to inexperienced immigrants and it particularizes the nation's longstanding openness to immigration.

The novel portrays the contemporary American experience transgressing national borders and concepts of identity. In the post-World War II era, with the commanding influence of the United States, particularly on Third World countries, Rushdie offers a critical rendering of the transnational inequalities of contemporary economics and cultural production. He suggests that the consequent processes of uprooting are due to the products of globalization, media and migration, dismantling the homogenous local places and a longstanding feature of pure American life. The novel analyzes the ambitions and presumptions of its three main characters regarding their respective claims to be considered Americans. It also regards the distinctiveness and comical display of the American identity and its dark implications, in the fate of comprehensive widespread domination.

In *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, Rushdie deploys a circular logic to establish the configuration of American national identity. It includes incidents such as Ormus greeting passengers on an Indian flight to London with "Welcome aboard the *Mayflower*, ... *these are the people who are going with me to the New World*" (250). Ormus' decision to leave India is due to his alienation from his Indian origins: familial tragedy, cultural isolation (interest in American Music) and hopes of finding his love, Vina, who had earlier left India for the United States. He is "dressed carefully for the journey, arraying his body in the casual wear of America ..." (251). His look matches his presumption about why he will do well after immigrating to the US: "I want to be in America, America where everyone's like me, because everyone comes from somewhere else ..." (252).

America is presented in the novel as a premise of globalization as Arjun Appadurai in *Modernity at Large* describes it:

The lines between the realistic and the fictional landscapes they see are blurred, so that the farther these audiences are from the direct experiences of metropolitan life, the more

likely they are to construct imagined worlds that are chimerical, aesthetic, even fantastic objects... (35)

The novel carries the message of eminent displacement owing to globalization, which is conveyed by Rai as the “conflict between the fantasy of Home and the fantasy of Away, the dream of roots and the mirage of the journey” (*The Ground Beneath Her Feet* 55). This aspect features ex-centric travellers who render Europe and America into what James Clifford calls “sites of travel” which are being “traversed from the outside,” to the effect of “enacting differently centred worlds” (103). Travelling across the globe charts passageways between the West and the East regarding translations across natural and invisible lines, unsettling the horizontal –vertical, and the margin-center divides. Boundaries of homelands vacillate between fluidity and fixity and vanish in the endless global territorial reconfigurations. They are subject to endless processes of partitioning and withdrawal where: “Everything starts shifting, changing, getting partitioned, separated by frontiers, splitting, coming apart. Centrifugal forces begin to pull harder than their centripetal opposites. Gravity dies. People fly off into space,” as observed by Rai in the novel (*The Ground Beneath Her Feet* 168).

For Ormus Cama, Umeed Merchant and Vina Apsara, westernised nonnatives or eastern hipsters “on the road”, the imaginary gap dividing the Orient from the Occident, is traumatically experienced. As Ormus puts it, “Actually it’s the West that’s exotic, fabulous, unreal. We underworlders...” (*The Ground Beneath Her Feet* 262).

After his presumptuous re-discovery of America, Ormus declares: “We are the Pilgrim Children ... Where the first foot falls, let us call it Bombay Rock...” (80, 258).

Ormus da Cama remains enthralled in this transitional phase, which gets translated in Rushdie’s narrative as the “fourth function of *outsideness*” (80), the disruptive drive of rootlessness or nomadism as orated by his father Sir Darius Cama, who accredits its conclusiveness by confirming that it is:

...for those who value stability, who fear transience, uncertainty, change, have erected a powerful system of stigmas and taboos against rootlessness...so that we mostly confirm, we pretend to be motivated by loyalties and solidarities we do not really feel, we hide our secret identities beneath the false skins of those identities which bear the belongers’ seal of approval. But the truth leaks out in our dreams; alone in our beds [...], we soar, we fly, we flee. And in the waking dreams our societies permit, in our myths,

our arts, our songs, we celebrate the non-belongers, the different ones, the outflows, the freaks. (80)

Ormus ventures to alternative universes to witness the melting of rock-hard into thin air, off-centers from the world and causes frontiers to glide across territories and gaps to fracture and separate the solid ground beneath one's feet. Ormus' route through the looking glass provides him the gateway to parallel worlds in which England becomes a poor substitute for America, Kennedy escapes assassination in Dallas, and the Watergate Affair becomes a fantasy thriller.

The "fourth function of *outsideness*" (*The Ground Beneath Her Feet* 80) implies the lack of having roots anywhere, not being wholly attached to a place, its culture and people. However, Vina does not quite succeed in this, as she remains deeply attached to her native land, India, all her life. This semi-detachment invites new possibilities and freedom that we desire for providing a greater insight of the world and its functioning. As Rai affirms: "The only people who see the whole picture, are the ones who step out of the frame" (207).

The four functions directly relate to the four elements (earth, air, water and fire) in the universe and have great importance in the lives of the three protagonists. The 'earth' stands for stability, certainty, and roots, the characteristic elements from which the protagonists fly away and nonetheless need. Vina's death in an earthquake shows her failure to attain stability as she loses 'the ground beneath her feet.'

Similarly, the element of 'air' contains the conceit of freedom, of embracing the unknown and the crossing of the frontiers. This metaphorical frontier-crossing gets demonstrated through the flights these protagonists take – first to England and then to America. 'Water', the third element, is a metaphor for sea-image which is associated to Ormus' increasing dives into the unconscious, alternative world; and finally, 'fire' implies, like the 'air', the leaving behind of things, getting rid of the unpleasant and the destructive aspects of life. All these four elements contrive that discarding any of them would entail a loss of balance in the person. Thus, each protagonist tries to achieve a high personal complexity and make attempts to achieve it. Vina particularly accepts the changing nature of life, embracing certain ideologies, while discarding others by declaring: "Whereas the most obvious lesson of travelling ... was that reality shifted. Where the different realities met, there were shudders and rifts" (*The Ground Beneath Her Feet* 246).

After migrating to the United States, she recognizes how colour definition dismisses a person's identity and usually entails discriminations. Ormus expresses his angst: "Do I have to be a color...coloring. Can't we get beyond, finally, I mean can't we get under our skins" (386).

Aside from the protagonists, other characters in the novel too exhibit such rootlessness. Sir Darius Cama, who tries to establish preconceptions about England as a highly desirable country to live in, creates a fantasy of England contrary to India, clearly rejecting it and believing that it:

...is in a state of advanced decay. Old virtues – service of community, discipline of personality, memorizing of poetry, mastery of firearms, pleasure in falconry, formal dancing, building of character through sport – these things have lost meaning. Only in the mother country can they be rediscovered. (*The Ground Beneath Her Feet* 90)

Rushdie makes him resemble the ignorant immigrant who traveled overseas for the first time, oblivious and unprepared. When he enters England and encounters the unsympathetic attitude of the immigration officers, his idealistic vision of England gets strongly contrasted, and his construct of England gets shattered. He perceives: "Life's bruises demythologise us all" (138). It takes him a while to accept England as the newly -chosen, welcoming home place.

Contrastingly Vivvy Merchant, narrator Rai's father finds himself lost in the chaotic state of the modern world. In his attempt to identify himself through his home town with a feeling of belongingness, he appears as a solid contrast to Darius' identification with England, the faraway country, "Vivvy Merchant however dreamed of the past. That was his promised land. The past was the truth, and like all truths, it lay hidden. You had to dig it out" (60).

Rushdie attempts to negotiate the purpose of art and imagination in the novel, wherein a 'third', in-between space, finds a uniquely valid realm. Tracing Homi Bhabha's notion of a 'third space' of communication, it is argued that the third space testifies cultural rendition, which contravenes territorial borders and is disconnected from cartography. With this perspective, Rushdie draws upon the stimulus of popular culture, especially music, to catalyze pivotal movements. With the evocation and implication of music as a culturally global phenomenon, Rushdie's work celebrates a variable, hybrid perception of a postmodern life. The novel foregrounds the motif of displacement by placing its focus on rock music, which is illustrated by Rushdie in the essay "April 1999: Rock Music" published in *Step Across This Line*, as the entity that crossed "all frontiers and barriers of language and culture to become only the third globalized phenomenon in history after the two world wars" (300).

Rushdie treats rock music as a platitude of hybridity, a mutual cornerstone that transgresses borders of fantasy and reality, culture, and race. The breaking down of frontiers through music endeavours is well understood through the Oriental frame of reference despite the West employing all the means to subdue the East, culturally, economically and militarily. Rushdie reiterates this phenomenon through Rai's voice:

In India it is often said that the music I'm talking about is precisely one of those viruses with which the almighty West has infected the East, one of the great weapons of cultural imperialism, against which all right-minded persons must fight and fight again. (*The Ground Beneath Her Feet* 95)

Rushdie deconstructs the Western neocolonial attitudes, with instances where Ormus' songs are welcomed by a few American audiences, specifically the young. The others react towards their music with wrath due to the lyrical content of the songs. The album, '*Race Ballads*,' explicitly has anti-war songs sung by Vina and Ormus's rock band VTD. It is frowned. The Government intervenes, and threatens Ormus of banishment from the United States, and other sanctions. The federal agent on the phone informs them:

We have some concern about certain lyrical content. There is naturally no question of infringing any individual's First Amendment rights, but the songwriter if we understand it correctly is not a U.S. Citizen. A guest who wishes to remain welcome is not well advised to piss on his host's best rug. (*The Ground Beneath Her Feet* 381)

Ormus responds to such demeanor with music and concerts, bringing together thousands of people irrespective of their race and nationalities. Ormus's music in the novel, especially the "earthquake songs...are about the collapse of all walls, boundaries, restraints. They describe worlds in collision, two universes, tearing into each other, striving to become one..." (390). His ambition gets achieved via "Rock Music, the music of the city, of the present, which crossed all frontiers, which belonged equally to everyone" (96).

Such transgression exemplifies Rushdie's attempt to embark on a distinctive journey, entering the realm of music in a global, transcultural world. Rushdie treats music as the comprehensive universal language of the world. In this very novel, the chapter "The Invention of Music", describes music as speaking "the secret language of all humanity, our common heritage, whatever mother tongue we speak, whatever dances we first learned to dance" (*The Ground Beneath Her Feet* 89).

For Ormus and Vina, their musical craft was a conscious border-crossing expedient, “the key that un-locked the door for them, the door to magic lands” (95), and “the magic valley at the end of the universe” (177). Music, therefore, is construed as an integrating force of solidarity best depicted by Rushdie in a globalized world. On the contrary, the new music becomes the global ‘virus’ uniting the various actual or projected worlds and breaking the imaginary line between the East and the West. Rock ‘n’ roll does stand as the first memento of an accelerating globalized era.

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