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Globalization and the Crisis of Cultural Identity: A Critique of Salman Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*

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Abstract

The paper proposes to discuss the issues related to “globalization and crisis of cultural identity” in Salman Rushdie’s *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999), which describes the contemporary situation in the context of postcolonial multiculturalism. Apparently, in the scenario of globalization, there is transmission of knowledge and transportation of technology, trade, goods but the culture, tradition and identity of a particular race cannot be transported in the same manner. In *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, Rushdie shows how the migrants face different types of problems in travelling and much higher in the migrated country. Vina can fly to India because of her US Passport, but within America she faces the problems like prejudice and threats to her travel. Her mother and step-father have to secure a place in the school-bus. They explain Vina and her sister that their “darkness was not Negro darkness, they were Indians from India and didn’t need to be discriminated against, they could ride on the bus along with the regular kids” (*The Ground Beneath Her Feet* 105).

Keywords

Globalization; Cultural Identity; Ethnicity; Postcolonial Multiculturalism; Salman Rushdie; *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*.

Globalization has been described as the spread of international practices, associations, awareness and organization of social life. Globalization may be evaluated culturally, economically and politically. In *The Consequences of Modernity*, Anthony Giddens writes, “Globalization can thus be defined as the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa” (Giddens 64). Swedish journalist, Tomas Larsson, in his book *The Race to the Top: The Real Story of Globalization*, states that globalization “is the process of world shrinkage, of distances getting shorter, things moving closer. It pertains to the increasing ease with which somebody on one side of the world can interact, to mutual benefit, with somebody on the other side of the world” (Larsson 9). Cultural globalization has increased cross-cultural contacts but may be accompanied by a decrease in the uniqueness of once-isolated communities.

Globalization refers to cultural hybridization and growing pluralism. In fact, globalization has emerged with innovative opportunities for the curious people to look for new possibilities for the betterment of lives. Such a dream of being migrated in other countries often turns out to be illusory to them and it causes displacement, homelessness and the crisis of cultural identity. In *Imaginary Homeland*, Salman Rushdie has rightly pointed out: “...to migrate is certainly to lose language and home, to be defined by others, to become invisible or, even worse, a target; it is to experience deep changes and wrenches in the soul. But the migrant is not simply transformed by his act; he also transforms his new world. Migrants may well become mutants, but it is out of such hybridization that newness can emerge” (210).

In the postcolonial state of affairs during 1980s, an individual's dreams of leading a better life through migration seem to be contradictory. Such aspiration by a variety of characters in Salman Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* elucidates complexities of human situation to represent their own cultural values in a new world of globalization. Similar to many of Rushdie's earlier novels *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* contains the themes of exile, transformation and flux, and like those earlier books it considers such issues through the figure of multiple duality between home and rootlessness, love and death, East and West, reason and the irrational. Toni Morrison has commented on the sixth novel of Rushdie as "a global novel", which is a variation on the Orpheus/Eurydice myth with rock music replacing Orpheus' lyre. The myth deals with a red thread from which the author sometimes wanders, but to which he attaches an endless series of references. In *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, Salman Rushdie delves deep into the shifting cultural ground upon which identities, nations, and empires are built. Rushdie's novel is at once a celebration of a fluid, hybrid vision of contemporary life and a darker portrait of the fragmented, divisive nature of contemporary politics. As such, the novel illustrates what could be called the irony of globalization while as an ongoing process globalization signals a literal and symbolic opening up of the world to the heterogeneous cultures and identities that comprise it, globalization also brings with it hegemonic economic and cultural practices against which national and cultural entities must form their own sites of resistance.

The paper examines critically the issues of ethnicity and identity in the global circumstances in the novel which is concerned with displacement of the condition of "imagined communities" and shows a considerable shift in cultural identity and ethnicity due to "global cultural flow" that emerges from globalism and cosmopolitanism. Such aspects in the novel leads to the emergence of transnationalism and "third-culture" promoting the "imagined worlds," but they could not erase the tensions between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization. The general condition of the cultural heritage of India under

the impact of globalization is viewed from different positions in international cultural network. This is caused by a search for particularism, reinforcement of the local, assimilation of cultural diversity, dissemination of local in global, and vice versa. The aim of this research paper is to study how in his fiction Rushdie delves deep into the East and the West to explain the changes in identity and postcolonial subject's rootlessness resulting in disorientations from the personal, ideological, spatial and temporal issues. Rootlessness is viewed as anti-social because it disorients from family, clan, race and nation in the novel. The narrator Rai, finds himself and the Muslims marginalized in Bombay. They also face different types of problems, prejudices, threats during travelling in the country to which they have migrated. The cultural encounters in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* is represented by the celebrity culture projected through Vina Apsara as Princess Diana, Tina Turner as Madonna, and many others. The central concern of the novel is disorientation which in the words of Rushdie means "loss of the East". Rushdie's idea of ideological disorientation emerges from his concerns of "chutnification". He brings together the hedonistic and progressive West and the ascetic and stagnant East in a globalised culture through a remix of narrative and Bollywood's glamour, suspense, romance and trashy-tunes.

Rushdie's novels are concerned with the migrant's relationship with his homeland. Rootlessness is seen in the novel as disruptive because it distracts from home, family, clan, race, and nation. The narrator, Rai in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* is a cosmopolitan migrant who narrates the history of India from temporal and geographical distance. Rai's description of Bombay shows difficulties of representation and responsibility from outside India. Rai's changing narration and perception of Bombay show transformation taking within Bombay, that is, de-Islamization. The Muslims think that they are not having the privilege that their counterpart are having in Bombay, which is regarded as a city of diversity, tolerance and cosmopolitanism. In addition, the narrator himself feels marginalized in the narrative of the city and nation as it

revolves around Vina and Ormus's love. Above all, there is no direct relationship between the narrator and the nation; unlike Salim Sinai, the narrator in *Midnight's Children*, who is "handcuffed to history," Rai, the narrator of *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* is not fond of illustrating history or Bombay. He is other to the city and nation, and his relation to Bombay is only through his parents. So, it is his belated arrival which does not include construction of postcolonial identity. The creation of Maharashtra in 1960 shows Marathi-centric narrative. The representation of Bombay as multi-ethnic and cosmopolitan city appears distant from contemporary reality as the narrator himself feels alienated from the city. But Rai thinks that people will not understand his narrative as he is away since long time, and he claims to give an account of his sensibility:

I know. People will say I've been away too long, I don't understand the situation, it's not as I say it is, it never was, it was better in some ways, and in others, worse. But I'll tell you how it feels, after all these years. It feels like an ending in the middle pathway of my life. (*The Ground Beneath Her Feet* 248).

Rai's distancing from and participation in Bombay as postcolonial migrant is what Bhabha terms as 'condition of in-betweenness'.

In *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, Rushdie shows how the migrants face different types of problems in travelling apart from other problems in the migrated country. Vina can fly to India because of her US Passport, but within America she faces the problems like prejudice and threats to her travel. Her mother and step-father have to secure a place in the school-bus. They explain Vina and her sister that their "darkness was not Negro darkness, they were Indians from India and didn't need to be discriminated against, they could ride on the bus along with the regular kids" (105).

In 1999, Salman Rushdie wrote a passionate defense of American culture in a column entitled "Globalization" for *The New York Times*. He argued against the position that globalization, virtually synonymous with the cultural hegemony

of the United States (as well as with American military-political interventionism), is a “social catastrophe” that threatens the “survival of true cultural diversity, of the world’s precious localness” (*Imaginary Homeland* 268). Unsurprisingly for Rushdie, he went on to question the assumptions underlying the “truth” of “localness”, that is, assumptions of purity and authenticity: “Is not *mélange*, adulteration, impurity, pick ‘n’ mix at the heart of the idea of the modern, and hasn’t it been that way for most of this all-shook-up century?” (*Imaginary Homeland* 268). By insisting that the idea of “pure” cultures leads “toward ethnic cleansing, toward the gas chamber”, and by insisting that American culture epitomizes the opposite – impurity – Rushdie implied that behind the adulteration and whimsically phrased “pick ‘n’ mix” lies an ethical position not uniquely, but for Rushdie, distinctly, 20th-century American cosmopolitanism.

The novel was written after Rushdie immigrated to America and settled down in New York. Unsurprisingly, it does not just deal with his impressions of America, but most importantly, focuses also very much on the condition of the outcast, the emigrant and in particular on the question whether it is possible to lead a life not just without roots, but also without any firm attachments or ties. The characters in the novel seem to be torn between the need to be free and experience the changing nature of the world on the one hand, and the need for roots and close relationships that should give them certainties on the other hand. In order to comprehend a person’s need for relationships, Rushdie explores in the novel the role of love and the extent to which it could contribute to make a person whole. The theme is connected with the role of art in its various forms. The few touches of fantasy do surface in the novel - Ormus' supposed ability to anticipate the very songs that Elvis, the Beatles and Bob Dylan would make famous 1,001 days later -- feel like gratuitous whimsies dutifully grafted onto generic descriptions of rock concerts and music-business shenanigans. Ormus is “the greatest popular singer of all. A musical sorcerer whose melodies could make city streets begin to dance and high buildings sway to their rhythm, a golden troubadour the jouncy poetry of whose lyrics could unlock the very gates

of hell". Like Elvis, he is known for his pelvic gyrations and curling lip; like Elvis, he is haunted by memories of a dead twin brother, and like John Lennon, he is eventually gunned down by a crazed fan. Vina, on her part, is described as "a woman in extremis", an outlaw singer who is continually reinventing herself, a troubled woman who is mourned as a goddess by millions around the world after her tragic death. As for Rai, he's a familiar with Rushdie figure, a spiritual relative of Saladin, the displaced hero of *The Satanic Verses*, and Moor, the conflicted narrator of *The Moor's Last Sigh*. A photographer by vocation, Rai is a professional observer who finds his skepticism sorely tested by his encounters with Ormus and who finds his own detachment dissolving in his love for Vina.

At times Rai demonstrates Rushdie's magpie love for language. But all too often his meditations on the story of Ormus and Vina devolve into ponderous pontifications, the babbling of someone in love with the sound of his own voice. He blathers on about Ormus having double vision, suggesting that the world he and the other characters inhabit is a kind of mirror world of our own. He wonders "if each of us has alternative existences in the other continuum". And he speaks of "a transitional phase" that "only the imperative force of the Immense can force towards completion". In the end this portentous mumbo jumbo sucks all the air out of this novel and deprives Ormus and Vina of their vitality as characters. By the end of the book they have become nothing but brightly painted puppets, mechanically re-enacting the Orpheus and Eurydice myth while laboring under the weight of their creator's myriad philosophical theses. As Rai himself suggests, they "had ceased to be real". They had "become little more than signs of the times, lacking true autonomy, to be decoded according to one's own inclination and need". Instead of turning the Orpheus legend into a compelling postmodern myth, Rushdie has simply freighted an old story with his favorite themes and the random detritus of the current celebrity culture. In trying to write what he has called "an everything novel", he has produced a strangely hollow book, a book that lacks both the specificity and the magic that have enlivened his best work in the past.

To conclude, Salman Rushdie places the immigrant and cultural hybrid at the front and center of the majority of his fictional works. One could describe a great deal of his characters as “cultural hybrids,” meaning that his characters, for one reason or another, have split cultural identities. In other words, they are caught between two cultural influences. As a result of being caught between different cultures, the cultural hybridity experiences feelings of dislocation and seems to fight between the dual cultural influences looking for some sort of cultural equilibrium. It shows that the issue of globalization, and the crisis of cultural identity in the novel emphasize that the postcolonial societies are being smelled unpleasant by the misleading and devious agenda of apparently progressive globalization.

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