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Narrative Schizophrenia or Crossing Boundaries: The Postmodern Predicament of Time and Space in Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence*

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Abstract

Salman Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence*, set in fifteenth century and sixteenth century India and Europe, blends historical events, fantasy and fable that make the narrative blurred, multi-vocal and attempts to undo the standard histories and complexities of two different cultures by bringing together fictitious characters with historical figures. In his nonlinear and horizontal approach to history, Rushdie unfolds the narrative amidst the global moments that anticipate and prefigure the modern era. The connection between Florence and India is established by the European visitor, a long lost relative of Mughal emperor Akbar, born to an exiled Indian princess and an Italian father in Florence. The narrative moves between two continents in time and space, the court of Akbar to renaissance Florence, mixing history, fiction and fantasy. This kind of transgression among genres, a common feature of postmodern fiction, creates

fragmentation and ruptures in plot, characters, and factual references of the novel. It also justifies the postmodernist claim of inaccessibility to the representation of reality through narrative and interpretations. Foregrounding such axial propositions, the paper explores how the narrative in the novel, is liberated beyond national boundaries in time and space by using intertextuality, parody, magic realism and the like. In addition, the paper explores how historical fiction like *The Enchantress of Florence* blurs the dichotomies of fantasy and historical records, and thereafter questions the nature and responsibility of fiction.

Keywords

Narrative Schizophrenia; Historiographic Metafiction; Intertextuality; Magic Realism; Salman Rushdie; *The Enchantress of Florence*.



The postmodern tactics employed by Rushdie in his novel *The Enchantress of Florence* reveal his personal disdain and suspicion in history like his other historical novels starting from *Midnight's Children* in 1980s. This novel portrays a multilayered, multicentred and multivocal story where historical events and magical elements mingle and challenge the crystallite distinction between reality and fantasy. In his attempt to fictionalize history and of historicizing fiction, Rushdie attempts to look at historical events by contemporarising them. For doing so, he makes historical characters interact with his fictional characters. In other words, in this novel Rushdie offers a new perspective to Indian Mughal history—the reign of Mughal emperor Akbar—by intermingling it with Florentine renaissance history and other corresponding historical events. According to western ethnocentrism, historically there was no connection between these contemporary events, but Rushdie links them with his fictional narrations.

The novel set in fifteenth and sixteenth century's attempts to mirror contemporary sensibilities and apprehensions as its narration unfolds during global moments which foretell the modern era. The stranger and storyteller in the novel, Niccolo Vespucci—cousin of Amerigo Vespucci (the great Italian explorer) and namesake of Niccolo Machiavelli (the great Italian diplomat and political philosopher)—introduces himself as Mogor Dell Amor (the mogul of love) and claims to be a far uncle of the emperor Akbar. He changes his personal identity and historical narration according to situation. At one point in the novel he admits the distortions in his story and says "...that witchcraft requires no potions, familiar spirits, or magic wands. Language upon a silvered tongue affords enchantment enough" (75). This unreliability of narration and fragmentation is a common feature of all the postmodern fiction. It also justifies the postmodernist claim of inaccessibility to the representation of reality through narrative and interpretations.

This kind of transgression among genres, a common feature of postmodern fiction, creates fragmentation and ruptures in plot, characters, and factual references of the novel. Foregrounding such axial propositions, the paper explores how the narrative in the novel is liberated beyond national boundaries in time and space by using intertextuality, magic realism, historiographic metafiction and the like. In addition, the paper explores how historical fiction like this blurs the dichotomies of fantasy and historical records, and thereafter questions the nature and responsibility of fiction. For the purpose, the paper is divided into two parts; In Part I, the Deleuzian concept "schizophrenia" to comprehend the nature of postmodern narratives have been redefined and extended, whereas the Part II of the paper discusses how the idea of "narrative schizophrenia" affects the thematic and structural contents of the novel.

I

For Deleuze and Guattari "schizophrenia" means "the liberation of desire". The basic premise resulting from their critique of psychoanalysis is their

emphasis on the positivity of schizophrenic language. They view unconscious as a positive domain in which desire is constituted as an “untrammelled flow” (*A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*). In *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), Deleuze and Guattari promote a critique of interiority to affirm the exteriority of forces and relations. Schizophrenia is described as an effort to construct a rhizome network in *A Thousand Plateaus*, that is, it is a breakaway into the unstable foundations, non-relations, edge of fracturing, disjunctions and the fight against fascism and power. In other words, it is an articulation of difference. It stands for radical freedom and subverts the notions like “desiring-machines” and “body-without-organs”. In this regard they maintain that a subject may seem fragmented and disunited, temporarily but the subject develops certain amount of consistency that comes from the continuing power of relocation. Though, Deleuze and Guattari’s this idea is developed from their critique of psychoanalysis, the above definition of “schizophrenia” has been extended in the narrative structure of Salman Rushdie’s novel *The Enchantress of Florence*. The narrative in Rushdie’s fiction travels beyond territorial boundaries as found in other postmodern fictions. For him, human culture and emotions cannot be restricted to a political territory. Unlike the modernist narrative where foundational views preside, the narrative in postmodernist fiction subverts the representation, factuality, historical truths. In this novel, Rushdie de-territorialises the boundaries between nation, culture and religion.

II

Like other postmodern novelists, Rushdie replicates the rebellion from conventionality and attempts to project unreality and vastness required to assign contemporary reality, devoid of strict markers. In this novel Rushdie attempts to draw a global map of the renaissance within which Florentine humanism, sensuality, political thought and love poetry has its eastern counterpart in the humanist, syncretic and proto-modern elements in Akbar’s court in Sikari. Here

Rushdie—in voicing this idea of a de-territorialized world through postmodern devices like historiographic metafiction, intertextuality, magic realism, and the like—brings together flashes of dreams and omens, beliefs in magic and sorcery and even visions of the dead in the narrative.

The postmodern novelists provide reasoned arguments for “anachronism” and “chronotope” in their novels to counter essentialism of realist fiction, and outline the illusion of truth or demystify the authority of the “author-figure”. Linda Hutcheon describes this mode of fiction writing as “Historiographic Metafiction” which refers to “those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 5). Salman Rushdie uses this idea of historiographic metafiction, in the novel *The Enchantress of Florence* to investigate the whole idea of fiction or the discourse it tries to portray.

The novel is divided in three parts: the first third concerns Mogor-dell'Amore and his travels to reach Akbar; the second relates the story of three friends in Florence, Italy; and the third tells the tale of QaraKooz, a forgotten Mughal princess whose beauty enchants all who see her. As the narrative progresses, imaginary characters meet the factual and real-life personages such as Amerigo Vespucci, Niccolo Machiavelli, and Botticelli. It becomes impossible to distinguish between the factual and fictional characters unless the reader is reminded that this narration is a story by the opportunist stranger. Like, the historical account of the stranger becomes metafictional when he put into the dungeon and he says, “All men needed to hear their stories told. He was a man, but if he died without telling the story he would be something less than that, an albino cockroach, a louse. The dungeon did not understand the idea of a story (91)”.

The characters and their various situations form the backdrop against which Rushdie formulates his ideas regarding beauty, power, art, and even the nature of humanity. Rushdie powerfully brings both Mughal India and Florence

to life. In the end, when the author writes reflecting the hallucinated character the enchantress's voice, "You have allowed me to return and so here I am, at journey's end" (349), a sort of loss of textual narrative miracle is felt abruptly. So again and again the reader is reminded that whatever is presented to him is a created discourse. Thus, the novel is an account of nightmare of history shrouded very much in mystery.

Intertextuality plays a major role in connecting the fragmented events in the narrative. The term intertextuality is popularized by Julia Kristeva which refers to signify the number of ways in which one literary citation and allusion is linked to the other in natural and creative cross- textual ways both at factual, formal and functional levels ("Word, Dialogue and the Novel", 34-37). In the novel *The Enchantress of Florence*, there seems to be at least two levels or a double sense of meaning which gives reference to other situations, texts. The novel here and there gives references to other earlier novels by Rushdie himself. For example, the motif of the "potato witches" in the fifteenth chapter of the novel appears already in *Shalimar the Clown*. At the end of the novel, Rushdie adds a "Bibliography of Books and Web sites" which clearly indicates references to other texts. In addition, at the end of the novel when Niccolo Vespucci, has himself disappeared, Akbar feels disappointed considering: "Vespucci's story was concluded. He had crossed over into the empty page after the last page, beyond the illuminated borders of the existing world... (344)". Here "the illuminated borders" may be read as the borders of the painted Mughals world in its miniatures. In this regard, Engelbert Jorissen says that

Rushdie's novel is indeed so full of details and literary citations that is sometimes not easy to follow...For example the scene in which Arcalia is putting his own things and what he has robbed of Hauksbank easily into his "parti-colored greatcoat"...reminds the diligent reader of the important role of Shakespeare's *Othello* and

The Merchant of Venice. (Travelling Through Times and Spaces 50-51)

The novel comprises independent stories which are intertwined meticulously in the narrative which develop in most different historical times and places. The kind of structure of the novel reminds the reader of the tales of *The Arabian Nights*. The story that emerges, unites the lives of three Florentines (Niccolo Macchiavelli, Antonino Argalia, and Ago Vespucci) with Akbar's dynasty by way of an intrepid princess named Quara Koz ("Lady Black Eyes")—the tragic heroine of Niccolo's tale and the erstwhile enchantress of Florence (The Fictive Origins of Secular Humanism 676). Thus, intertextuality plays an important role in enabling Rushdie to succeed in recreating a New World by assimilating history of the East and West.

Magic realism combines realism and elements of fantasy in such a way that magical elements grow organically out of the reality portrayed. In literary circle, the term magic realism is popularized by Gabriel Garcia Marquez and other postmodern writers. Rushdie in the novel *The Enchantress of Florence* uses magic realism to connect renaissance Europe and Mughal India. The novel on the surface is the story of a mysterious woman, a great beauty believed to possess the powers of enchantment and sorcery, attempting to command her own destiny in a man's world. The novel opens with the account of the visit of a stranger, "tall, yellow haired European traveler", to the Mughal emperor Akbar's court and his claim that he is a distant relative of the emperor born to an exiled Indian prince Quara Koz, 'Lady Black eyes' and an Italian from Florence. It is through the tales narrated by the traveler that the whole world seems connected reflecting the mutual suspicion and mistrust between the East and the West. In the very first chapter of the novel, the cart-driver glares at the traveler (who is carrying a secret with him to be revealed only to the emperor Akbar) and rebukes him thus: "Keep your secret ... Secrets are for children, and spies. ...And for sorcerers.... And for lovers too. And kings" (9). This statement serves as a pointer

to the forthcoming events in the narrative which are full of magic, sorcery and sensuality. By comparing himself with the power of the “elephant king” he remembers a past incident in Florence where he had “transformed the gold into smoke and yellow smoke back into gold” (15).

The traveler is on a mission in India to make his fortune here. After coming to Fatehpur Sikiri he declares that he has a secret which he would disclose only to the emperor. He claims that he also has “the letter in Elizabeth Tudor’s own hand and under her personal seal, the message from the queen of England to the emperor of India... He was England’s ambassador now” (29). He succeeds in his ploy when he is granted permission to meet the emperor. Thus, through this imaginary character of the traveler the historical figures are made to interact with each other beyond time and space.

In narrating history with fantasy, Rushdie combines the real and unreal into one. Like in Chapter 3 of the novel where he describes Akbar as follows,

Even the emperor succumbed to fantasy. Queens floated within his places like ghosts, Rajput and Turkish sultans playing catch-me-if-you-can. One of these royal personages did not really exist. She was an imaginary wife, dreamed up by Akbar in the way that lonely children dream up imaginary friends. He gave her a name, Jodha, and no man dared gainsay him (33).

Thus, the historical fact about Jodha’s existence is merely succumbed to a dream progeny not more than that. Yet at the same time her non-existent existence does not break away with the historical records. Reality of her existence is expressed as a portion of sorcery and a matter of dreamland. Also at one point in the novel, The Emperor asks Dashwant, his talented painter to paint the details of the story of that enchanted Princess and his forefathers in his private rooms. Dashwant paints the princess as a four year-old girl with bright eyes and extraordinary beauty. Her portrait is believed to possess super human powers. Then Dashwant draws her as an adolescent girl, which even attracts Birbal.

Dashwant paints her as “the rediscovered protagonist and her new lover—the hidden Princess Lady Black Eyes or Quara Kooz or Angelica, and the Shah of Persia—standing face to face” (160). The power of her portrait makes the painter lost and then, evaporates him. Thus magic realism is used in the novel to question the authority of historians in interpreting past events.

The novel attempts to intervene in cultural systems in many ways through an interesting presentation of cultural signs of Mughal Empire in India and then flourishing artistic and diplomatic Western nations. Thus, the postmodern techniques used in the novel establish a network of textual relations. The first is the intertextual relationship that becomes interesting in the novel only when the connection can be clearly verified fancifully and this textual relationship usually takes the form of allusions, quotations, annexations, etc. The second is the deconstructive view which says that intertextuality is the basis and requirement of all communications among all the fanciful notions of the novel. The historiographic metafiction of fantasizing Akbar, His Majesty, the enchantress of Florence and the mock-heroic tradition of the life and manners of Mogor arouses curiosity to find the spontaneity and blend of centuries and spaces across the world together to give shape to magic realism. At one point in the novel Akbar says, “Make as much racket as you like people. Noise is life and an excess of noise is a sign that life is good” (30). The same can be said about the literary techniques like fragmentation, unreliable narrator, fabulation which attempts to unite the different worldview in a meaningful one. Thus, the use of these postmodern devices helps Rushdie in creating a new world by assimilating the history of East and West.

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