

MYTH AND HISTORY: A POSTMODERN PERSPECTIVE OF SALMAN RUSHDIE'S THE ENCHANTRESS OF FLORENCE

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Abstract:

'Myth is muddled history' said Euhemerous. This is true for the Postmodern view of history as well. Postmodernism deconstructs all totalizing narratives with its "incredulity towards metanarratives". History being a 'Grand Narrative' it becomes an important prerogative of postmodern novels in subverting history. Postmodern novels use Magical Realism, which C. N. Ramachandran defines, is "an attempt to transcend the limitations of Realism, a free mixture of fantasy and reality,.." (225), and is generally used by Rushdie. In *The Enchantress of Florence*, the fictionalizing of history occurs through the interweaving of myth into the novel. Which Rushdie uses as a subverting principle. In the mythic method, "... the past and the present are synthesized, antiquity and modernity are fused, and ages and cultures merge into one another" (Dorairaj, 66) which dismisses the concept of time and space which are the prerogatives of history. The especial trend of postmodern novels is where the narrator, a fictional character, more often takes up a historical narrative and tries to bring out the events of the past that were until then suppressed and had remained unknown. Here the self-reflexive narrative of the author himself fills the 'unknown' gaps with explanations. This research article traces the elements of myth and history in Salman Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence* in a postmodern perspective.

Keywords: History, Fantasy, Reality, Antiquity, Modernity.

The true spirit of Postmodernism is reflected in the genre of fiction that Linda Hutchen calls "Historiographic Metafiction" (15). In Rushdie's novels, "Historiography and the novel are tied together as genres, which continually return to figure the Indian nation as the site of an incomplete or fractured modernity. The desire to find some third form of writing ..." (Mee, 146). Rushdie, a leading exponent, used Historiographic metafiction to start a new genre of novels, which "inaugurated a post-foundationalist approach by its imitation of history." (Merivale, 329). Through this subversive element of postmodernism, Rushdie mixes history, fable and magic together, making an enchanting novel, that serves as a mininarrative, undermining the metanarrative of established history. As McHale says, "The post-modernists fictionalize history, but by doing so they imply that history itself may be a form of fiction" (96).

The Enchantress of Florence is set in the sixteenth century India in Sikri, the capital of Akbar the Great. Into this historical setting comes Mogor, the storytelling stranger who claims to have a secret story that would change the established history of Akbar's ancestors. This story

is about a princess of Mughul lineage, a sister of Babur, who had been taken away along with her elder sister, Kazhanda and her playmate, the Mirror, as the spoils of war when Babur lost the battle in Samarkhand to Shaibani Khan. There begins the life journey of the little girl nicknamed 'Qara Koz' or Lady Black Eyes who later becomes the most powerful Enchantress in the world. When Saibani Khan was defeated, the three women were liberated; but she along with her Mirror chose not to return and stayed with her liberator, for Shah Ismail became "... her first infatuation ..." (EF 268). Incensed at this Babar struck out her name from history and Mogor claims this was the reason she was not mentioned in the ancestry. This anger now explained why Babar sent home the army of Shah Ismail immediately after the capture of Samarkhand, a question that had been unanswered by history. In this narration, the borders between the historical and mythical narrative are blurred and blended, at once inscribing and subverting history.

Akbar is presented as a true renaissance king promoting all kinds of learning and culture with his famed courtiers, "the Navaratna or Nine Stars" (EF 34):

The songs of Tansen could break open the seals of the universe and let divinity through into the everyday world. The poems of Faizi opened windows in the heart and mind through which both light and darkness could be seen. The governance of Raja Man Singh and the financial skills of Raja Todar Mal meant the empire's business was in the best hands. And then there was Birbal, the best of the nine who were the best of the best Abul Fazl, the man who knew everything (EF 53- 54, 82)

He is unique for his contrasting personality full of paradoxes, that reflect a true renaissance as well as postmodern spirit: "A Muslim vegetarian, a warrior who wanted peace, a philosopher-king" (EF 41). His secular notions of religion are also depicted as he doesn't particularly favour any religion but, "He felt ... *Hindustani*" (EF 42). The fictionalizing subversion comes when Akbar's favourite queen Jodha is depicted as a fictional woman: "She was an imaginary wife, dreamed up by Akbar in the way that lonely children dream up imaginary friends

..." (EF 33). Rushdie's Akbar is also a postmodern individual as he contemplates about reality and illusion: "... the emperor was of the opinion that it was the real queens who were the phantoms and the non-existent beloved who was real" (EF 33). He is also on the quest for identity as he debates on the postmodern multiplicity of self: "Perhaps this idea of self-as-community was what it meant to be a being in the world," (EF 39). The language he spoke was also a postmodern contradiction, "... a poet's language born out of soldier's mouth" (EF 43). So, the historical two-dimensional king, Akbar the Great, is made a flesh and blood human of doubts and faults, in search of his Identity.

The Florence narrated through Mogor's story also resembles the Renaissance Italy with its many carnival's feasts and debauchery. The political conflicts of the city with the Pope, King of Naples, King of France and the Medici are mentioned but fictitious characters populate these historical incidents. Historical characters when mentioned are parodied to the extent that nothing is recognizable than their names. Such is the case with the well-known Florentine, Machiavelli, who is named Niccolo il Machia, and portrayed as a sex-addict: "... the reincarnation of the god Priapus, always ready for action, always chasing the ladies," (EF 183). His shrewd practicality is considered a "... curse to see the world too fucking clearly, and without a shred of kindness, and then you can't keep it to yourself ..." (EF 197). He turns even more comical as he is represented as a family man with a duck-like wife and a long line of children feeling that there was "... no end to fatherhood ..." (EF 305). The biggest subversion occurs where his book "mirror-of-princes piece" (EF 361), which is actually *The Prince* is considered a failure and the courtiers laugh at him saying, "If this Niccolo Mandragola's name is remembered at all, it will be as a comedian, not a thinker" (EF 365). Amerigo Vespucci is

mentioned as being the cousin of Niccolo's friend Ago Vespucci; Throughout the novel historical characters, especially well-known ones, are humorously parodied, like Abul Fazl and Machiavelli. Thus, while subverting history parody does not destroy the past but tries "...to enshrine the past and to question it" (Hutcheon 126).

Rushdie, using myth "...makes the protagonist float above history and time – constantly decentering the outside as well as the inside of the nation" (6), says Rana. The important characters – Mogor, Akbar and the Enchantress – both real and fictional, are out of bounds of time, space and history, each according to their own degree. It is the story, which liberates them from all such constraints. The perfect example is the Enchantress who is the one that succeeds in detaching herself completely from form of shackles. She is able to shape incidents through her visions of the past as well as the future through her dreams. Her multiple personality was a composite of all the people she related to. In one dream, she sees herself, "... floating outside herself and watching her own story as if it were happening to someone else..." (EF 372). She dies physically but enters the pages of the story, "... moving out of the world of earth, air and water and entering a universe of paper and ink ..." (EF 423). Later after many years when Mogor tells her story she comes out of it captivating all her audience and through their minds becomes real once more.

A number of wilful subversions take place in the novel. While Jodha, a historical woman, is made an imaginary person who vanishes, the Enchantress, a fictional woman turns real replacing Jodha. The historical characters from Akbar's court and Florence are parodied through exaggeration as in the case of Tansen's musical prowess, Akbar's inefficient sons especially Prince Salim, Abul Fazl's knowledge and Machiavelli. Akbar's beautiful Sikri is contrasted with the war-torn outside world where the outside world becomes the reality and Sikri, though real, is called a "lie" (EF 53) an illusion, because of its appearance of a peaceful paradise of plenty.

Another parody of Postmodern fiction is how the fictional characters have the tendency to be involved in matters that affect history. It was during Akbar's rule that the East India Company sent by Queen Elizabeth signed a treaty to trade with India. However, this incident is subverted as Mogor usurps the Lord bearing the letter from Queen Elizabeth and no treaty is signed. Mogor invents stories about the Queen and the story goes how Akbar sends letters of love which never reach her. The Enchantress' decision to stay with her lover is said to have influenced the history of the Mughul Empire: "So if your story is true, then the beginning of our own empire is the direct consequence of the wilfulness of Qara Koz" (EF 272).

"Historical metafiction often shows the whims of our insistence on control, through a central figure's insistence that absolutely everything makes sense only in terms of him or her" (171), says Brenda K Marshall. This is exactly true in the case of Angelica, the Enchantress, as she becomes the mythic centre around which everything makes sense. Akbar too considers himself to be omnipresent and omnipotent: "The emperor ruled over everything. Time itself could be stretched and paused" (EF 194); then again, "He, Akbar, the perfect man, was the engine of time" (EF 387). Later he even tries to control the Enchantress' story by writing his own ending. He says, "He did not believe the foreigner's tale. He would tell himself a better one instead. He was the emperor of dreams ... This was his story now" (EF 426-427).

Historically, Akbar left Sikri for a new capital, which is a well-known fact. Historians still speculate as to why Akbar chose to, "... abandon [Sikri] so soon and abruptly ..." (Richards, 66); the novel here fills the gap left unsaid by history. The dryingup of the life-giving river, causing the move, is here explained as being the result of the emperor taking away his favour from Mogor and forcing him to escape with his two ladies. The symbolic significance is that the water, the vitality, the life-force is represented by the stories which are important for an individual's identity. Sending away Mogor meant sending away the vitality

and hence Akbar has to relocate from the barren land. This incident is paralleled with the drying up of the river Arno in Florence when Angelica, the Enchantress is similarly driven away. Postmodern mininarratives alter the repetitive notion of traditional history. In postmodern fiction, the end can never be determined for it points out the incompleteness of history. Rushdie's Akbar proves this by saying, "... history does not repeat itself but moves forward, and that Man is capable of change" (EF 43). Thus, the postmodern Historiographic metafiction liberates history from its static immutability towards fluid identities. To quote Neil Ten Kortenaar, Rushdie's novel, "both undermines and presumes the possibility of history". (91)

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