

The Counter-Culture of Rushdie's Imagination: The quest for New Values



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Introduction:

In the recent years, a great body of fiction, written by writers of Indian origin, has emerged on the world literary scene. A large number of these diasporic writers have given expression to their creative urge and have brought credit to the Indian English fiction as a distinctive force. The present paper comprises critical imagination in the most significant way. Most of the Indian diasporic writers express their longing for their motherland as well as portray an objective picture of Indian society.

In the last century, several Indian writers have distinguished themselves not only in traditional Indian languages but also in English. India's Nobel laureate in literature was the Bengali writer as Rabindranath Tagore. Other major writers who are either Indian or of Indian origin and derive much inspiration from Indian themes are R K Narayan, Vikram Seth, Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Raja Rao, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Chandra, Mukul Kesavan, Shashi Tharoor, Nayantara Sehgal, Rohinton Mistry, Indian Women writers and poets like Kamala Das ushered in the feminist era in India by her bold and confessional writings.

In recent years, English-language writers of Indian origin are being published in the West at an astonishing rate. In June 1997, a special fiction issue of The New Yorker magazine devoted much space to essays by Amitav Ghosh and Abraham Verghese, a short story by Vikram Chandra, and poems by Jayanta Mahapatra and A K Ramanujan. John Updike profiled RK Narayan and Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things*.

The Jnanpeeth Award and Sahitya Akademy Award are among the most prestigious Indian literary awards.

Indian English Literature refers to the body of work by writers in India who write in the English language and whose mother tongue is usually one of the numerous languages of India. It is also associated with the works of members of the Indian diaspora, especially people like Salman Rushdie and Kumar Kaushik who were born in India. As a category, this production comes under the broader realm of post-independence literature- the production from previously colonised countries such as India.

Among the later writers, the most notable is Salman Rushdie, born in India, now living in the United States. Rushdie with his famous work *Midnight's Children* (Booker Prize 1981, Booker of Bookers 1992) ushered in a new trend of writing. He used a hybrid language – English generously peppered with Indian terms – to convey a theme that could be seen as representing the vast canvas of India. He is usually categorised under the magic realism mode of writing most famously associated with Gabriel García Márquez. Rushdie's statement in his book – "the ironical proposition that India's best writing since independence may have been done in the language of the departed imperialists is simply too much for some folks to bear" – created a lot of resentment among many writers, including writers in English. In his book, Amit Chaudhuri questions – "Can it be true that Indian writing, that endlessly rich, complex and problematic entity, is to be represented by a handful of writers who write in English, who live in England or America and whom one might have met at a party?"

The active exercise and use of imagination is indispensable to the realization, establishment and defense of those values which define us and according to which we try to live our lives. In 21st century all the claims and counter claims for and against the role of imagination in fiction have become simultaneously available, from Henry James' sacramental views in *The Art Of The Novel* (1934) through the liberties of the 'Magic Realist' to Samuel Beckett's paradoxical vision of the cessation of all mental activity in *Imagination Dead Imagine* (1965). And the writers with a post colonial background, have a specially difficult negotiation to make in this respect. One thinks of the Guyanese writer Wilson Harris, who argued that 'a philosophy of history may well lie buried in the arts of the imagination.' Harris has exemplified in his essays and novels that "Counter Culture of the Imagination" which he sees as the most positive and creative response to the colonial experience, in what is to be understood as a "quest for new values" And it is here, in this contested space, that the present study will try to locate the works of Salman Rushdie.

In the beginning of the nineteenth century, a time like our own that threatened personal liberty and freedom of thought, and when he himself had been victimized for atheism, Shelley

wrote a *Defence of Poetry*, known for its definition of the role of imagination in the discovery and direction of our lives. And, at the end of the twentieth century, many wars and revolutions later, we are if anything even more aware that the active exercise and use of imagination is indispensable to the realization, establishment and defence of those *values* which define us, and according to which we try to live our lives. Now, in 21st. century all the claims and counter claims for and against the role of imagination in fiction have become simultaneously available. And Salman Rushdie, the writer in question here, says that imagination, "The process by which we make pictures of the world is one of the keys to our humanity". Then, it is also a fact that the human appeal to the imagination, earlier and even now, gives way to debate over the issue. We can recount that in his extraordinary book, *A Table of a Tub*, Swift terms the imagination as that which gives access to the whole spectrum of human-potential. Then, proving Swift's point, what Dr. Johnson reclaims as a 'licentious and vagrant faculty' is later taken to be principle of perception and expression by the romantics : Coleridge's 'shaping spirit of imagination' But, from the beginning exponents and Critics of novel countless heavily in the imagination, giving more weight to observation and documentation. But, then, works like Stern's *Tristram Shandy*, with its concentration on inner happenings in mind, is a case in point otherwise. Emile Zola further provided emphasis on the role of imagination in his theory of novel, and argued that a properly scientific novel can't be applied to the art of novel.

In our own times in the beginning of 21st. century we witness whole bunch of arguments for and against the role of imagination in fiction. This is evident from Herry James's views in *The Art of Novel* (1934) through the freedom of the science fiction writer, writer of fantasies and magic realism, to Beckett's paradoxical vision in *Imagination Dead Imagine* (1995). And the writers of the post-colonial world have to rework on the role of imagination to suit their specific needs. We are reminded of the painstakingly done theorizing of Wilson Harris of Guyana, who believes that the dynamism of cultural admixture is to be found "in the evolutionary thrust, it restores to the orders of imagination". Harris has proposed in his critical writings and showed in his novels that 'Counter-Culture of the imagination' which he terms as the most creative and needed response to the colonial experience, in what is understood to be 'a quest for new values'. And it is in this contested category and space that this study tries to locate the work of Salman Rushdie.

For Salman Rushdie, as a postmodern writer, there is no such thing as an unqualified fact, nor and absolute fiction; the two categories necessarily overlap. And whatever the risk involved in attempting a synthesis of fact and fiction, the separation of the two offers an even bleaker prospect. Facts by themselves will get the writer nowhere; 'where the strength for fiction fails the writer, what remains is autobiography.' Rushdie believes that it is only through an exercise of imagination that we can take part in the project of what is now a global culture, write the "books that draw new and better maps of reality, and make new

languages with which we can understand the world". Elsewhere, Rushdie quotes Richard Wright as saying that "black and white Americans were engaged in a war over the nature of reality". For him the modern world is as much the creation of Kafka as it is of Freud, Marx or Einstein. Rushdie links the idea of change to that of the new migrant sensibility also as the effect of mass migration has been the creation of radically new types of human beings: people who root themselves in ideas rather than in places. And if new sensibilities require new forms (as they do), then Salman Rushdie is an enthusiastic proponent of these: film, radio, gramophone, television, video - all find their place as both narrative material, structural device and metaphor in his fiction.

And in the times we live in, this is indeed the location of culture. It is not only in the essays but in the novels themselves that Rushdie pursues the critique of the imagination- the quest for new values. In *Midnight's Children* (1981) the imagination is enlisted to participate in the birth of a nation, macroscopically and at the microscopic birth of one child (and his thousand magical siblings). The story of Saleem Sinai's first thirty years is synchronized with the first thirty years of independent India. But here we are not to believe everything we are told. The narrator Saleem himself confesses at one point to telling self-protective lies: "I fell victim to the temptation of every autobiographer- to create past events simply by saying they occurred" (*Midnight's Children* 427). The lesson to be drawn here is that history is not only made, by events, but also made up, narrated like the story of a life or the anecdotes within it.

Salman Rushdie takes the imagination as the agent of synthesis: It is through imagination only that we are liberated from the harsh reality or crude facts of history, and it also sort of frees us from the recordings from the diary of our own life. It is important then to see what Rushdie has to say about the governing power of imagination, and how this help us in our intended study of his novels. What emerges from Rushdie's views is that as a postmodern novelist, there is no such thing as an unqualified fact, nor an absolute fiction for him; the two categories necessarily overlap and trespass in each other's territory. It is significant for him that there is much of fiction in journalism today, and there is much journalistic in fiction. Rushdie sees Julian Barnes' *History of the world* as 'the novel as footnote to history', not a history but a fiction about 'What history might be'. Again, Marquez for Rushdie, has the ability, through the extraordinary power of his imagination, to make the real world behave in precisely the improbably hyperbolic fashion of a Marquez Story.

Throughout in Rushdie's critical writings there is mistrust of history as it is practiced, but he believes that novelists are not the only ones who can challenge the accepted and sponsored manifestations of truth or fact. "In the aftermath of Kennedy's assassination, the notion that "visible" history was a fiction created by the powerful, and that Invisible histories contained the "real" truths of the age, had become fairly generally plausible. But, the novelist is dedicated to that form of writing in which notions of the sacred and the profane can be

simultaneously explored". We can see his own statement justifying *The Satanic Verses* to his readers:-

".....That I was not attempting to falsify history, but to allow fiction to take off from history.The use of fiction was a way of creating the sort of distance from actuality that I felt would prevent offence from being taken."

But, whatever the dangers in attempting a synthesis of truth and reality, fact and fiction, the separation of the two is even worse. Facts in themselves are nothing and can't bring to the writing the status of literature. Rushdie feels that:-

"Where the strength for fiction fails the writer, what remains is autobiography".

But going by the same logic, fiction by itself, without a mix with it of real history, will ultimately a triviality only.

Thus, imagination plays the role of mediator between fact and fiction. And Salman Rushdie's views on role and function of imagination are very positive; and for him it is through the exercise of imagination that we can take part in the project of a new global culture, write the "books that draw new and better maps of reality, and make new languages with which we can understand the world." Then, Rushdie has his views on the world of imagination at war with the 'real' world. And it is about this war that literature is whether these are wars within the innermost orbit in the mind of man, or the real wars. Tolstoy makes his stuff on or the wars in Milton's work in heaven and hell, and on earth. Rushdie also quotes Richard Wright declaring that "black and white Americans were engaged in a war over the nature of reality" and the project that Rushdie undertakes in *Imaginary Homelands* is also just this. For Salman Rushdie, The modern world is as much the creation of writers like Kafka and others as it is of Freud, Newton, Marx, or Einstein. Here Rushdie reminds of new type of human beings living in this age of globalisation. The effect of mass migration is that we have this new human tribe: people who root themselves in ideas rather than in places. Rushdie believes that before and around 1947 we saw migration of the people on a grand scale, and we now have our corss-culture trends in a large section of humanity. This migrant sensibility visible in the air may require new forms, to wage the war over nature of reality where imagination is summoned to negotiate, then cinema, is a place where the new can take the birth better. Not only cinema, but television, video, internet-all find place in his fiction as matter of narrative, structure and metaphor. And during our times this is where we can locate 'culture', and Rushdie very much exploits this location in his fiction to forge a new relationship between public and private life, in his pursuit of arriving at a desired synthesis of fact and fiction in his quest for new values.

And it is this quest for new values of the cross-boarder culture of the day, that involves Rushdie to the mainstream post colonial culture where many writers see the imagination as defining a space which is more metaphorical than actual. Homi Bhabha too proposes his idea of a 'Third Space' not hemmed in by simple dualities, where hybridity might truly thrive and, here, we consider again war over reality, on the disputed territory of imagination, and this takes us to the representation of reality in *The Satanic Verses*. The aftermath of the fatwa, and subsequently emerged politics is not our concern here, but that this gave voice to some of the issues in criticism. A section of writers' fraternity feels that we are in danger of passing death-sentence over the imagination. Carlos Fuentes in mindful of ab/uses of imagination in literature:-

"By making the imagination so dangerous that it deserves capital punishment, the sectarian have made people everywhere wonder what it is that literature can say that can be so powerful"

Again, For Edward Said, "Rushdie is the focus of imagination's holy war". Rushdie, though has his argument for *The Satanic Verses*, yet accepts that the novel has created a controversy over "Who should have power over the grand narrative, the story of Islam". He is aware of the dangers as well as rewards affixed with the use of the power of imagination in the process of writing. But, the writer haste navigates between the real and fictional world, and arrive at the desired synthesis.

But, imagination can't be so innocent always and Rushdie concedes that "The imagination can falsify, demean, ridicule, caricature and wound as effectively as it can clarify, intensify and unveil". He gives the example of the British general election of 1983 as "a dark fantasy, a fiction so outrageously improbable that any novelist would be ridiculed if he dreamed it up, We are reminded of the limitations which must be placed on the freedom of the imagination. But, further, we have Rushdie's argument that of all the art forms 'literature can still be the most free' and believes that the 'interior space of the imagination is a theatre that can never be closed down'.

Not only in his critical writings, but in his novels also Rushdie dwells deep into the nature and extent of imagination in arts. His first novel *Grimus* is an allegorical representation of how and in what ways imagination can be objective and create a world of its own away from the world of realities. We may find something of the romantic escape in what Rushdie proposes in the context. But, participation, and not escape from the responsibilities placed on imagination is what we find in *Midnight's Children*, where through imagination, author participates in the birth of a nation macroscopically, and at the microscopic birth of a child, and his thousand magically born siblings. Then, We hear the story of first three decades in the life of Salim Sinai, the chief

protagonist, synchronized with the thirty years after independence. But, in the course, the reader is not supposed to believe everything narrated. The narrator, Salim Sinai himself confesses: "I fell victim to the temptation of every autobiographer to create past events simply by saying they occurred". Rushdie means that history is not only constructed by the events, but also narrated (in order to be constructed through narration), like the storm of a life, or the anecdotes it is made up of. But, this is not so in *Shame*, where we are told that 'Pakistan is a country that is insufficiently imagined', and this Pakistan-book of Rushdie seems to crush itself between paradoxes, and no value seems to emerge out of the exercise, at least in the cultural context of the Indian subcontinent, though the postmodern value of doubting the constructed realities certainly is a key to the novel.

The Satanic Verses too has 'the imaginative capacity of the mind' as its focus-point. The imaginative process through which we construct the identity, many-sided energy of imagination producing both good and evil, the extent of imaginative belief that constitute 'faith' or 'religion' (and doubt, or atheism)- all these are put into a conflict and interaction, represented by different protagonists (like Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha), different locations, different historical periods etc. And caught at a moment in one such conflict, Gibreel Farishta states, 'if I was God, I'd cut the imagination right out of people'. This is the human predicament of man in modern times. This concerns the problem of living life in an imaginative manner devoid of any illusions. Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* further extends this conflict, and we find this narrated in lighter vein there. In *East West* also the stories continue to deal with this dilemma, and we have men with their multiple personalities, and alternative realities. And, with a different perspective Rushdie returns to his theme of *Midnight's Children* in *The Moor's Last Sigh* : with both a micro and macro narrative. Here, the greater history of the Spanish/Portuguese colonization of Goa, and the miniature history of the local Zogoiby family happily mingle.

We come to discuss now Rushdie's theory of novel- which again is not a simple task as it encompasses many seeming contradictions. There is the visible deviation from the formal categories, rather breaking down of it, and Rushdie upholds that in the form of *Midnight's Children* is "multitudinous hinting at the infinite possibilities of the country". This he achieves through a mingling of fantasy and realism which, according to him can best represent the Indian reality. The aim, naturally is to challenge "absolutes of all kinds". It is through this form of the novel that Rushdie develops for himself, that he defends *The Satanic Verses* as well. The task is not simple, as it involves, according to Rushdie, writing "in a form which appears to be formless". No wonder then, that Rushdie admires the writerly qualities he finds in *Tom Jones* of Fielding.

Shades of Critical Opinions:-

One is not surprised at the fact that Rushdie, a great revolutionary in his form and contents receives all shades of critical opinion. First, there is a bunch of informed critics who take objections to Rushdie's work on firm ideological grounds. Their criticism involves, that imagination before given a free play, must enter in the cultural equation. Timothy Brennan, foremost among this band of Rushdie's critics. He accuses Rushdie of not using imagination responsibly in order to depict or construct the reality, and commenting upon *shame*, the Pakistan book of Rushdie, says that he destroys "any coherence his imagination may have given the country by adopting a formal attitude that makes every statement capable of being at the same time withdrawn." Another critic who is significant is Aijaz Ahmad who attacks Rushdie in *In Theory* (1992). Targeting very basis of formation of imagination of Rushdie he says :-

"One did not have to belong one could simply float, effortlessly, through a supermarket of packaged of and commodified cultures, ready to be consumed."

Brennan and Aijaz Ahmad are representative of the Postcolonial Critics who challenge the very authenticity of such postmodernist novelist as Rushdie, who claim to have hold on postcolonial reality. But, then, there are such plank objections too, as Mr. Sengupta's against Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* : 'What is the use of stories that aren't even true' . This critic is naturally not on such sound grounds as Aijaz Ahmed or Brennan in his challenge to Rushdie's depiction of reality as he negotiates it through imagination.

To answer this band of postcolonial Critics, there are voices which don't see any compulsion for Rushdie to meet the Criteria for acceptance prescribed by this Postcolonial Catechism. The argument is for reading literature disinterestedly and in way that doesn't take it solely for sort of social intervention alone. A perverse reading of Rushdie's texts, according to them, can turn the text against itself.

Secondly, there is criticism of Rushdie by the upholders of feminism. Rushdie's work has faced a good deal of negative criticism in this connection. Rushdie's tendency almost to demonize female sexuality in works like *Grimus*, *Midnight's Children*, and *Shame* has been well taken notice of Catherine cundy holds that the treatment of women in Rushdie's novels "serves more as a revelation (albat involuntary) of Rushdie's psychology than it contributes to the fiction."

Taking a look at the academic criticism of Rushdie we find that Rushdie's work has been taken for subject of study of influences and intertextual references. We find that critics have explored the influences of Sterne, Joyce, Gunter Grass, and Marquez extensively. However at thematic and structural levels, Rushdie seems to owe much to Defoe, Fielding, Swift, Kafka,

Yeats, Beckett, Bulgakov and Ted Hughes, and this connection needs to be studied at length. This criticism has also traced Rushdie's links with the sources in the Indian and Arabic tradition.

If we look at the world culture, one thing we can notice is the Indian Diaspora that constitutes an important and unique force in some reverences. The incorporation of the British Empire in India can be linked to the existence of modern Indian Diaspora all over the world. Dating back to nineteenth century, Indian indentured labor was taken over to the British colonies in different parts of the world. Places like Fiji, Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad, Surinam, Malaysia, South Africa, Sri Lanka... leave the foot prints of Indian immigration in a peculiar way. Over two million Indian men fought on behalf of the empire in several series of wars fought abroad, including the Boer War and the two World Wars, and some remained behind to claim the land on which they had fought as their own. In the early part of 20th century many Gujarati traders left for East Africa in large numbers as if it's an emulation of their ancestors. In the post World War II period, most of the Indian labor and professionals scattered and it was a worldwide phenomenon. The reconstruction of Europe after the war was provided by Indian and other South Asians, particularly in United Kingdom and Netherlands. In the more recent years the physical landscape of much of the Middle East is transformed by unskilled labours from South Asia. Indians have made their presence visibly felt in professions in countries like the United States, Canada and Australia.

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