



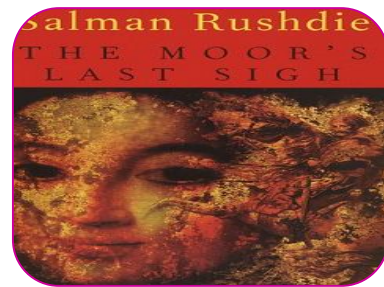
FAMILY REPRESENTATION IN RUSHDIE'S THE MOOR'S LAST SIGH

Shameem Sultana

Research Scholar, Dept. of English, Osmania University, Hyderabad.

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to illustrate how Salman Rushdie portrays the concepts of childhood and family in the post-independence era. Within Rushdie's fictional works, he delves into the symbolic relationship between family and the nation, showcasing the multifaceted roles that families play in this dynamic. On occasion, the family serves as a metaphorical allegory for the nation, while also contributing to the resistance against the nation's hegemonic tendencies by imparting a distinct identity to its members. In certain instances, especially in South Asian nations, families may even attempt to exert influence over the entire nation by solidifying dynastic rule. In *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995), he foregrounds these different dimensions so prominently that they basically it becomes a family story.



KEYWORDS: Family, Child, Salman Rudie, Family Novel

INTRODUCTION

Written fourteen years after *Midnight Children*, *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995) is actually the fictional embodiment of India's post-Independence political life, besmeared with communal violence and rampant political corruption. The political resolution that the subsequent generations will take India to a better future nosedived into frustration as greed, cynicism, aggression, malaise and ennui have become the determining characteristics of this generation. The novel is a record of this frustration. It traces Moor's family history back to the early years of the twentieth century. Moraes Zogoiby's (The Moor, as he was nicknamed by his mother) experience of India reaches into the 1980s and early 1990s to glance at 'the disintegration of the post-emergency, anti-Indira coalition government' (MLS 261) the return of Mrs. Gandhi to power in 1980, the death of Sanjoy Gandhi and the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi. Set mostly in Bombay, the novel tells 'the story of the fall from grace of a high-born cross-breed', Moraes Zogoiby, who is heir to 'the spice-trade-'n'-big-business crores of the da Gama-Zogoiby dynasty of Cochin' (MLS 5). As Moor tells the story of four generations of his family from the last four decades of the nineteenth century till the present, it becomes clear that the text is tracing the fortunes of the narrator's family in complex, allegorical relation to the fate of the Indian nation. As in the case of Saleem Sinai, the genetically 'impure' protagonist of *Midnight Children*, the mixed identity of the Moor is made to parallel the heterogeneous composition of Indian population and cultural life.

Rushdie writes *The Moor's Last Sigh*, which unmistakably registers his growing disenchantment with secularism, as is manifest in India. What *The Moor's Last Sigh* offers is an interrogation of the liberal multiculturalist terms with which secular nationalism constructs a unifying narrative. The text suggests, as Sharmani Patricia Gabriel observes, "the secular nation's constant harking back to the past

for a common history is unable to confront the reality of the social relations presented by the contentious plural politics of the contemporary nation" (79). *The Moor's Last Sigh* records a host of critical moments where the secular narrative of India had received fatal blows over the years: the Gujrati-Marathi language riots that broke out in 1957 and ended with the partition of the state of Bombay, the anti-Sikh riots in Delhi set off by the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984 by Sikhs seeking vengeance for the Indian Army's attack on the Golden Temple, Amritsar, the equally shocking assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in 1991 by Tamil extremists, and the Hindu Muslim riots in Ayodhya and Bombay following the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992. And of course there was the stunning effect of the emergency.

FAMILY IN *THE MOOR'S LAST SIGH*

In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Rushdie continues with a similar interface between the nation and family: while the function of the family in the narration of the nation's history is predominantly allegorical, Rushdie also foregrounds the meeting points of the nation and the family throughout the novel to show how crucially one influences the other. There are clearly two issues that Rushdie explores in *The Moor's Last Sigh*. Firstly, the novel has been intended as a continuation of *Midnight's Children* to show a further degeneration of India in all fields as we have entered the last quarter of the twentieth century. Secondly, the novel, like all Rushdie's previous ones, is an attempt to rewrite national space as a space of complex heterogeneity in which cultural differences constantly disturb the imagined constructions of cultural and national identity. To that end, Rushdie does not only limit himself to contemporary history, but goes back in time and moves across spaces to connect the political events of the twentieth-century India with some remote events in the world-history — the Spanish reconquest of Granada in 1492, the expulsion of Jews and Moors from Catholic Spain in the fifteenth century, the founding of the spice trade between Europe and India, and Portuguese colonial expansion in the fifteenth century. In the famous speech given at the moment of India's freedom from colonial powers, Nehru gave a voice to the collective desire to create a secular, democratic, tolerant, pluralist and socially just nation — 'the noble mansion of free India where all her children may dwell' (McArthur 234).

The Moor's Last Sigh foregrounds Moor's hybrid and dynamic universe wherefrom he resists the fixed conceptions of culture, and the tyranny of the majority: "Majority, that mighty elephant, and her sidekick, Major-Minority, will not crush my tale beneath her feet. Are not my personages Indian, every one?" (MLS 87) So, Moor's tale is composed of the minority communities Portuguese-Catholic and Spanish-Jewish communities. This mongrelization, which Rushdie defines as a cultural politics that "celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combination of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs (IH 394), has been allegorized by 'masala aesthetic'. Moraes Zogoiby personifies the 'masala' as 'melange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that' (IH 394). The Masala binds the family and the nation together in its aspect of mongrelization: Moraes is a product of the 'pepper love' between his parents and their 'passionate conjoining' in a 'foetid atmosphere heavy with the odours of cardamom and cumin" (MLS 90); Moor is raised as neither Catholic nor Jew but a "Jewholic — anonymous, a cashew nut, a stew-pot, a mongrel cur ... a real Bombay mix" (MLS 104). Moor's father, Abraham Zogoiby is one of the few remaining members of the ancient Cochin Jewish community of India. His lineage on his father's side can be traced to the first batch of Jews who arrived in India after their expulsion from Spain in 1492. The ancestry is even more complicated by the possibility that one of the Moor's Jewish ancestors who had left Spain and settled in India was the mistress of Bobadil, the last Moorish ruler of Granada, who was driven into exile along with the Jews, following the conquest of Spain by the Catholic rulers Ferdinand and Isabella in the fifteenth century. Abraham later on realizes that his mother's claim of their 'purity of race' is nothing but a fiction. Moreover, Moor's mother, Aurora da Gama comes from a Catholic spice-trading family based in Cochin. She proudly claims descent from Vasco da Gama, the Portuguese navigator. Thus, Moor's family history is a classic example of cultural intermingling, as Moor, referring to his own polyglot family history, poses the following question:

Christians, Portuguese and Jews; Chinese tiles promoting godless views; pushy ladies, skirts-not-saris, Spanish shenanigans, Moorish crowns ... can this really be India? Bharat-mata, Hindustan-hamara, is this the place? (MLS 87)

This mingling is also foregrounded through Aurora's artistic composition 'Mooristan', a place where worlds collide, flow in and out of one another, and washofy away. Place where an air-man can drown in water, or else grow gills, where a water-creature can get drunk, but also chokeofy, on air. One universe, one dimension, one country, one dream, bumpo'ing into another, or being under, or on top of. Call it Palimpstine (MLS 226).

The novel is once again a family saga, the story this time of the doomed Zogoiby family. The Zogoiby family is 'handcuffed to history' in a similar way to that of Saleem; one of Moor's sisters dies in the Bhopal disaster, and when Sanjoy Gandhi is killed in a plane crash, Moor tells us, "I, too, was plunged towards catastrophe' (MLS 274-76). The link continues till the end. Both the family and the nation are seedbeds of heinous treachery and conspiracy and the plot is peopled with hired goons and contract killers. Aurora is killed in a fall from the high terrace of her Bombay house. Towards the end, we understand that it is her husband, Abraham Zogoiby, 'the most evil man that ever lived' who is responsible for this. Corruption pervades the entire world, as we find Moor himself is employed by his father's business rival Mainduck in a campaign of violent reprisal. Again, the demolition of the mosque at Ayodhya and the burglary at Zogoiby bequest are juxtaposed in a bizarre manner. Finally, there is an apocalyptic explosion that destroys whole buildings and families and public figures.

CONCLUSION

The family and the nation are intertwined inseparably from the beginning till the destruction. Rushie's novel consistently features divisions and political conflicts within families, protagonists marked by monstrous physical defects, and the theme of double identities. These elements serve as allegories, symbolizing the gradual erosion of civil values and the rapidly deteriorating state of subcontinental politics. In his novel, the family-nation interface has emerged to be a very complex one, the constituents knotted with one another in a relation of power politics.

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