CHAPTER 4

Indianness as a Representational Mode in Salman Rushdie’s
Midnight’s Children, The Moor’s Last Sigh and Shalimar the Clown

The notion of Indianness as a mode of representation has generated a renewed interest in the narrative strategies adopted by the authors of CIWE. The use of an ‘inclusive’ mode of writing, along with Magic Realism as another technique, hints at the strategies to discuss the experiences of India by these authors. It has been observed that in order to narrativise his views on India, Salman Rushdie in his novels has provided many insights into the notion of ‘India’ and ‘Indianness’ in terms of India’s mythical and epical traditions. Rushdie’s assertion that there has never been a ‘unified’ idea of India makes the notion of Indianness a very complicated issue which has been rendered even more problematic by the re-consideration of such terms in the changing contexts of debates on the notion of Indianness within India and abroad. This also hints at the different attempts made in the intellectual history of IWE to use myths to suit various purposes and contexts following the different courses of events as well as the different characters, his novels are mythologised. This strategy has been essentialised by an incorporation of the two Indian epics as the pretexts of many of his fictional works. However, seen in terms of Indian history and culture, the representation of Indianness in Rushdie’s novels can be considered in two obvious ways—Indianness which is represented, and Indianness itself as a representational mode—both demanding serious critical attention from bother readers and critics.

In this chapter, the discussion of Indianness as a representational mode in Salman Rushdie’s novels is intended on three novels – MC, TMLS, and STC whose contexts are visibly Indian. Seen in terms of the framework of Rushdie’s oeuvre, one can discuss representation as the reproductive potentiality of
certain ideas which Rushdie tried to make accessible to his readers. However, another way to look at the issue of representation is to examine the ability of a text to draw upon the features of the world and present them both as reflections as well as constructions. While doing so, representation is influenced by culture, but at the same time also shapes culture and moulds society’s attitudes, values, perceptions and behaviour. If one assumes that Rushdie’s novels are based on history, the principal objective of a novel like *MC* is to ask whether the first generation of independent Indians could really live up to the expectations of Jawaharlal Nehru the first Prime Minister of independent India. Similarly, the other novel *TMLS*, written fourteen years after *MC*, may be seen to be another fictional embodiment of the gloomier and darker assessment of the post-independence life in India. Indira Gandhi’s Emergency in *MC* is replaced by the rise of Hindu Fundamentalism in *TMLS* under the auspices of fictional character named Raman Fielding—a caricature of Shiv Sena chief Bal Thackeray. In *STC*, Rushdie takes the evolution of Islamic terrorism often posing a threat to India’s unity, although the elements of violence within India are also to be located in a global postwar context. Thus, seen in terms of the narrative design, these three novels can be seen as a cycle that describes the various changes in the politics in independent India and helps explain the fact that ‘Indianness’ has always remained a major issue in contemporary India.

But, the way Rushdie conceives and develops these novels in an epic design helps to discuss Indianness not just as a theme but as a representational mode. Rushdie even uses fantasy to evoke Indianness as he believes that fantasy “offers a way of echoing in the form of our work the issue faced by all of us: how to build a new ‘modern world’ out of an old, legend-haunted civilization, an old culture which we have brought into the heart of a new one” (*Rushdie, Imaginary Homelands* 19). This also leads to the question of Rushdie’s target audience. However, responding to such a question, Rushdie states: “…I have never had a reader in my mind. I have ideas, people, events,
shapes, and I write ‘for’ those things” (19). Perhaps, this is how the issues of representation become so important in Rushdie’s novels. Then again he states that he writes ‘for’ people who feel part of the things he writes ‘about’, but also for everyone else whom he can reach (20). Thus, the representation of Indianness in Rushdie’s novels may provide valuable inputs regarding the portrayal of Indian life and creative culture in the context of CIWE in the last three decades.

Rushdie adds a distinctively ‘Indian’ feel to these three novels drawing heavily on the Indian epic traditions. This helps to see how the idea of India in the novels in question is expanding through several ‘re-telling’ of the mythical and religious stories, and how the models for such ‘stories’ can easily be located in the great Indian epics like the Ramayana\(^4\) and the Mahabharata\(^5\).

Also behind the beautiful utilization of the resources is the Indian writer or storyteller who may be presumed to have disseminated a sense of Indianness through these tales over centuries (Teverson 45). Rushdie seems to be highly impressed by the recursive nature of stories, and in MC he was attempting the creation

> “of a literary form which corresponds to the form of oral narrative and which, any luck, [would] succeed in holding readers, for reasons of its shape in the same way that the oral narrative holds audiences for reasons for its shape, as well as its narrative”

(qtd. in Teverson 45).

Then, Indianness in Rushdie’s fictions can be seen as the construct of literary devices and representation of practices that intend to record, explain, expand, critique and most importantly, represent Indian realities or realities accessed by the Indians in certain historically given times. This encourages the readers to examine not only the socio-political and cultural stances of the author/narrator, but also to explore how and why certain narrative traditions, styles and languages are “used, discarded or privileged” (Khair 6). These strategies of

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reading became very prominent when one starts reading Rushdie's novels for the first time.

However, the use of myths in the contemporary novel-writing in India by an author like Rushdie is to be explored in some detail to analyse and understand how the mythical tradition has provided various narrative possibilities even in the present times. It is also important to note that Rushdie has made several attempts to discuss the connection between the form of the novel and the idea of India as he takes the novel to be "...precisely that 'hybrid' form. It is a part of social enquiry, part fantasy, and part confessional. It crosses frontiers of knowledge as well as topographical boundaries" (Rushdie, Step Across 58). This is connected to yet another view of Rushdie, when he states: "I want to extol the virtues of the most important thing that came into being on the midnight fifty years ago, the thing that has survived...the so-called idea of India. I have spent much of my adult life thinking and writing about this idea" (Rushdie, Step Across 178). Perhaps, here lies an answer to the use of Indianness as a representational mode in his novels.

Rushdie's MC can be read as a deliberate attempt to present a panoramic picture of India and its mythical culture to an alien reading public who feel emotionally and exotically about India. As we find in the essay "Salman Rushdie" the use of Indian myth in MC stresses a single most important episode—the marriage of Parvati and Shiva the preserver and destroyer, and the birth of their elephant-headed child, Ganesh, usually taken to be the god of good fortune. The army major named Shiva in MC is also a seducer of the rich. Consequently, he has many children spread across the map of India. But he is also the one who becomes instrumental in the mass sterilization of the children of midnight so that they remain impotent and cannot assume any authority in future. Shiva, like the legendary god, is thus both creator and destroyer. Such dualities are visibly borrowed from Hindu mythology, and are also designed as the author's commentary on the type of novel he originally intended to write.
Saleem also reminds the readers of the Hindu god Brahma who is said to have dreamt the universe, because he too claims to be the universal receptacle—"the sum total of everything...everyone everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine" (457). This is what is so uniquely Indian about this novel. The political and mythical run in parallels.

In *MC*, the personal story of Saleem and his family metaphorically correspond to the key events in India’s postwar history. But gradually, the narrator Saleem assumes the role of Valmiki, the author of the epic *Ramayana*. Gradually, Rushdie evokes the fictional similarities of the various characters and events of the novel with the Indian epic. Although this novel repeatedly recalls the pre-independence sectarian violence in Indian political life, it is also designed to suggest the living presence of India’s mythical past, not as a vital tradition but as a false consciousness. For example, one can take note of the resemblance between India’s independence and the legend of birth of Lord Ganesha. As Rushdie states:

> The legend of Ganesha is a legend of disputed parentage...Shiva becomes convinced that his wife has been fooling around, that the child is not his...Now it seems to me that since Saleem’s entire ancestry is also very murky and disputed...it was correct to give him, as a mythological ancestor, somebody with disputed ancestry, with a disputed family line.3

In an interview, Rushdie talks about Ganesh like this:

> Ganesh is a very popular God in Bombay. Ganapati is a big festival, and so from the time of I was a child, I have been quite interested in, and very fond of Ganesh. And the reason Saleem has a big nose is basically Ganesh because of various reasons. First of all it is a joke. Secondly, Ganesh has a lot of connection in legend with storytelling, and because Saleem is the storyteller, it seemed quite appropriate that I should give him that resonance..." (Kumar, *Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children* 216)
This is one of the several examples of Indianness as a representational mode used in this novel.

One way to consider the narrative structure of *MC*, is to understand the way Rushdie incorporates myths into everyday life. For example, it has been observed by many that Saleem and Padma, in many ways resemble Brahma and Lakshmi, which further refers to the Brahmanic dictates of masculinity and femininity. As Seema Bhaduri writes: “Like Brahma Saleem has ‘miracle laden omniscience’ which is ‘balanced’ by Lakshmi/Padma’s ‘paradoxical earthliness of spirit’” (Bhaduri, *Salman Rushdie* 120). Such dualism resumes the progressive and formal integrity of the narrative. However, there are other instances in the novel *MC* which are designed in the epical line. Vijay Mishra states: “…one finds that the Ramayana read allegorically affirms Hindu genealogy, order, and sanctity of the family and constructs the Indian idea of men and women in contrast the Mahabharata is about power and politics, about national disintegration and schisms. The Indian here confronts the forces of history”.¹¹ Such observation enriches the minds of the readers regarding Rushdie’s use of myths and legends in the making of this novel.

A variety of different interpretations can be provided on the role of Padma, Saleem’s supposed listener, and on her identification with a Hindu goddess. While Saleem is associated with the figure of Ganesh, Padma’s reference in Hindu mythology seems to be more flexible. As Mujeebuddin Syed discusses, Saleem’s character at once reminds one of the mythical culture as he casts himself as omniscient and omnipotent not only as Brahma the creator, but also as Vishnu the preserver. Thus, empowering himself as the all-knowing narrator, Saleem ‘chutnifies’ the idea of India with references to myths and legends. Though he playfully identifies himself with the elephant headed god Ganesh, because of his love for writing, in several places, he also plays the role of Vishnu as he considers himself to be the agent of everything that happens in the novel and presents himself as an Avatar of Vishnu (Syed, *Rushdie’s* 122).
Midnight 154). However, the role of Padma as the audience or listener of Saleem’s narrative is one of the most important aspects of the novel. Padma is the name of the Lotus Goddess, Lotus symbolizing the possibility of beauty and nobility arising out of impurity as Saleem states: “Padma our plump Padma...she had been named after the lotus goddess, whose most common appellation amongst the village folk is “The One Who Possess Dung” (24). Thus, the presence of Padma further enhances the mythic background of the novel. She interrupts Saleem’s narrative to speed up the story in the direction she herself prefers. As Saleem states: “But here is Padma, at my elbow, bullying me back into the world of linear narrative” (38). Then again Saleem contemplates: “How to dispense with Padma? How give up her ignorance and superstition, necessary counterweights to my miracle laden omniscience...but must I now become reconciled to the narrow one-dimensionality of a straight line?” (150). Such type of communication between the speaker and the listener is unique to storytelling, and Rushdie beautifully utilizes the Indian narrative tradition to represent that.

Saleem’s attempt at recording his narrative in mythical terms foreshadows his metafictional observations. For example, after Padma deserts him, he reiterates:

When Valmiki, the author of the Ramayana, dictated his masterpiece to elephant headed Ganesh, did the god walk out on him halfway? He certainly did not. (Note that, despite my Muslim background, I’m enough of a Bombayite to be well up in Hindu Stories, and actually I am very fond of the image of trunk-nosed, flap-eared solemnly talking dictation!). (149-150)

Here Saleem both confesses his love for myth and his intentions to use myth in a half ironic playful manner in keeping with the over-all pattern of narration (Smale, 55). The idea that myth is played off against history becomes evident in the naming of the three important midnight’s children—Saleem, Shiva and Parvati—Saleem Sinai alluding to Mount Sinai and Moses, Shiva named after
the Hindu God of destruction and procreation, Parvati the wife of Lord Shiva. Saleem’s sister Brass Monkey reminds of Hanuman whose setting fire to Ceylon is paralleled with her compulsive habit of setting fire to shoes: “My sister the Brass Monkey developed the curious habit of setting fire to shoes” (150), or “Brass Monkey was as much animal as human” (151). But Brass Monkey is very loyal to Saleem and that too reminds of Hanuman who was loyal to Rama.13

When Parvati’s child (after Shiva seduces and abandons her) is born, Saleem hails him as the great grandson of a great grandfather. And the birth of Ganesh, during Indira Gandhi’s Emergency, brings some hope.14 The implication is that good is born out of evil, and the present disruption might lead to future unity. But, inversion plays an important role in this novel, for example, in Hindu mythology, as Saleem observes, Padma is the “Lotus Calyx, which grew out of Vishnu’s naval, and from which Brahma himself was born; Padma the source, the mother of time” (194-195). The mythical Padma thus symbolizes source of life, but the Padma of $MC$ is poor and she cannot conceive a child because Saleem is impotent. About Shiva, Saleem states:

> [b]ut two of us were born on the stroke of midnight. Saleem and Shiva, Shiva and Saleem...to Shiva, the hour had given the gifts of war (of Rama, who could draw the undrawable bow; of Arjuna and Bhima; ancient prowess of Kurus and Pandavas united, unstoppably, in him!)...and to me, the greatest talent of all – the ability to look into the hearts and minds of men. (200)

Thus, inversion is also used in case of Shiva. Shiva, unlike the Hindu God, destroys good and not evil. But, throughout the whole text of $MC$, Shiva has been used as a contrast to Saleem.

Rushdie’s reference to the case of Commander Leela Sabarmati is another example of the way he invokes the story of Rama. As the narrator states:

> Commander Sabarmati was the most popular murderer in the history of Indian Jurisprudence. Husbands acclaimed the punishment of an errant wife; faithful
women felt justified in their infidelity… ‘In the Sabarmati Case, the noble sentiments of the Ramayana combine with the cheap melodrama of the Bombat talkie…’ (262).

Then again the narrator asks “If Rama himself were alive, would we send him to prison for slaying the abductor of Sita? Great matters; my vengeful eruption into the history of my age was certainly no trivial affair” (264).

Rushdie however explains the whole situation like this:

The thing about Ram… he crops up in the Nanabati case… that the Nanabati case was a kind of twentieth century reenactment of the Ramayana. And the book actually says at one point that supposing that you had Sita abducted by Ravan, and Rama goes off and kills the abductor and then he is taken to court, he is found guilty or innocent? Has he committed a crime or not? And so it seemed to me that when I made that connection it seemed to explain why it was that the Nanabati case had such a hold on people’s imagination at that time… but it was quite extraordinary. It was the only thing people talked about for two years. It was a big thing happening in the country. Although at the end he [Nanabati] went to jail. And so I say in the book that India found itself having to choose between the rule of heroism, and the rule of law, between the mythical past, and its present. (Kumar 217-18)

[There was no doubt on whose side the people were… Yeah, it’s to do with private morality and public morality… it was used to say that in India, more than anywhere else that I know, the past in that sense is still with us. Those legends have not lost their power, they haven’t just become fairy stories. They are still actual and are part of people’s [daily?] equipment. So, there are going to be parallels between living legends and actual facts. And Ravana gets it twice actually. (Kumar 218)

This explanation is one of the ways through which Rushdie seeks to assert his take on the use of myths and legends as part of the daily life of every Hindu who often parallels the legends with actual facts. And perhaps, the representation of the same situation in fiction is what concerns him most as an author.
A whole lot of discussions have been provided by critics of different sorts on the narrative style adopted by Rushdie in *MC*. As Mukesh Srivastava opines:

At the first sight, it is a parody of the epic, the realist and the autobiographical mode that jostle uneasily and too rapidly in the traditional Indian folktales, and *puranic* modes of storytelling. In this medley of ‘surprise’ and ‘innovation’, however, there is definite sense in which Rushdie carries forward modernist problems of knowledge and representation” (xi)

But Srivastava also writes that at certain places, Rushdie’s narrators might be sensitive to some historical and political ‘events’ which seems to acquire a fantastic or magical figuration in the text. But this often lapses into a solipsistic, anti-representational style, devoid of the crucial multiple conjunction of a usable past. The over-all effect of such a narrative, that tries to express a collective destiny of its people, is a parody of both the nationalist past and the traditional epic. It seems to be the production of a new artistic form—the implantation of a post-modernist aesthetic on Indian materials (xi). It is really so interesting to find such grafting in Rushdie’s fiction.

Rushdie’s use of Indianness as a representational mode in *MC* becomes obvious in the way he makes India’s mythical and epical tradition the integral part of his structural principles in the novel. One can also cite the example of Indira Gandhi being the ‘Omnipotent Goddess’, who is afraid of the Midnight’s Magical Children. So, it is by using the Indian epical and mythical past in a novel like *MC* that Rushdie seeks to attack the contemporary mythmaking of Indian national politics. His own response to the idea of the Indian nation is brilliantly explored through these lines in *MC*:

August in Bombay: a month of festivals...there was an extra festival on the calendar, a new myth to celebrate, because a nation which had never previously existed was about to win its freedom, catapulting us into a world which, although it had five thousand years of history...was nevertheless quite imaginary, into a mythical land, a country which would never exist except in a phenomenal
This reflects on what Benedict Anderson had stated about a nation being “imagined political community...and communities are to be distinguished by the style in which they are imagined” (6).

_TMLS_ is another ‘epic’ about India in which fundamentalism and hybridity are to be seen as the two competing aspects of history. The Moor’s commitment to a tolerant and vibrant culture and community is not only central to Rushdie’s view of an ideal India, but also an essential indicator of Rushdie as a novelist. He expresses the possibility of an India built on the very differences within multiple cultures of India. But unlike Saleem in _MC_, the Moor specifies not only what India as a nation has become, but also what it had promised to be at the time of its inception as a nation. The Moor reminds that a free India was supposed to be above religion, above class, above caste, above hatred, above vengeance, above stupidity. The significant point is that Rushdie not only keeps this view as an ideal, but also critiques what had happened to India in the post-independence periods. In her paintings, with increasing desperation, Aurora tries to paint old, tolerant Moorish Spain over India, overlaying, or palimpsesting, the ugly reality of the present with ‘a romantic myth of the plural, hybrid nation.’ The narrator even says: “India was uncertainty. It was deception and illusion” (95). All such deliberations once again confirm what Rushdie intended to state in _MC_ that Post-independence India bred more tensions among its inhabitants.

Unlike in _MC_, in which the mythical line is devised with a male figure like Ganesh, in _TMLS_, it is mainly the female figure who receives the status of a myth. The narrator tells that Aurora’s paintings can be read in terms of the mother India myth as he states: “Motherness—excuse me if I underline the point—is a big idea in India, may be our biggest: the land as mother, the mother as land, as the firm ground beneath our feet” (137). The reference made here is
also to Mehboob Khan’s film “Mother India” in which Radha, the hardworking village woman, was worshipped by the peasant population as the ‘village matriarch’. Similarly, Aurora too was ‘translated into myth’, as the narrator states, when she became a leading figure in Indian nationalism during 1940s. The way Radha in the film disowns her furious son, Aurora too in the novel disapproves her son’s love affair.

But the reference to Aurora—“Mother India”—as the destructive goddess Kali, provides the main mythological pretext in the novel. According to the narrator, while representing everyday politics, the paintings of Aurora also shape realities:

Mother India with her garishness and her exhaustible motion, Mother India who loved and betrayed and ate and destroyed and again loved her children, and with whom the children’s passionate conjoining and eternal quarrel stretched long beyond the grace; …a protean Mother India who could turn monstrous…who could turn murderous, dancing cross-eyed and Kali-tongued while thousand died…” (60-61)

In this case, references made to Hindu Mythology is worth noticing as the narrator represents the life-offering and destructive mother (Aurora) as the two manifestations of the same female principles. As Sabine Schulting argues, in Hindu mythology, while Saraswati—the goddess of learning—is either the daughter or wife of Brahma, Uma is another name for Shiva’s wife Parvati. The mythological Shiva is the absolute God who creates and destroys the world. He appears as half male and half female. His female part ‘Shakti’ can either be peaceful or dreadful and usually figures as his wife Parvati or Uma who can also become Durga or Kali at certain times. This also means that Kali is just one aspect of the mother goddess, or Shiva’s female counterpart, who has several other ‘incarnations’ like—Devi, Durga, Kali, Parvati, Uma, Sati or Padma (some of who are also alluded to in MC). As her husband’s main power or ‘Shakti’, she thus becomes responsible for the actual creation and destruction...
of the world (246). When Morae is imprisoned in Bombay Central after Uma’s death, he explicitly associates his mother with goddess Kali:

I tried to cling to the past. In my bitter turmoil I sought to apportion blame; and mostly I blamed my mother...For what kind of mother would set out such flimsy provocation to destroy her child, her only son? Why, a monster!—O, an age of monsters is come upon us. Kalyug, when cross-eyed red-tongued Kali, our mad dam, moves among us wreaking havoc. (288)

A novel that strongly ‘constructs’ gender and represents the complex intersections of diverse cultural moorings, TMLS foregrounds hybridity. In fact, this novel is about hybridity as it deconstructs the myth of cultural unity in India. This aspect of the novel comes to the forefront in terms of the narrator’s questioning of unitary history and exposing the different ‘palimpsestine’ layers of his own ‘Indian’ history: Hindu, Christian, Muslim and Jewish. So, the story the narrator tells is based on India’s cultural diversity as a condition for an individual’s existence in India. As the narrator tells about Aurora:

She was an art critic whose book on the confining myth of authenticity, that folkloristic straightjacket which she sought to replace by an ethic of historically validated eclecticism, for it was not the entire national culture based on the principles of borrowing whatever clothes seemed to fit, Aryan, Mughal, British, take-the-best-and-leave-the-rest. (52)

But, at the same time, TMLS also beautifully records the emergence of violence out of the struggle over cultural meaning as exemplified by the Hindu leader Raman Fielding. This is most explicit in what the narrator talks about “Mumbai’s Axis”: “‘Mumbai’s Axis,’ the party of Hindu nationalists named after the mother goddess of Bombay, which was growing rapidly in popularity among the poor—would return to attack” (230). There is also a reference to the conflicts over Ayodhya that started with the birth place of mythical Rama in 1991, followed by the demolition of the Babari mosque at the same sight by a group of militant Hindu nationalist. Thus, Rushdie’s representation of Indianness in this novel also critiques Hindu nationalist politics within India.
The narrator of the novel also makes an important remark on the Hindu politics played in India in the name of Ram.

In the city we are for secular India but the village is for Ram. And they say *Iswar and Allah is your name* but they don’t mean it, they mean only Ram himself, king of Raghu clan, purifier of sinners along with Sita. In the end I am afraid the villagers will march on the cities and people like us will have to lock our doors and there will come a battering Ram. (56)

Then again after the killing of Raman Fielding, the narrator is reminded of the *Ramayana*. As he states: “...After Ram killed Ravan he chivalrously arranged a lavish funeral for his fallen foe...As for me: not living in heroic times, I neither honoured nor desecrated my victim’s body; my thoughts were for myself, my chances of survival and escape” (369). Thus, the reality of contemporary India, according to the Moor is that “Not even an Indian was safe in Indian country;...In Indian country there was no room for a man who didn’t want to belong to a tribe, who dreamed of moving beyond; of peeling off his skin and revealing his secret identity...”(414). This is how, it can be argued, *TMLS* represents a darker picture of India.

Thus, in *TMLS*, once again Rushdie offers ideas of contemporary India in terms of India’s epical and mythical tradition. Subsequently, the idea of the Indian nation becomes, for Rushdie, a metaphor, an allegory as well as a space to belong. As Santosh Gupta observes, his notion of India and his version of the Indian nation necessarily get metaphorised or mythicized so that he can deconstruct the politically viable idea of the nation. The epic dimension of *TMLS* is implicit in that the Moor is exiled for fourteen years like that we find in case of Lord Rama in the *Ramayana*, as the narrator states: “Fourteen years is a generation; or, enough time for regeneration” (430). Thus, the storyteller Rushdie, through this type of a narrative, recreates his lost narrative space and perhaps reformulates the role of an Indian author who has to make necessary adjustments with the narratives already prevalent in India while writing a
fiction about India. This situation is more evident in the context of IWE of the later part of the 20th century.

In the third novel *STC*, Rushdie has returned to the Indian subcontinent after a prolonged gap of almost 10 years. Once again, in this novel Rushdie incorporates mythology, legend, and traditional story-telling to shed new lights on the actions of the main characters and to emphasize the traditional beliefs that affect much of their behaviour. Rushdie purposefully alludes to the *Ramayana* through his realistic description of the performance of traditional Ram Leela during the grand Dassehra festival in the Kashmiri village of Pachigam during which: “Giant effigies of Ravan, his son Meghnath and his brother Kumbhakaran would be erected within the walls of the Shalimar Bagh, and Abdullah Noman as Lord Ram—a Muslim actor playing the part of a Hindu god would shoot an arrow at Ravan” (71) which has a symbolic meaning for the society in which Hindus and Muslims lived happily together before political conflicts began to tear Kashmir into bits. It needs to be mentioned that this novel provides an excellent example of co-existence in which Hindus and Muslims never saw themselves as separate or different from each other culturally.

*STC* narrates a very simple story of love and revenge following a triangular relationship of three characters—Shalimar, Boonyi and Max Ophuls. The Muslim boy Shalimar and the Hindu Pundit girl Bonnyi were the happy go lucky lovers in Pachigam, and their affair was intensified by their enactment of the story of Rama and Sita during the Ramleela festivals that culminates in their nuptial bond. But the sudden arrival of Max Ophuls, an American ambassador to the Kashmir valley to control dissident moves by a groups of people, problematizes everything. Ambitious Boonyi elopes with Max for better life and providence, and becomes his mistress. Shalimar, who later becomes a terrorist, takes revenge by murdering Max Ophuls in Los Angeles. According to the story of the epic *Ramayana*, during the exiled years in the forest
hermitage of Panchabati near the Godavari river, Lord Ram and his brother Lakhsman, had to leave Sita alone on a fateful day. But, before leaving, Lakshman had drawn a magic line in the dirt all the way across the small hermitage and warned her not to cross it or invite anyone else to do so telling that the line would protect her from any harm. But the moment Lakshman left, the demon king Ravan suddenly turned up disguised as a beggar and insisted on her offering alms by crossing the line. In the fear of getting cursed, Sita crosses the line. The moment she did so, Ravan comes to his actual form and abducts her away to Lanka. One of the main stories in the Ramayana is then based on the rescue of Sita from the clutches of Ravan and his killing by Ram, Sita’s husband.

In the context of the novel, both Hindus and Muslims together like to watch Sita rescued from the demon king Ravan in the enactment of the stories of the Ramayana during the Dussehra festival. But Boonyi Kaul in the novel would think that “A woman’s demons were out there, like her lovers, and she could only be coddled for so long. It was better to be done with magic lines (Laksman Rekha) and to confront your destiny. Lines in the dart were all very well but they only delayed matters” (50). As if the mythical was becoming real. Rushdie’s narrative thus deconstructs the traditional role of Sita as the docile lady with the aggressive nature of Bonnyi. It is however, Rushdie’s expertise to mingle this background with the storyline of the epic Ramayana following which the American ambassador Max Ophuls is visualised as Ravan causing disturbance in the lives of Shalimar (Ram) and Boonyi (Sita). In both the epical story of Ram and Sita, and the modern day Kashmiri story of Shalimar and Boonyi, it is a woman who becomes the cause of the death of their ‘abductor’. There is also a specific reference to the nine grabbers in the cosmos, Surya, Soma, Budha, Mangal, Sukra, Brihaspati, Shani and Rahu and Ketu—the shadow planets and the influence they exercise over people’s daily lives (45). It is interesting to note how Rushdie relates the plight of the common Kashmiri
people like Shalimar and Boonyi to the rages of Rahu and Ketu. Such examples, express the inescapable pattern of behaviour already codified in ancient Indian myth but continuously being unfolded in the 20th century India through literature.

But Rushdie does not accept such codifications to be necessary givens. Instead, he deconstructs the traditional role of various mythical characters, and in a way, rewrites the Ramayana epic by changing the narrative line to suit the context of 21st century narration as can be seen in the following lines taken from the novel:

In the old story Sita the pure was kidnapped and Ram fought a war to win her back. In the modern world everything had been turned upside down and inside out. Sita, or rather Boonyi in the Sita role, had freely chosen to run off with her American Ravan and willingly became his mistress and bore him a child; and Ram — the Muslim clown, Shalimar misplaying the part of Ram—fought no war to rescue her. In the old story, Ravan had died rather than surrender Sita. In the contemporary bowdlerization of the tale, the American had turned away from Sita and allowed his queen to steal her daughter and send her home in shame. In the ancient tale, when Sita returned to Ayodhya after defending her chastity throughout her captive year, Ram had sent her back into forest exile because her long residence under Ravan’s roof made her chastity suspect in the eyes of the common people. In Boonyi’s story, she too had been exiled to the forest, but it was the people...who had helped her and saved her life. (263)

Another example of such a deconstructive mode of writing is explicit when the narrator relates Sita’s ‘Agni Pariksha’ to Boonyi’s.

In the great old book Sita had called upon the gods to defend his virtue, stepping into a fire and emerging from it unscathed; and she had asked the underworld to open so that she could depart from this world in which her innocence was not enough, and the gates of the underworld did open, and she went down into darkness. If she, Boonyi, set fire on herself no good would protect her. She would bum and the forest would bum with her. Accordingly she lit no fire. Once in
despair she did ask the gates of hell to open in the earth below her feet, but no cavity yawned. She was already in hell. (264)

Such artistic and imaginative manipulations of the epical incidents also entail consolidation of identities, reconsideration of Indianness, and the right to constantly redefine the mythic line, on the basis of which a novel like *STC* is written.

The use of the mythical pretexts is also available in Rushdie's other novels like *G* and *TSV*. For example, *G* alludes to the theme of creation and dissolution in Hindu mythical tradition. Uma Parameswaran opines that when Grimus tells Eagle: "You are to be the next stage of the cycle the next bearer of the flag, Hercules succeeding Atlas" (233). Rushdie is referring only to the Greek version of the cyclical nature of creation. Instead, she connects it with the Hindu myth of Shiva's dance and dissolution. For example, dance is symbolic of Shiva's creative power, and during each cycle of existence, Natraja or Shiva sustains the universe by maintaining the equilibrium of forces of nature. Then, in a climax of movement, he dissolves the universe back into formless energy. Then another cycle begins. Each cycle is called a Mahayuga which lasts about four and half million years, and there have been countless Mahayugas. Calf Island in *G* represents the last period of one such cycles. The idea of Hindu mythology also comes to mind as one finds formless energy taking form and then again dissolving into formlessness in *G* which is integral to Hindu ideas of creation (Parameswaran 64-65). Similarly, in *TSV*, we see Rushdie making the mythical idea of reincarnation, represented by Gabreel Farishta, prevail till the end of the novel. Rushdie's use of the Indian mythical tradition becomes explicit when Gabreel's popularity is compared to the Blue-skinned Krishna dancing and playing flute among the beautiful gopies (16), and when Gabreel's migrant self is seen as the Rebirth/Avatars of Vishnu. The *Mahabharata* does not even leave the characters in England, for *Mahabharata* becomes Mahavilayet in which the white-racists of England are projected as the
new Kurus, and the Black self-help groups are shown as the new Pandavas (283). But in none of these novels, Indianness is used as a representational mode.

So, the notion of Indianness in an author like Rushdie has become a part of what may be seen as the larger process of India’s self-apprehension or self-awakening. This enormous process is also the outcome of various modes of cultural exchange, production and dissemination of knowledge, the most important mode being the story-telling. These three novels of Rushdie clearly signify such an outcome most vividly. In his essay “Commonwealth Literature Does Not Exist”, Rushdie writes:

Books are almost always praised for using motifs and symbols out of the author’s own national tradition, or when their form echoes some traditional form, obviously pre-English, and when the influences at work upon the writer can be seen to be wholly internal to the culture from which he ‘springs’. Books which mix traditions, or which seek consciously to break with tradition, are often treated as highly suspect. (IH 66)

Perhaps, this is what justifies Rushdie’s use of Indianness as a mode of representation. But his Indianness is not only restricted to the analysis of India’s history and culture, as he also integrates it with his consciousness as an author. As David Smale writes:

Rushdie places different understanding of history alongside each other, deconstructing the institutional distinction between historical and fictional narrative. Rushdie offers a more fluid conception of history, one rooted in memory and the oral storytelling art. (10)

With his characters’ familiarity with India’s mythical tradition, Indian landscape, involvement with the Indian administration and political party, and a feel for the people and their problems, the Indian background in his novels becomes quite revealing.
Subsequently, Rushdie’s use of storytelling as a technique, his evocation of Indian habits and customs, languages and distinctive ways of thoughts have been enriched by the recent critical debates on the notion of Indianness in the context of CIWE. His reliance on the ancient Indian oral narrative tradition is acknowledged in an interview with David Brooks like the following:

One of the strange things about oral narrative—which I did look at very closely before writing MC—is that you find there a form which is thousands of years old, and yet which has all the methods of the modernist novel, because when you have somebody who tells you a story which is told from the morning to the night, it probably contains roughly as many word as a novel, and during the course of that story it is absolutely acceptable that the narrator will even so often enter his own story and chat about it—that he’ll comment on the tale, digress because the tale remind him of something, and then come back to the point...It seems to me that when you look at the old narrative and use it, as I tried to do, as the basis of a novel, you become a modernist writer by becoming a traditional one.

Besides such statements regarding his use of oral storytelling as a technique, Rushdie’s analysis of the problems with India’s self-assertions, nationalism, the consequences of decolonisation, and the Indian cultural paraphernalia, have helped in locating many of the formative elements of the concept of ‘India’ and ‘Indianness’ in his fictional works.

As an emigrant from India, then a new-comer in England, and now residing in New York, the conditions of migrancy is central to his sentiments. However, the main problem he faces relates to whether it is really possible from a distance and straddling so many different cultures, to write about India? Perhaps, the answer is made explicit in the way he explores Indianness as a representational mode in the three novels in question by showing his awareness on Indian culture and tradition, and by discussing how they have been used only to meet certain political ends. As he states in “Imaginary Homelands”: “If literature is in part the business of finding new angles at which to enter reality,
then once again our distance, our long geographical perspective, may provide us with such angles” (15). Indianness read from such an angle is what provides an enriching experience to all those engaged with Rushdie and his works.

Another way to read Rushdie’s novels is to assume that he is consciously taking part in a great experiment in CIWE. Of late, an awareness of India’s socio-historical problems and a desire to examine one’s past heritage appeared more prominently in prose-writing like the novel. This reflects on his choice of the form of novel to deal with the notion of India. Someone may ask if Rushdie writes from a split background. To this, one response may be that it is this split that keeps him alive as an author. Similarly, one may also question how does Rushdie represent India? The answer may be that the idea of ‘India’ in Rushdie’s novels is more than just “constructs” of literary devices drawn mainly from the West. Rushdie would like to state that the migrant negotiates the culture and values of both the native and the adopted ‘homes’ strategically drawing from each to create a new hybrid identity. Thus, displacement does not become a problem for a migrant author like Rushdie. Rushdie’s comment on his ‘Indian self’ is important in the following context of discussion:

I agree with my many selves to call all of them ‘me’. This is the best way to grasp the idea of India... The selfhood of India is so capacious, so elastic, that it manages to accommodate one billion kinds of difference. It agrees with the billion selves to call all of them ‘Indian’. This is a notion far more original than the old pluralist idea of ‘melting pot’ or ‘cultural mosaic’. It works because the individual sees his own nature writ large on the nature of the state. This is why individual Indians feel so comfortable about the strength of the national idea, why it’s so easy to ‘belong’ to it, in spite of all the turbulence, the corruption, tawdriness, the disappointment of fifty overwhelming years.

(Rushdie, Step Across 179)

However, Rushdie has drawn the materials also from his own life and experience, and this becomes significant in the way he replenishes his novels with insights borrowed from his own ideas of Indian history and culture.
Central to Salman Rushdie’s sensibility as a writer is a valorization of the supposed unity in diversity which he celebrates so beautifully in IH:

One of the most absurd aspects of the quest for national authenticity is that—as far as India is concerned, anyway—it is completely fallacious to suppose that there is such a thing as a pure unalloyed tradition from which to draw. The only people who seriously believe this are religious extremists. The rest of us understand that the very essence of Indian culture is that we possess a mixed tradition a mélange of elements as disparate as ancient mythical and contemporary Coca Cola American...Eclecticism, the ability to take from the world what seems fitting and to leave the rest, has always been a hallmark of the Indian tradition...’ (IH 67)

Thus, a critic like R. Radhakrishnan would like to argue that Rushdie’s is a certain kind of self-aware and autonomous literature that deals with the complexities and the nuances of form, and voice, and figuration that is validating itself, will also speak for India, and usher India into global prominence.

The issue of locating Indianess as a representational mode in Rushdie’s novels has a lot to do with his vision as an author of Indian origin, and with the forms of writing that he employs. It is as if his readers in India tend to reflect on his novels with reference to the mythic, while his readers in the West may respond more to his use of the fantastic and Magic Realism. Magic Realism is the term that is constantly being used to specify Rushdie’s fictional works. At the same time, it is important to recognize that no two works of Rushdie are actually alike despite all inherent similarities.22 Regarding the narrative technique of Rushdie, Aijaz Ahmad states that: “It has not been possible, though, to sustain this idea of quintessential Indianess in the ‘form’ of Rushdie’s narrative technique; the lines of modernism and postmodernism are too numerous” (126). He thus considers Rushdie to be a part of the contemporary exiled writers for whom not belonging also means belonging everywhere.
The experience of reading the novels of Rushdie thus helps to see that through his art of storytelling, he indicates the narrators’ desire to describe Indian history and culture which he considers ‘a rich mixture of tradition’ (Rushdie, Imaginary 2). One of his own views of Indianness is best reflected in what he declares of MC like this:

But the story is told in a manner designed to echo, as closely as my abilities allowed, the Indian talent for non-stop self-regeneration. This is why the narrative constantly throws up new stories...The form multitudinous, hinting at the infinite possibilities of the country. (16)

The interesting point to be made here is that the same idea of regeneration through non-stop storytelling is maintained in his TMLS and STC, although the time and context of these novels drastically differ from each other. Making up stories of India by an ‘Indian’ storyteller also means that there are myriads of other possible versions by other Indians. But Rushdie’s ability to transform reality into a story also suggests that it has a darker side that needs to be told. Novels like MC, TMLS and STC then speak about the darker side of the mythical properties of India, or of the nationalist fantasy that have come to influence every Indian even after 60 years of India’s independence. Thus, Rushdie’s use of Indianness as a representational mode gets justified.

End Notes:

1 As Devdutt Pattanaik states myth is essentially a cultural construct, a common understanding of the world that binds individuals and countries together. There are two types of myths – religious and secular. Ideas such as rebirth, heaven and hell, salvation and damnation are part of religious myths. While ideas such as sovereignty, nation state, human rights etc. are secular myths. If myth is an idea, mythology is the vehicle of that idea. Mythology constitutes stories, symbols and rituals that make myth tangible. Myths condition thoughts and feelings, and influence behaviour and communication. Myths and mythology render profound influence on
culture. It is obvious that Rushdie refers to both types of myths. See Pattanaik’s *Myth=Mithya* for a better understanding of the idea of myth.

2 After the publication of this novel, Rushdie became controversial again as the Hindus in India were enraged by his parody of Bal Thackeray, the leader of the Hindu revivalist party Shiv Sena. Maharashtra State considered banning the novel, but the attempt was repelled by India’s Supreme Court in February, 1996. So, following the wake of the Fatwa and the publication of *TMLS*, the novels of Rushdie were again censored in the Indian Subcontinent. Even the proposed filming of *MC* in India had to be abandoned. Rushdie observed in his “Adapting MC” that “The rejection of MC changed something profound in my relationship with the East. Something broke and I am not sure it can be mended” (*Step Across 87*).

3 Rushdie’s own attempt at making an imaginative literary cycle around certain similar concerns of contemporary India and Indianness is clearly visible in these novels namely *MC*, *TMLS* and *STC*. Particularly, his conflation of the mythical and fictional accounts of events and his demonstration of the ways historical processes create codified meaning focus on the narrative strategies that are deliberately employed by Rushdie to mediate such meaning. This demonstration, I believe, starts with *MC*, continues through *TMLS*, and ends with *STC*.

4 The epic *Ramayana* still continues to be one of the greatest achievements in the history of creative poetry in India. Supposed to be written by the great sage Valmiki, the main story of the epic centres around Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita, and the killing of Ravana, the demon king of Lanka by Rama, following his abduction of Sita. Important to note that Rama and Sita, though divine, suffer like any ordinary human beings, and represent the triumph of truth despite all obstacles and personal disasters. There are numerous versions of the story of the Ramayana in circulation in contemporary times.

5 Unlike the epic *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* has a complex story. Almost eight times longer than Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* put together, it is the world’s longest epic. Based on the family feuds between the Kurus and the Pandavas, it has numerous characters who are divine and demonic, noble and mean, and presents wide range of possibilities. Saint Vyasa is supposed to have written nearly 30000 lines. However, later poets enlarged it upto 100,000 lines with anecdotes and illustrations. According to Manoj Das: “Traditions ascribe the compilation of the Puranas to Vyasa the author of the Mahabharata and the editor of the Vedas. This carries two indications: the Puranas were taken quite seriously, next in importance to the Vedas, the Upanishads and the two epics. Secondly, the first series of the Puranas were as old as the *Mahabharata*” (Das 60).
This book was a huge commercial success with Rushdie’s winning the most coveted Booker McConnell Prize in 1981. As Meenakshi Mukherjee writes, serious discussion on the book began with myriad reviews, interviews and other media coverage of Rushdie, and his promotional tour around the world. Soon the book was appropriated to theoretical discourse about nation, history and narrativity. This book also won the Booker of the Bookers in 1993, and finally the best of the Bookers in 2009.


According to Hindu mythology, Parvati is the wife of Shiva. She is known under different names and worshipped in different forms. One Amarakosa provides the following synonyms for Parvati: Uma, Katyayani, Gauri, Kali, Haimavati, Bhavani, Rudrani, Sarvani, Aparna, Durga, Mrdani, Candika, Ambika, Arya, Paksayani, Girija, Menakatmaja, Camunda, Karnamoti, Carceika, Bhairavi and so on. Some of these names refer to the various dispositions of Parvati, while a few are the names in the various incarnations of Parvati (Mani 576).

Shiva is one of the Trinity, the other two being Brahma and Vishnu—Brahma for creation, Vishnu for sustenance, and Shiva for annihilation. Vishnu was born first, Brahma next, and Siva last. The essence of Indian spiritual thought is that these three visible forms of God will, at the close of the Kalpa, cease to be and become one with the cosmic power, and that the Trinity will be born again at the commencement of the Kalpa and will take up their respective functions. The dominant quality or attribute of Shiva is Tamas (darkness). Many stories, with slight variations, are told in the various Puranas about the birth of Shiva (Mani 723).

Ganesh is usually regarded as the elder son Shiva and Pravati, but the Puranas differ considerably in their accounts of his origin. He is the Indian God of wisdom and good fortune, and all sacrifices and religious ceremonies, all serious compositions in writings, and all the worldly affairs of importance are begun by all pious Hindus with an invocation to Ganesh (Wilkins 324).


As Patricia Waugh would have explained, authors like Rushdie, in turning away from ‘reality’, has however “discovered a surprising way out of their dilemmas and paranoia. Waugh calls it the Metafictional deconstruction that provides a better understanding of the
fundamental structures of narrative. At the same time, it also offers nearly accurate models for understanding the contemporary experience of the world as a construction, an artifice, a web of interdependent semiotic systems. The anxiety that permeates the metafictional writing of the sixties and seventies is therefore slowly giving way to celebration, to the discovery of new forms of the fantastic, fabulatory extravaganzas, magic realism (Waugh, 9). A novel like MC helps in such a celebration and discovery.

14 But Rushdie uses inversion of such myths. The inversion reinforces the narrator's claims that the present era is Kali Yuga in which betrayal becomes the buzzword. Amina, Pia, Leela, Parvati, Indira Gandhi all are guilty of betrayal. And all these characters are shown in relation to the Ramayana which exalts the virtues of loyalty. This is an important message provided by Rushdie the author.

15 Rushdie's critique of Hindu Fundamentalism becomes more evident in the portrayal of Aurora, an activist and an artist, with the strength to confront the dark forces at work in India. Rushdie here is making a mockery of the term Hindustan when the narrator says that Drugs, Terrorism, Musulmans-Mughals, Weapon system delivery computers, scandals of Khazana bank, Nuclear bombs all symbolize contemporary Hindustan because “[V]iolence today is hot. It is what people want” (Moor 306).

16 For a comprehensive account of the Vedic and Puranic traditions in Hindu Mythology see W. J. Wilkins's Hindu Mythology. The materials have been arranged in such a way that a reader can conveniently gain access to the names, characters, and relationship of the principal characters of Hindu Mythology.

17 MC, which is about India, became famous for its narrative inventiveness, its ambitions, and its intertextual connection with Indian mythical traditions. TMLS is a disillusioned sequel to MC. Towards the end of MC, Saleem contemplates on the possibility of new myths being born after failure, or the destruction of Nehru's vision of a secular and tolerant India. The narrator in MC states: "We, the children of independence, rushed wildly and too fast into our future; he, Emergency born, will be is already mode cautious. Biding his time, but when he acts, he will be impossible to resist. Already, he is stronger, harder, more resolute than I: when he sleeps, his eyeballs are immobile beneath their lids. Adam Sinai, child of knees-and-nose, does not (as far as I can tell) surrender to dream.” (425). But the possibilities placed in Adam Sinai, are lost in TMLS as India now is facing many other problems. Bombay is now at the hands of the fundamentalists. Adam Sinai has found no myth. Instead, he becomes a gangster serving organized crime.
18 As stated in the novel, Rahu is the exaggerator or the intensifier, and Ketu is presented as the blocker or the suppressor. The dance of the two shadow planets is the dance of the struggle within us, the inner struggle of moral and social choice (48).

19 But, Rushdie in his essay “Influences” has also expressed his indebtedness to the great storytellers like Cervantes, Kafka, Melville, Gunter Grass, Milan Kundera, Marquez, and his narrative style magnificently adopts the oral traditions from a number of Oriental traditions.


21 However, Rushdie’s novels have to be culturally contextualized. The most significant question Rushdie is trying to address is if ‘India’ or Indian Literature in English is coterminous with the India of the political map, or is it to be used in a wider imaginative sense so that a new identity of Indian Literature can be generated. Through the use of Indianness as a representational mode, Rushdie is examining a genre of literature which is comparatively new and has a colonial past. Yet very powerfully he has expressed the need to read and interpret India in the Post-independence period.

22 For example, his first novel $G$ is formed in the mythical mode that somewhat distinguishes it from other novels. $HSS$ another novel that probably comes closer to $G$, but the use of fantasy here is quite unlike that of $G$ and the fairytale mode, together with the quest motif hints at the allegorical dimension of the later. While the conflation of the real and the fantastic in $MC$ is far more mature and enduring.

Works Cited:


