CHAPTER-VII

THE MOOR'S LAST SIGH: REIMAGING INDIA
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The Moor's Last Sigh: Reimaging India

I had seen India's beauty in that crowd with its soda-water and cucumber but with that God stuff I got scared. In the city we are for secular India but the village is for Ram. And they say Ishwar 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.

(The Moor's Last Sigh, 55-56)

Midnight's Children and Shame remain wonderful works that present the problematics of the postcolonial identity of Rushdie's migrant characters who are torn between nationalism and internationalism, between trying to remain true to indigenous traditions and seeking to bring the benefits of an alien modernity to the natives. The reader may better appreciate the author's quest for identity by examining his life, his deliberately chosen prose style, the theme of 'double identity', 'divided selves' and the 'shadow figures' in his novels and in his personality. In The Moor's Last Sigh, Rushdie makes the reader feel that he has travelled a long way from the Midnight's Children as far as his
imagination is concerned, that he has also attained maturity and brilliance. Instead of a 'comic-epic', what the reader gets in this novel is a brilliant 'parodic allegory', spectacularly ambitious, funny, satirical and compassionate. It is a love song to a vanishing world, but also its last hurrah. Rushdie's art in this novel is really allegorical in its most sophisticated garb, very effectively hiding his motives, yet vividly demonstrating his apprehensions about the bruised political sensibility of contemporary India, and yet showing his immense faith in the regenerative power of the soul of India.

A multi-layered epic novel which performs with astonishing brilliance at various levels, *The Moor's Last Sigh* paints the Oedipal mix-up, the underworld operations of the big business houses in Bombay and their brutal gang wars, the alarming rise of the Hindu, Muslim fundamentalist groups, their fanning of communal fire and its impact on the socio-political, artistic, and intellectual spheres all over the country, especially in Bombay. The reader finds in the narrator/author a tension of narrative co-ordination between the narrative structure and his subject, which is, according to Bhabha, 'the ambivalent recreation of the temporalities of the nation space'. Rushdie's temporality appears a metaphorical hyphenation of the host nation's physical time and the metaphorical temporality of the native homeland, which is being offered as a narrative location through the imaginary shreds of nation's cultural signification.

As an emigrant writer, whenever Rushdie looks at his native land—India in *Midnight's Children* and Pakistan in *Shame*; he uses his 'outside-insider' position in order to offer, what he says in *Imaginary Homelands*, a "stereotopic vision" instead of "whole sight" (19). However, since Khomeini's 'fatwa' he has become a genuine exile or rather a 'double exile': an exile at the individual level
for being haunted by the 'fatwa' for so many years even after Khoneini's death and, also a person-non-grata at the national level in India. As a full-fledged exile, his homeland has become quite literally a fictive entity, and the experience of homeland is now only an imaginary obsession. He feels at the individual level, as Fanon suggests, "the need to speak to his nation and compose the sentence of a new reality in action".

The thematic obsession of the narrator/novelist has been reflected through his fictional approximation to the native national space which is, in fact, an ardent, despairing turning toward anything that will afford him what Fanon calls "secure anchorage". In order to ensure his salvation and escape from the possibility of his imagination's imminent assassination, he feels the need to turn backward, towards his forgotten roots. The narrator Moraes Zogoiby recounts the rise, decline and plunge to extinction of a Portuguese merchant family anciently established in southern India. The hapless narrator was born, like Mr. Rushdie, in Bombay—but in 1957, ten years later. Moraes, nicknamed Moor, the last living member of the da Gama-Zogoiby line, is now held captive by a mad artist Vasco Miranda in a remote fortress in Benengeli in Spain. Throughout, echoes of Mr. Rushdie's own predicament are never too hard to detect: "Here I stand; couldn't've done it differently"—is one of the Moor's last thoughts as he is "in a far-off country with death at my heels" (3).

However, notwithstanding the terrible psychic and physical disruptions that Rushdie has been suffering in the aftermath of 14 February 1989, The Moor's Last Sigh has been able to register a triumph of art over adversity. Rushdie has successfully fought back in the novel against all dangerous disruptions and diminutions. He has doggedly defended his right to write about—205—
his cultural roots in India, reaffirming that he is not willing to be excluded from any part of his Indian memory that continuously supports his plural and partial identity. In fact, *The Moor's Last Sigh* has been a poignant depiction of the essence, effervescence and exuberance of Indian experience. By fusing an individual body with the subcontinental psyche and a family story with the national history in the novel, which remains his *tour de force* all along, Rushdie has been able to rediscover the soul of India—the corporate, somatic and symbolic basis of Indian identity.

Not quite surprisingly, therefore, the articulation made from this subject position echoes the prison narrative of *The Moor's Last Sigh*. It is a discourse through which a self-incarcerated artist engages himself in a dialogic interrogation to protect his identity as well as to project his own version of truth. “Men and women who leave their natural places are less than human”, a Spaniard named Medina, at Benengeli remarks, “Either something is lacking in their souls or else something surplus has gotten inside – some manner of devil seed” (327). One may view this comment as the tragic, self-depreciatory words of the author himself, who has been under the double fate of expatriation and the ‘fatwa’. It speaks volumes on the exile’s “twice-doomed” situation that stands in contrast to the emigrant’s “twice-born” status.

As a dual exile, Rushdie has to define his identity and his resourcefulness by differentiating him and his immediate ordeals. The rupture between aspiration valorized by dominant culture and the experience of actual socio-political devaluation cuts through the very center of his subjectivity. Quite significantly, therefore, the novel begins with an impounding sense of death of its narrator-protagonist Moraes Zogoiby who is languishing in captivity in an alien land.
However, there is also a charged imagery of emancipation and escape from this strangulating threat of death, underlying the author's own concern for such an aseptic exposure to freedom:

I have lost count of the days that have passed since I fled the horrors of Vasco Miranda’s mad fortress... ran from death under cover of darkness and left a message nailed to the door. And since then along my hungry, heat-hazed way there have been further bunches of scribbled sheets, swings of the hammer, sharp exclamations of two-inch nails. (3)

The reader thus gets increasingly absorbed in the labyrinths of Rushdie’s narrative struggle for projecting the dialectical interrelationship between the fictive and the mundane, between narrative and nationality. The narrative recurrently refers to the situation of imminent death—“Life itself being crucifixion enough” (4), but every time the protagonist defies death threat in whatever form it does come. Even after the tragic death of his beloved, the narrator decides to defy the dictates of death and not to yield:

No, I would not die, I had already decided that.... To die’ would not immortalize that love, but devalue it. So I would live, to be the standard-bearer of our passion; would demonstrate, by my life, that love was worth more than blood, than shame—more, even, than death. (281)

The protagonist survives, instead, his assailant Vasco Miranda dies a ghastly death, empowering him to go ahead with his story and keep on searching
for the meanings of life, imagining the ways to make life much more worthier, much more fuller.

The thematic premise of The Moor's Last Sigh is, in many ways, built around what Rushdie in Imaginary Homelands calls his doctrine of hybridization or cultural 'mongrelization' (394), involving the insight that migrancy is not one-directional but two-directional; that the state of being inbetweenness partakes of its origins—the past, and its destination—the future. In Midnight's Children Rushdie excavates layers of Indian history in order to bring home the idea that multiculturalism is perhaps the only panacea capable of saving the mixed-bag of Indian tradition from the clutches of imperialism and the confining myth of cultural hegemony. However, in The Moor's Last Sigh he expresses his doubts that multiculturalism and imperialism are not simply opposed, as one tends to believe they are, but may be curiously intertwined. By systematically juxtaposing the Indian history with the history of Spain, he creates an imaginative hybrid of culture—a 'Mooristan' or 'Palimpstine' (226)—that allows the novelist to analyze and explore the problematic of multiculturalism in the postcolonial world. The great insight that distinguishes The Moor's Last Sigh from his earlier works is that a false hybrid of culture may adversely affect a genuine 'mélange' culture and 'mongrel' selves.

In this connection, it is not very difficult to see in Rushdie's vision an explanation as to why he chooses to tell the story of contemporary India in the novel not from the perspective of a majority Hindu or minority Muslim character but from the odd angles of a minority within minority, who is not just a Catholic or a Jew but a 'cathjewnut', a 'mongrel cur' (104). By focusing on his identity as an inheritor of a rich and varied culture, the 'highborn crossbreed' half-Christian, half-Jewish narrator Moraes Zogoiby cherishes his palimpsestic identity that is
India's; he inherits a richly varied identity not just from his family but also from the cultural matrix of the subcontinent—"a real Bombay mix" (104). This is a deliberate strategy that avoids presenting India essentially as an ethnically homogenous culture, which helps explore the identity-formation possibilities from a different angle avoiding the risk of being called parochial. His half-Christian, half-Jewish narrator underlines the strength of this approach:

Christians, Portuguese, and Jews: Chinese tiles promoting godless views: pushy ladies, skirts-not-saris. Spanish shenanigans. Moorish clowns...can this really be India? (87)

Meanwhile, Rushdie has adopted the recurrent narrative strategy of intertwining family story with national history through out the novel so that he can talk more than personal experiences on the plane of fantasy and metaphysics. He excavates piles of stories from four generations of the Christian–Jewish de Gama-Zogoiby household of Cochin involved in the spice trade in India. The narrator Moraes, affectionately called Moor by his mother Aurora, recollects most of the exhilarating story of his family, his fall from his mother's grace, and about his exiled life at the Alhambra.

Tracing back his family saga to four generations of the subcontinental history, Moraes fuses the legends and myths about the Jewish settlements on the Malabar coast both before and after the Christian era, and about Christianity in India from the times of St. Thomas the Apostle, not just to root himself within the socio-cultural matrix of the subcontinent but also to redraw a colourful and composite picture of the palimpsestic nature of Indian reality. By foregrounding the points of view of Christians and Jews—the two small minorities of the nation state—the narrator, in fact, emphasizes strength of the multicultural
aspects of India’s heritage. He questions the very myth of authenticity of a ‘pure’ or ‘superior’ culture through his seemingly innocuous satiric tone:

No, sahibzadas. Madams-O: no way. Majority, the mighty elephant, and her sidekick. Majority- Minority, will not crush my tale beneath her feet. Are not my personages Indian, every one? Well, then: this too is an Indian yarn. (87)

At a personal level, Moraes’s quest for ‘home’ and ‘wholeness’ seems to be very basis of his understanding and readjustment of a strained relation with his mother. Of course, the reader here cannot help but connect the problematic parent-son relationship—a major theme in all the novels—with Rushdie’s own love-hate relation with India. As the mother, Aurora epitomizes both the creative and destructive elements in nature; she is the symbol of “Mother India who loved and betrayed and ate and destroyed and again loved her children, and with whom the children’s passionate crying and eternal quarrel stretched beyond the grave”(60-61). At a symbolic level, however, Rushdie’s narrative presents a quest for the dawning of a new world that is bounded by no single faith or tradition, but offers limitless possibility of exuberance and rebirth as India has always been; he envisages:

...a free country above religion because secular, above class because socialist, above caste because enlightened, above hatred because loving, above vengeance because forgiving, above tribe because unifying, above language because many-tongued, above colour because multi-coloured...(51)
From the first page to the last Spanish history hovers in the background of *The Moor's Last Sigh*. Moraes's ancestry embraces the historical, religious and cultural links with Portugal: on his mother's side he is descended from Vasco da Gama, the famous navigator; on his father's side the lineage is traced back to Boabdil, the last Moorish Sultan who, after surrendering the Alhambra to Ferdinand and Isabella in A.D.1492, was exiled from Andalusia. The Jewish ancestors of Moraes's father Abraham Zogoiby are said to have come to India as a result of forceful Christianization of Spain that led to the expulsion of the Moors from the land. The Indian Zogoibys are, according to family legend, descended from the exiled Sultan Boabdil and a Spanish Jewess who found refuge in India (82-83).

The 'Moor' of the title is Sultan Boabdil, the Unlucky, who was deposed from Granada, the last stronghold of the Moorish rule in Spain. The 'last sigh' literally refers to the sigh of Boabdil who, after his exilement, reined his horse upon the Hill of Tears and turned for one last look upon the Granada he has to leave behind. Metaphorically, however, it speaks a whole lot of thing. A homeless by choice and then a person-non-grata in India as Rushdie has become of late, it is not very difficult for the reader to understand why the novelist is fascinated by the sad story of the Sultan and "the fabulous multiple culture of ancient al-Andalus" (398). The brilliant history of Moorish Spain, which witnessed a world where the tolerance of the Muslim rulers for non-Muslims ensured a vibrant symbiotic culture, appears to provide Rushdie a better yarn to weave a much more complex and richer identity that transgresses all kinds of signs of division and separation. But the people's zealous obsession with a pure, essential identity on religious and communal lines in post-Independence India is a perfect anathema to the fabulous multiple culture of ancient Andalus.
Rushdie sighs over this fading faith. He laments over this terrible loss in the pages of *The Moor's Last Sigh*:

And so I sit here in the last light, upon this stone, among these olive trees, gazing out across a valley towards a distant hill; and there it stands, the glory of the Moors, their triumphant masterpiece and their last redoubt. The Alhambra, Europe's red fort, sister to Delhi's and Agra's—the palace of interlocking forms and secret wisdom.... I watch it vanish in the twilight, and in its fading it brings tears to my eyes. (433)

In *Midnight's Children* as well as in *Shame* Rushdie has brilliantly chronicled the catastrophic consequences of religious intolerance, political chicanery and totalitarianism. Following these concerns, the present state of criminalization of politics and public life, the growth of Hindu nationalism, religious and intellectual intolerance and other kind of disruptive fundamentalism, which pose a real threat to the age-old secular identity of India, have been brilliantly portrayed in the pages of *The Moor's Last Sigh*. Rushdie turns to his favourite theme of 'loss and lamentation' thus:

Violence was violence, murder was murder, two wrongs did not make a right: these are truths of which I was fully cognizant....In these days after the destruction of Babri Masjid, 'justly enraged Muslims' / 'fanatical killers' (once again, use your blue pencil as your heart dictates) smashed up Hindu temples, and killed Hindus, across —212—
India and in Pakistan as well....They urge among us...Hindu and Muslim, knife and pistol, killing, burning, looting... (365)

It is in this context, Moorish Spain offers Rushdie a historical alternative to the pathetic loss of secular credence in contemporary India. He condemns the politics of the colonialists who impose a so called 'super culture' upon a subject people, and that of the neo-nationalists of the post-colonial era who propagate the myth of 'cultural nationalism' by rejecting all outside influences especially those from their former masters. Rushdie's inclination towards a 'functional multiculturalism' seems to be in line of his status as one of the most vocal members of the post-diaspora community of writers. Thus the narrative darts and bounds across time and space, countries and cultures, to weave a dream of different cultures merging in to a larger unity.

It is increasingly felt that Rushdie provides a clue in the narrative to his own vision of India though the "fabulous multiple culture of Moorish Spain" as well as Aurora's 'Moor paintings' to "create a romantic myth of the plural, hybrid nation" (227). One can hardly miss in the project the author's attempt to redraw an imaginative relationship with a familiar city and a cultural history. The narrative provides a defining metaphor for an imaginary homeland that has been symbolically presented in the dreams of Camoens as much as in his illustrated daughter's paintings that recreate a super hybrid of Moorish Spain and Moghul India in a beautiful artistic imagination:

The Alhambra quickly became a not quite Alhambra; elements of India's own red forts, the Moghul palace-fortresses in Delhi and Agra, blended Moghul
splendours with the Spanish building's Moorish grace. (226)

The vision of Camoens and his father the grand patriarch Francisco is, in fact, Rushdie's own vision about a strong democratic India. Both the father and the son are rational nationalists, modeled upon the freethinkers of Goa. Francis is an admirer of Gandhi and takes part in the home Rule Movement. Camoens is actually "a nationalist whose favourite poets were all English" (32), who becomes a follower of Nehru after a brief flirtation with the Communists. He incorporates Nehruvian idealism as well as Gandhian tolerance to dispel all doubts regarding the accommodative sweetness of Indian reality. The narrator pays glowing tribute to both of them: "To me, the essential doubleness... hate-the-sin-and-love-the-sinner sweetness, is one of the true wonders of India" (32).

The great divide in the household of the da Gamas occurs on ideological and political lines, which assumes acrimonious height epitomizing the character of the indomitable Epifania and her other son, the homosexual Aries, who names his bulldog after Jawaharlal Nehru. While Francisco and Camoens rebel against colonial exploitation and announce that "The British must go", the grand matriarch Epifania and her elder son Aries cry for "England, God, philistinism, the old ways" (18). From the smug irony that Rushdie treats the imperialist Epifania and Aries, it becomes evidently clear that he makes fun of the tendency prevalent in some quarters during the colonial era to blindly idolize anything that was British or western. In case of Aires, Rushdie hints that Anglophilia may be a form of escapism, for he fondly loves to cherish a "secret fantasy that the Europeans might one day return to the Malabar Coast" (199). In her self-deceiving way Epifania, on the other hand, becomes a fanatic Anglophile and...
"continues to believe, to a degree that is almost blasphemous, in beneficence of the British" (22). When Francisco decries the evil of the British, she retorts back, urging the munificence of the British have given us everything, isn't it? —Civilizations, law, order, too much. Even your spices that stink up the house they buy out of their generosity, putting clothes on backs and food on children's plate. Then why speak of such treason? (18)

But Rushdie is equally critical of such characters as Raman Fielding who feels that Europeans have nothing to contribute to India. In fact, the author gives vent to his own depreciation of the divisive tendencies of heightened nationalism that flourishes during the Emergency phase of Indian history. He observes: "Before the Emergency we were Indians. After it we were Christian Jews" (235). He goes on to show how the kind of cultural chauvinism propagated by Fielding leads to disastrous religious violence in such incidents as the demolition of the Masjid at Ayodhya. Rushdie denounces fanaticism of every kind; "two wrongs" —religious fanatics destroying the Masjid and fanatical killers killing Hindus and smashing Hindu temples—cannot make even one thing right.

Moreover, Rushdie appears really perturbed by Fielding's theory of prejudiced nationalism that condemns artists like Aurora who refuses to remain confined within the narrow limits of native tradition. He continues his interrogation of the postcolonial myth of cultural authenticity. Despite his own hybrid name—his first name is Indian while his last name is British—Raman Fielding acts as a fascist politician, who is all out for the restoration of the aboriginal purity of India:
He spoke of a golden age 'before the invasion' when good Hindu men and women could roam free. 'Now our freedom, our beloved nation, is buried beneath the things the invaders have built. This true nation is what we must reclaim from beneath the layers of alien empires.' (299)

Raman Fielding shares remarkable similarities with other marginalized characters like Shiva in *Midnight's Children*, Raza Hyder in *Shame*, Khattam-Shud in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, who imbibe the fascist and the cartoon. As a failed artist who could never rise above the level of a cartoonist, however, he ensures his rise in Bombay's power politics by instigating communal passion and flairs. The author analyses Fielding's *modus operandi*:

In his bizarre conception of cricket as a fundamentally communalist game, essentially Hindu but with its Hindu-ness constantly under threat from the country's other treacherous communities, lay the origins of his political philosophy, and the 'Mumbai's Axis' itself...Thus uniting regional and religious nationalism in his potent, explosive new group. (231)

Fielding is undoubtedly shrewd enough to gauge and utilize the dreams and desires of the urban Marathas, uprooted from their local cultures, and to give shape to an aggressive programme of crushing all immigrants to the city of Bombay. Moreover, he is told to be against unions, in favour of breaking

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strikes, against working women, in favour of Sati, (298). Like Shiva and Raza Hyder, he smacks hard masculinity and brute force; he is described thus:

He preferred male company. There would be evenings when in company of a group of saffron-head-banded M.A. Youth Wingers he would institute a sort of Macho, impromptu mini-Olympiad. There would be arm-wrestling and mat-wrestling, push up contest and living-room boxing bouts. (300)

Unlike Shiva, however, there are no redeeming touches to Fielding/Mainduck. From a structural point of view, fascists like him do constitute a counter point to the migrant, translated men and women who, with infinitely varied shades of their identity, rejoice at cultural hybridity. It is not unnatural, therefore, to see Rushdie’s portraying Raman Fielding alias Mainduck—the Hindi word for a toad—in the novel like a cartoon:

"Fielding’s name derived, according to legend, from a cricket-mad father, a street-wise Bombay ragamuffin who hung around the Bombay Gymkhana pleading to be given a chance: ‘Please, Babujis, you give this poor chokra one batting? One bowling only? Okay, okay—then just one fielding...the immortal C.K. Naidu, who recognised him from the old days at the Gymkhana and joked, ‘So, my little just one fielding... you sure grew up to take some expert catches.’ After that the
fellow was always known as J.O. Fielding, and proudly accepted the name as his own. (230)

The novelist's caricature of the right-wing Hindu axis of Bombay and its maverick leader Raman Fielding, whom many would like to identify with the Shiv Sena chief Bal Thackray, has been central to the controversy that raises much heat and dust in the political arena. Thackray found his satirical portrayal too hard to digest and castigated Rushdie publicly, saying that India is no more his homeland, hence he has no business writing about people and places he has been cut off from. Thus he demanded a blanket ban on The Moor's Last Sigh in India. The banning was also sought by some politicians simply because they were upset that Aries named his dog after Jawaharlal Nehru. Rushdie's denial of the allegation of any political innuendo appears very much plausible from the viewpoint he intends to project in the novel. As against this alleged 'homelessness', however, Rushdie doggedly defends his right to write about India where he was born. He reaffirms he is not willing to be excluded from any part of the memory of his mother country; he argues elsewhere in Imaginary Homelands: "It is a perfectly proper function of people who care about India and write about it to express their misgivings and their fear" (15).

Rushdie's penchant for portraying contemporary personalities to project his worldview continues still further; the reader is given oblique references to another right-wing leader wedded to Hindu fundamentalism— Uma Bharati, painted as Uma Sarasvati. She is the enigmatic "Mata Hari"— for whom Moraes develops a grand passion that leads to his tragic fall. In Uma Sarasvati, Rushdie paints a radical whose commitment to her cause matches her histrionic and chameleon talents to maintain an incredibly deceptive façade. Nurtured in the
paramilitary school of the right wing Mumbai Axis (337), Uma believes that the Muslims, the Christians and other minority communities are harming the interests of the majority community of Hindus, hence, are unwanted in India. She plots to destroy the da Gama-Zogoiby family and, there by, cut the promising minority to size. The predator that Uma is, she makes terrible unimaginable use of Moraes’s passion for her to poison his parent’s minds against him. The Moor’s final evaluation of Uma is striking; she has been reduced to an ugly lizard as Fielding to a toad:

I imagined a chameleon-like creature, a cold-blooded lizard from across the cosmos, who could take human form, male or female, as required, for the express purpose of making as much trouble as possible .... Turbulence, disruption, misery, catastrophe, grief all these were on the menu of its preferred foods” (320).

The neo-nationalists like Fielding and Uma put forward the argument that an independent nation seeking to decolonize itself fully must reject all outside influence and embrace a pure native culture. But for the migrant Rushdie, the very notion of purity appears a chimera, for the glory of Indian culture lies in its complexity, not in its purity. In this respect, Zeeny Vakil provides an important link between The Satanic Verses and The Moor’s Last Sigh. She reappears in the later, where, based on her earlier influential study of the Moghul Hamza-nama art, she becomes a connoisseur of Aurora’s paintings. In her bitter criticism of the imperialistic ‘Ram-Rajya’ rhetoric of the right wing Mumbai Axis of Fielding and Uma, Zeeny represents the secular voice of millions of Indians:
'What bunkum, I swear,' she expostulated. Point one: in a religion with a thousand and one gods they suddenly decide only one chap matters. Then what about Calcutta, for example, where they don't go for Ram? And Shiva-temples are no longer suitable places of worship? Too stupid. Point two: Hinduism has many holy books, not one, but suddenly it is all Ramayan, Ramayan. Then where is the Gita? Where are all the Puranas? How dare they twist everything in this way? Bloody joke. And point three: for Hindus there is no requirement for a collective act of worship, but without that how are these types going to collect their beloved mobs? A single, martial deity, a single book, and mob-rule: that is what they have made of Hindu culture, its many-headed beauty, its peace. (337-338)

However, despite the verbatim eloquence and rationality behind Zeeny's argument, what seems so disturbing to the novelist is the increasing acceptability of the authoritarian and absolutionist ideology of vendors like Fielding, and a growing support for a culture of violence, hatred and acrimony in present day Indian polity.

Rushdie's iconoclastic exercise, its satiric and cynical tone and tenor notwithstanding, reveals his deep concern about the catastrophic path chosen by the country of his origin in recent times. Aurora Zogoiby's career as a painter illustrates, at the center of the chronicle, this difficulty of pursuing the middle course of cultural hybridity in the contemporary world that compels either the
Western modernism or local tradition. The novelist seems to provide a clue to his own worldview through the series of 'Moor paintings' of Aurora—“an attempt to create a romantic myth of the plural, hybrid nation... to reimagine India” (227). What he appears to be emphasizing is the issue of religious toleration through inter-cultural dialogue: “Aurora Zogoiby was seeking to paint a golden age. Jews, Christians, Muslims, Parsis, Buddhists, Jains crowded into her paint-Boabdil's fancy-dress balls” (227). In fact, Aurora tries to create a super hybrid of Moorish Spain and Moghul India, as architectural styles of the two cultures fuse in her artistic vision:

The Alhambra quickly became a not-quite Alhambra: elements of India's own red forts. The Moghul palace-fortress in Delhi and Agra, blended Moghul splendours with the Spanish building's Moorish grace. (226)

Thus, the reader finds Rushdie very often using Aurora's painting as metaphor and commentary not only on contemporary reality but also on his own narrative art, mixing his own memory and desire with various ideas, issues, narrative modes and strokes:

She had gone back obsessively to the mythic-romantic mode in which history, family, politics and fantasy jostled each other ...to that exploration of an alternative vision of India-as-mother, not Nargis's sentimental village-mother, but a mother of cities, as heartless and lovable, brilliant and dark, multiple and lonely, mesmeric and repugnant, pregnant and empty, truthful and deceitful.(204)
Rushdie has reiterated the theme of “Motherness” in his earlier novels also; “It is a big idea in India,” he declares in an interview, “may be our biggest: the land as mother, the mother as land, as the firm ground beneath our feet” (137). But in portraying Aurora Zogoiby, however, he goes still further and supplants the traditional image of the kind, compassionate, demure, rural mother—whose image still hangs around the old generation movie star Nargis Dutta in Mehboob Khan’s classic Mother India, with his own sort of Mother India— the heartless yet lovable, multiple yet lonely—mother of “metropolitan, sophisticated, noisy, angry and different” or the “dark, bloody mother India” (5).

The idée fixe about mother India, in fact, has undergone a sea change under the modern, metropolitan, pluralistic, malleable and multicultural phases. Rushdie catches on the revision of the idée recue by presenting the fiery and flamboyant Aurora Zogoiby as the modern Mother India in contrast to the demure and docile image fostered by Nargis in the 1950s. In a true postmodernist fashion, Rushdie provides blaring references to the reader to start this comparison game, not the subtle, mild hints of the traditional storytellers. In fact, the narrator and the other characters lead the reader to this critical practice. The Moor comments:

The year I was born, Mehboob Productions’ all-conquering movie Mother India – three years in the making, three hundred shooting days, in the top three all-time mega-grossing Bollywood flicks – hit the nation’s screens. Nobody who saw it ever forgot that glutinous saga of peasant heroinism, that super-slushy ode to the uncrushability of village India made by the most cynical urbanites in the world. And as for its leading lady – O Nargis with your shovel over your shoulder and your strand of black hair tumbling forward over your brow! – she
became, until Indira-Mata supplanted her, the living mother-goddess of us all. (137)

There can be no doubt about this image of the traditional 'Bharat Nari' that has been fostered for ages by writers, artists and the popular media in ideal figures of Sita, Savitri, Shakuntala and others in glorious light to maintain status quo. Some positive features of the image notwithstanding, this patriarchal concept, oppressive and imprisoning, is getting to be increasingly objected to and rejected by the modern Indian women. The reader feels that Rushdie's story systematically breaks this traditional image of 'Bharat Nari' when he goes back and forth in the narrative to catch up the radical, urban Mother India—Aurora da Gama. Her mother Isabella had run a cold war with her mother-in-law Epifania from the moment Camoens chose her as his bride; she was, in the old lady's opinion, a "hussy from somewhere" (23).

Nargis's Mother India is a coy mistress, an rural bride, subdued and subjected, a true 'Bharat Nari' before and after her marriage. But Aurora's rebellious "marriage" with her Jewish employee Abraham Zogoiby, in contrast, is a public scandal, since the girl is just fifteen, fresh and innocent, and Abraham is her father's age—thirty-five. Aurora, therefore, remains "hussy, bitchy" to her grandmother all through out.

Fascinating and intricate weaving of the elements of real and imaginary lives—both on screen and off, and in the novel—has been really artfully handled by Rushdie. A fictional stormy meeting between the real-life Nargis and Sunil Dutt and imaginary Aurora Zogoiby takes place on the semi-realistic terrace of the Malabar hill palace—Elephanta—at which the legendary, sacred mother-son relationship is demolished by the rambunctious, wildly funny Aurora. That the legendary Nargis—who plays the role of the mother, and Sunil Dutt—who
plays the bad son's role in the film, are married in real life is everybody's
knowledge, but transforming this Oedipal element into the fictive story has been
a masterly stroke of Rushdie. Aurora proclaims a new myth, “Even in the picture,
but,” she goes on relentlessly, “I knew right off that bad Birju had the hots for his
gorgeous ma” (138). In her remarks here, the daring Aurora seems to express
a hidden longing for her own handsome son. One way of sublimating her original
sexual impulse is seen in her artistic endeavour, resulting in the famous ‘Moor
paintings’ in which the Oedipal element is subtly revealed. ‘To Die upon a Kiss’
is one such really revealing picture of the hidden impulses; Aurora portrays
herself as murdered Desdemona and her son Moreas as Othello! (224-25).
Though shocking, in these Freudian explications the author seems to be more
amused at the parallels with the movie stars of Mother India; he sees Aurora
as an ironic version of Nargis (219).

Rushdie’s Mother India figure is not simply the antithesis of the popular
image of Nargis in her roles as bride, wife and mother, rather Aurora is never
“redemptive” nor “conservatively wedded to the maintenance of the social status-
quo” (139). On the other hand, she is a sharply retaliating, vindictive woman in
many of her reactions. When she learns that her husband has started fooling
around with girls during her absences, the “bitchy, cosmopolitan” Aurora (156)
pays him back in his own coin by launching her own extra–marital affairs. One
of them, the Moor reports citing scandal in newspaper, is with the first Prime
Minister of India – Jawaharlal Nehru. In fact, the Moor strongly suspects that
Nehru might have fathered him:

Nine months to the day before I arrived, there was a
missing night. But innocent-till-proven-otherwise is an
excellent rule, and neither Aurora nor that great leader have any proof of impropriety to answer. Probably there are perfectly good explanations for all these matters. Children never understand why parents act as they do. (177)

This is, in fact, a brilliant instance of Rushdie's "chutnification" of history; this parodic exercise of turning gossip into history serves a vital function for the creator. It is a stroke of genius to refashion Mother India as a 'bitch goddess'. The emergence of a fiery substitute for the traditional image of Mother India in the character of Aurora Zogoiby is accomplished in a truly postmodern mingling of Roman, Judaic, Christian and Hindu myths, which has been hinted in another painting – "Paradise of Aurora". This classical Paradise is turned into Biblical Heaven when Vasco Miranda compares the Moor to Lucifer "hurled from that fabulous garden and plunged towards Pandemonium" (5). The point, however, stressed here is that this Edenic paradise contains in itself an "infernal private universe" (5). As Aurora, in another context, is “a godless Madonna” in her own painting (220), and Madonna being a metropolitan dame, she metamorphoses into a monster like Sufiya Zinobia in Shame. Perhaps Aurora sees in her work “her own answer to the brutalities of the time” (228).

The mythic dimension of the novel is further underlined by the fact of the protagonist being exiled for fourteen years like that of the epic-hero of Ramayan, who continues to produce tales even being away from his native space. In the novel the Moor discovers "Fourteen years is a generation; or, enough time for a regeneration" (43). The political somatics, which Pierre defines as the political libidinal production of historical body interfusing past and present imprinting in
Rushdie's narrative, exposes carnivalesque subjects of being simultaneously empty and full, reconstructed by the very transgressive surge that deconstructs it. In Rushdie, therefore, tales keep on generating within the narrative discourse of his fiction:

I'll say it again: from the moment of my conception ....
I have aged twice as rapidly as the old earth and everything and everyone thereupon ... Engendered on one hill, born on another, I attained mountainous proportions when I should still have been at the minor molehill stage. (144)

Thus, one can see that the Moor, the protagonist and fictional narrator of the novel – neither a Christian nor a Jew rather "a jewholic" and "atomised" (104) – represents non-singularity of identity construction and thereby subverts the attempts of assigning monological identify as an individual and as an exile. At the individual level the complicated Indian heteroglossia is what shaped his creative self and as an individual he is distanced both from nation as an exile, and from people as an accused.

Rushdie's choice of Spanish history in the novel has been espoused by the author's avowed support for the postmodernist ideology of multiculturalism. He squarely condemns the hegemony of modern nation states that try to impose uniform culture on other peoples. Multiculturalism seems to go hand-in-hand with anti-imperialism, a protest against the way the colonial nations try to impose an alien culture upon a subject people. Rushdie's version of Spanish history thus appears to be a kind of postcolonial rewriting in which the celebrated
traditional heroes—Ferdinand and Isabella—appear villainous in the novel. Centuries before the British took over India, the land was invaded by the Muslims who ultimately founded the Moghul dynasty. The historical background of *The Moor's Last Sigh* seem to be have been generated by Rushdie's fascination with the parallels between Moorish Spain and Mughal India. In both cases a complex hybrid culture resulted from the encounter between the invaders and the local populace.

However, Rushdie's complex understanding of the relation between multiculturalism and imperialism may be better understood by analyzing the way cultural practices get affected. Rushdie observes the artificiality and lack of warmth of the way the English Protestant community celebrate Christmas in Cochin: "Over in Fort Cochin, English families have put up Christmas trees with cotton wool on the branches..." (62). While cotton wool definitely fails the revelers' recreation of Christmas snow in the tropical climate of India, Rushdie digs out the falseness of the British position still further:

Here at Fort Cochin the English had striven mightily, to construct a mirage of Englishness... But D'Aeth could not help seeing through the conjuring trick....And when he looked out sea the illusion of England vanished entirely; for the harbour could not be distinguished, and no matter how Anglicised the land might be, it was contradicted by the water. (95)

Thus, one can see how Rushdie discriminates different kinds of imperialism. What he means to say here is that the English probably do not want to reach out to the Indians; rather they insist on recreating unilaterally a bit
of England in Cochin. In fact, their whole effort is devoted to avoiding any taint of hybridity, maintaining the purity of their Englishness. This sort of apathy for any genuine cultural dialogue has been tellingly contrasted in the way the Portuguese Catholics celebrate Christmas in the da Gama household:

There are no trees here; instead there is a crib. Joseph could be a carpenter from Ernakulum, and Mary a woman from the tea-field, and the cattle are water-buffalo, and the skin of the Holy Family (gasp!) is rather dark.... Nobody is shining down a chimney in this house. (63)

By contrast to the English Protestant Christmas ceremony, this Catholic nativity scene is an example of genuine cultural hybridity, as no less than the Holy family goes native. Going native, in fact, was the phenomenon the British colonial masters mostly feared. But in this process they lost an opportunity of seeking out ways of reimagining their identity. Rushdie makes a similar distinction in his view of Spanish history. The Moorish conquest of Spain had led to the development of a genuine, multicultural community, but when the Christians reconquered, they imposed a monolithic cultural practice, forcing the Muslims and Jews either to convert to Christianity or leave the country for good, and in the process they killed the glory of the fabulous synthetic culture of the past.

However, far from rejecting the European influence on India outright, Rushdie chronicles its significant contributions on Indian civilization. He suggests that at least one such contribution on Indian culture that has genuine and far-reaching consequences is the English language, which has all along been a strong unifying force as the lingua franca in India. In *Midnight’s Children*
Rushdie has told his readers how language-issues could provoke bitter acrimony amongst different communities and separate them from one another; how India had been divided anew, into fourteen states and six centrally-administered territories; and how the boundaries of these states were always earmarked by “walls of words”.

As against the ‘colonial hangover’ theory of the neo-nationalists, who want to dispense with English language with a view to decolonize the native mind, Rushdie, like many postcolonial authors, finds it a liberating instrument that can be reconstructed and used very effectively to reassert one’s lost identity. In his *Imaginary Homelands* he has spoken about his linguistic goal: “To conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free” (17). The reader finds him domesticating English language into an Indian-English dialect, a hybridized linguistic form. The vivid hybrid texture of his prose is seen through his use of this variety of language—whether he writes of “kababed saints” and “tandooried martyrs” (26) or deals with a “tropicalised Victorian melodrama” (100), or an “Indianised Last Supper” (202). His own art is a good example of the cultural hybridity he expounds. The reader, therefore, is never surprised when Aurora strongly supports the author’s views:

It was at this time, when language riots prefigured the division of the state, that she announced that neither Marathi nor Gujarati would be spoken within her walls; the language of her kingdom was English and nothing but. ‘All these different lingos cut us off from one another,’ she explained. ‘Only English brings us together.’ (179)
Rushdie always experiments with brio, vigour and wit. Here is just another example of the parenthetical characterization of an Iranian restaurant in Bombay— the 'Sorryno': "(so called because of the huge blackboard at the entrance reading Sorry, No Liquor, No Answer Given Regarding Addresses in Locality, No Combing of Hair, No Beef, No Haggle, No Water Unless Food Taken, No News or Movie Magazine, No Sharing of Liquid Sustenances, No Taking Smoke, No Match, No Feletone Calls, No Incoming With Own Comestible, No Speaking of Horses, No Sigret, No Taking of Long Time on Premises, No Raising of Voice, No Change, and a crucial last pair, No Turning Down of Volume — It Is How We Like, and No Musical Request — All Melodies Selected Are To Taste of Prop)." (205)

Aurora's artistic career suggests a final twist in Rushdie's exploration of the problematic of multiculturalism. He now raises serious doubts about the value of cultural hybridity. The transformation of the 'Moor' image suggests that the artist has ample doubts in her convictions. One may find a classic clue to this growing sense of doubt by comparing the early 'Moor pictures' which are a brilliant manifestation of exuberant life of India with the later day 'mercenary status' of the Moor:

He appeared to lose, in these last pictures, his previous metaphorical role as a unifier of opposites, a standard-bearer of pluralism, ceasing to stand as a symbol... of the new nation, and being transformed, instead, into a semi-allegorical figure of decay. Aurora had apparently decided that the ideas of impurity, cultural admixture and mélange which had been, for most of her creative...
life, the closest thing she had found to a notion of the Good, were in fact capable of distortion, and contained. This ‘black Moor’ was a new imagining of the idea of the hybrid… Then slowly he grew phantom-like himself… and sank into abstraction. Reduced to mercenary status where once he had been a king, he rapidly became a composite being as pitiful and anonymous as those amongst whom he moved. (303)

In order to understand this declivity, the reader has to see through Rushdie’s vision of the present day socio-political scenario of Spain. Coming to the contemporary Spain in search of some stolen paintings of his mother, Moraes sees the “denatured part of Benegeli” (390), invaded by displaced persons from all around the world who give it a pseudo-cosmopolitan character but only in terms of language. It is but a hollow echo of the genuine multiculturalism of the past. He finds the New Spain an "un-Spanish thoroughfare", full of non-Spaniards who were plainly had no interest in the siesta or any other local customs" (390). This commercial cosmopolitanism is certainly a degraded form of multiculturalism. By ignoring any form of ‘rooting’ from the local culture, from anything that roots a people to their soil, it deprives human beings every opportunity of constructing a wholesome identity. It tends to substitute particular love for particular people or particular culture with abstractions—a world of universal brand names, belong everywhere because belong nowhere in particular. Rushdie seems to speak against this commodity culture of capitalism which tends to “float upward from history, from memory, from time”. Cultural hybridity can really take the form of a genuine and powerful synthesis of antithetical elements, but it can also degenerate into empty forms of
amalgamation as the elements here are never joined together with any sense of belongingness, nor do they share any dialogic conflict with one another.

The central image for cultural hybridity in the novel, as Brenan envisages elsewhere, has been the ‘palimpsest’. For Rushdie, all culture, and especially Indian, is palimpsestic in nature. New cultural forces never displace or erase prior ones, but simply write over them, leaving piles of cultural heritage to enrich the communal consciousness of its people. In *The Moor's Last Sigh* Rushdie tries to juxtapose Spanish history to see if a more imaginative hybridized world—a ‘Mooristan’ or ‘Palimpstine’ (226) could meaningfully explore the complex question of identity within the vexed location of multiculturalism.

However, given to his earlier stance taken in *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*, the reader of *The Moor's Last Sigh* is likely to be a little bit surprised to find the author showing as if multiculturalism and imperialism are not simply opposed, rather the two may be blended in critical ways. He criticizes imperialism when it is imposed on a subject people as a monolithic culture—native or alien, but at the same time he rejects postcolonial nationalism when it seeks to imagine a culture as pure and imposes it on the people. It appears that Rushdie celebrates the clash of cultures giving to and taking from one another, ushering in a fusion of antithetical traditions. The author seems to be writing on edges, borders, thresholds and boundaries, looking for links and ‘bridges’, something that allows us to share, instead of dividing, what is on either side. His worldview of multiplicity finds emphatic expression in the dying Moor's vision: "our need for flowing together, for putting an end to frontiers, for dropping of the boundaries of the self (433)."
NOTES AND REFERENCES


■ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin, 1976)\(^\text{1}93\)


