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Hybrid Imaginaries: The Convergence of Myth, History, and Postmodern Narrative in Salman Rushdie's Fiction

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Abstract
Salman Rushdie occupies a prominent place in the landscape of contemporary world literature. What we come across in his fiction is a free and self-conscious borrowing from Hindu mythology, Islamic theological tradition, and the Western canonical inheritance of modernism and postmodernism. Rushdie refuses to adhere to any linear progression in his narrative. Rushdie uses magical realism to challenge the epistemological authority of Western realism that shaped the way stories were told under the influence of colonial thinking. Palimpsest is another significant tool – both as structural principle and metaphor for postcolonial cultural identity – that Rushdie uses in his works. Besides deploying these postmodern narrative strategies, Rushdie also engages with the ancient Indian oral narrative tradition. For Rushdie, then, the act of storytelling is always already a hybrid act, one that brings into productive tension the oral and the written, the traditional and the experimental, the local and the global. The synthesis of personal, social and political history along with the religious and cultural mythology on one hand, and literary allusion and postmodern narrative experiment alongside ancient oral tradition and contemporary fictional form on the other hand – present Rushdie's fiction as a fascinating site for critical engagement. This paper establishes that Rushdie's fiction engages with constructs of history, myth, and storytelling traditions across many traditions. For Rushdie, myth and history are not opposite categories, they are rather mutually constitutive elements – each rewriting and recontextualising the other.

Key words: Postmodernism hybridity myth historiography magical realism palimpsest

Introduction

Salman Rushdie occupies a prominent place in the landscape of contemporary world literature. He is not only a celebrated novelist, but also a cultural phenomenon. His fiction – both in form and content – consistently deals with the fractured experience of the postcolonial identity. His own life as well, is a palimpsest of competing geographies and histories. Born in India in 1947 – the year India not only gained independence but also was partitioned, educated in England, later forced by his parents to move to Pakistan and finally exiled back to Britain - Rushdie's life shows a pattern of perpetual unbelonging that becomes the defining feature of his literary imagination. He writes, the migrant's perspective generates a particular epistemological vantage point, one that sees the world in "fragments" and seeks, through the act of fiction, to reassemble what has been irretrievably shattered (Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* 12). Rushdie was born in a middle class Muslim household in Bombay. He spent first few years of his life in the middle of large Hindu amphitheatre in Bombay learning Urdu, Hindi and English language simultaneously. Although, this early exposure to pluralism - religions, languages, and cultures - was not his choice, yet has played a significant part in shaping his narrative style. Thus, what we come across in his fiction is a free and self-conscious borrowing from Hindu mythology, Islamic theological tradition, and the Western canonical inheritance of modernism and postmodernism. Timothy Brennan describes such a blending of diverse strands as a "cosmopolitan" literary project that is, at the same time, inescapably embedded in "the political conflicts of the third world" (Brennan 35). As a result, Rushdie's work can be attributed to what Homi K. Bhabha calls the "third space of enunciation" - — a liminal zone where different cultural systems, interact, hybridise, and create new meanings that neither traditions could produce alone (Bhabha 36–37). The fact is - Rushdie refuses to adhere to any linear progression in his narrative. There is no methodical telling of causality, rather his narrative proceeds through departure, interruption, and paradox. Linda Hutcheon's term "historiographic metafiction" helps explain his work. She asserts that his novels convey that all history writing is made up, temporary, and shaped by someone's beliefs (Hutcheon 105). For instance, in novels such as *Midnight's Children* (1981), *Shame* (1983), and *The Satanic Verses* (1988), history is never a stable ground upon which narrative rests; it is the very thing that the narrative questions and pulls apart. Rushdie makes visible what Hayden White has called the "narrativization" of historical reality — the process by which the contingent and chaotic stuff of the past is retrospectively shaped into coherent, authoritative story (White 4). Rushdie's deploys imitation, fragmentation, and irony to situate his fiction as a continued act of resistance against monolithic, nationalist, and colonial historiographies alike. Rushdie uses magical realism to challenge the epistemological authority of Western realism that shaped the way stories were told under the influence of colonial thinking. Thus, fulfilling the purpose of postcolonial writing, Rushdie reclaims for the postcolonial subject the right to inhabit a world structured by myth, prophecy, and the marvellous. Amaryll Beatrice Chanady opines, magical realism is defined not merely by the intrusion of supernatural elements into realist narrative, but by the coexistence of two distinct ontological codes without authorial resolution or privileging of either (Chanady 23). Elleke Boehmer further notes, Rushdie's magic is "not escapist but interrogative," that asks questions and defamiliarizes the everyday so that the readers can see the violence and absurdity concealed behind the official

stories (Boehmer 200). Therefore, in Rushdie's hands, magical realism becomes a political tool that uses the impossible to fight what seems inevitable.

Palimpsest is another significant tool – both as structural principle and metaphor for postcolonial cultural identity – that Rushdie uses in his works. A palimpsest is a manuscript with layers of writing. New text covers older writing, but the old never fully disappears. For Rushdie, this stands for how postcolonial people relate to history, language, and their own identity. In *Midnight's Children*, for instance, the narrator Saleem Sinai's body is itself a palimpsest. It carries the histories of the nation, his family, and colonial rule to the effect that the personal and the political are "handcuffed together" (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 238). The technique extends to his intertextual practice as well. He writes over and into a huge archive of earlier works—*The Thousand and One Nights*, *the Mahabharata*, Cervantes, Sterne, Grass. In doing so, he honours them and also twists them. He belongs to them and also pushes back. Besides deploying these postmodern narrative strategies, Rushdie also engages with the ancient Indian oral narrative tradition. While reflecting upon the narrative strategies used in *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie in an interview with David Brooks says:

One of the strange things about oral narrative — which I did look at very closely before writing Midnight's Children — 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 at that length . . . during the course of that story it is absolutely acceptable that the narrator will every so often enter his own story and chat about it — that he'll comment on the tale, digress because the tale reminds 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. (qtd. in Ray and Kundu 17)

This assertion merits theoretical consideration. Rushdie sees no contradiction rather convergence, wherein the metanarrative self-consciousness, the digressive structure, the interpolated commentary, and the fluid boundary between narrator and tale that characterise the modernist novel are not exclusively Western formal innovations but are equally constitutive of the katha and kathakata traditions of the Indian subcontinent. Scholars like

Meenakshi Mukherjee and Rosemary George also assert that Indian novel in English has multiple genealogies and that it uses narrative sources far older and complex than those available within the Euro-American literary tradition alone (Mukherjee 12; George 7). For Rushdie, then, the act of storytelling is always already a hybrid act, that juxtaposes the oral and the written, the traditional and the experimental, the local and the global. Therefore, the synthesis of personal, social and political history along with the religious and cultural mythology on one hand, and literary allusion and postmodern narrative experiment alongside ancient oral tradition and contemporary fictional form on the other hand – present Rushdie's fiction as a fascinating site for critical engagement.

This paper establishes that Rushdie's fiction engages with constructs of history, myth, and storytelling traditions across many traditions. For Rushdie, myth and history are not opposite categories, they are rather mutually constitutive elements – each rewriting and recontextualising the other. Catherine Cundy notes that Rushdie's fiction draws on what he calls "cultural accumulation" of myth -an archive of myth, stories and archetypes - that he constantly borrows, subverts and reshapes in his narrative (Cundy 3). This paper seeks to examine Rushdie's strategies of appropriation, subversion, and remythologisation that characterise his narrative practice. The paper is broadly divided into two parts. The first section explores the intertextual borrowings and mythological reworkings that run through several of Rushdie's fictional texts from *Grimus* (1975) to *East West* (1994). The second part focuses on *Midnight's Children* (1981) to examine a vast archive of myth and culture in his most celebrated novel.

I Rushdie's first novel, *Grimus* (1975), sets the tone for the intertextual ambition that characterises all his succeeding fiction. The title itself is an anagram of "Simurg," a giant mythical bird from pre-Islamic Persian folklore. The novel's narrative traces the odyssey of the protagonist "Flapping Eagle" in search of truth wandering through an allegorical landscape that draws simultaneously on Eastern and Western literary traditions. He is, as Rushdie writes, "forever homeless, rootless" (*Grimus* 36). Unable to endure his condition as perpetual outcast, he sets off on a journey in search of 'promised land' – which reminds us of the Exodus and the journey of the Israelites under the leadership of Moses in search of their 'promised land'. While the novel borrows its thematic premises and philosophical interrogation of happiness and the human condition from Samuel Johnson's *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia*; its spatial and topological organisation recalls Dante's Divine Comedy. Moreover, the spiritual and structural framework of the novel is borrowed from Farid ud-Din 'Attar's twelfth-century Sufi poem *The Conference of the Birds*, in which thirty birds undertake a transformative journey toward their mythical king. Flapping Eagle is not in search of a mere home. He wants to comprehend the broken, fragmented world around him. The idea — the journey as a quest for knowledge — forms the crux of all of Rushdie's fiction. Rushdie's third novel *Shame* (1983) takes the ideas introduced in Grimus further. Timothy Brennan argues that the Quran acts as a key intertext in the novel. It shapes both its moral world and its narrative structure (Brennan 62). Sara Suleri once described The Satanic Verses as "a deeply Islamic text" (qtd. in Cundy 4). Same thing could be said for *Shame as well.* The holy book appears throughout the novel's fictionalised Pakistan. It not only guides political and religious life, but it also appears as something deeply personal. Families record births, deaths, and marriages inside its pages. The Sufi thread from *Grimus* returns here as well. At one point, the protagonist Omar discovers a carved walnut screen. It depicts Qaf mountain and the thirty birds from Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*. The moment aptly describes Rushdie's style of weaving myth into legend and bringing it close to everyday reality. Convergence between history, religion, and folklore give a distinct political edge to his fiction.

Haroun and the Sea of Stories (1990), composed and published in the shadow of the fatwa that had forced Rushdie into hiding, functions on multiple registers simultaneously. Simply speaking, it is a children's fantasy. However, in the guise of that, it is a political allegory of censorship and the suppression of artistic freedom. It also questions the function of stories. The novel draws expansively on the Arabian Nights tradition. We find characters like Iff the Genie and Butt the mechanical hoopoe. They accompany Haroun to the mythical Land of Gup. His journey takes him through two opposing worlds. While, Gup

signifies speech, Chup implies silence. He travels through both in order to restore his father Rashid's lost gift for storytelling. This journey echoes the classical descent into the underworld. Scholars have noted its resemblance to Aeneas's journey in Virgil's *Aeneid*. Butt the Hoopoe is yet another character that reminds us of Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*. The way the hoopoe leads thirty birds toward their king in the poem, the character of Butt leads Haroun toward his goal. Resemblance between the villain Khattam-Shud and Ayatollah Khomeini further deepens the political allegory. The silenced Chupwala army reminds of citizens of a theocratic state. Influence of Indian oral tradition is also visible. The Water Genie tells Haroun that "no story comes from nowhere; new stories are born from old — it is the new combinations that make them new" (Rushdie, *Haroun* 86). The given statement can be read as a reflexive commentary on Rushdie's own writing style across all his fiction. Out of several such case studies in Rushdie's fiction, last though not the only one, where we find the reappropriation of a myth can be seen in the short story "The Courter" published in a collection of short stories titled *East West*. The hall porter Mecir (or Mixed-Up) takes his Indian friend, the retired ayah Mary, on the London Underground where her sari gets caught in an escalator. "She was forced to spin round and round like a top... It was Mixed-Up who saved her by pushing the emergency stop button before the sari was completely unwound and she was exposed in her petticoat for all the world to see" {Rushdie, *East West* }. The scene is a contemporary replaying of the attempted stripping of Draupadi, wife of the Pandava brothers, by Duhsasana in the epic the *Mahabharata*. By relocating this mythologically resonant act of gendered violence and its miraculous prevention from the epic battlefield to the London Underground, Rushdie performs what Linda Hutcheon would identify as a characteristically postmodern gesture of "ironic inversion" — using the past not to authorise the present but to render the present newly strange and newly visible (Hutcheon 125).

II

Midnight's Children (1981) remains Rushdie's most critically discussed engagement with the questions of myth, history, and narrative form. The novel spans six decades and three generations of Indian pre- and post-colonial history from 1915 to 1978. Interestingly, the narrator Saleem Sinai himself acknowledges with a typical satirical self-awareness, that he has been "mysteriously handcuffed to history" from the moment of his birth (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 9). The phrase captures the crux of the novel - the symbolic identification of the individual biographical story with the shared national narrative, alongside the revelation of the fragility of that identification. The novel does not proceed through a linear teleological progression, rather it unfolds through a uninterrupted flow of stories generating further stories — a structure that consciously models itself on the ancient Indian oral narrative tradition of the *Katha-Sarit-Sagar* and related compendia. Rushdie simultaneously borrows from the modernist novel by using digression alongside self-commentary to break the narrative frame. This convergence is deliberate and foregrounds postcolonial intentions. It not only challenges the implicit cultural hierarchies of the Western literary canon, but also asserts the equality of non-Western narrative traditions. In the process of retelling the history of India from 1915 to 1978, Rushdie apart from using magic realism, surrealism and other genres, also makes use of / appropriates / subverts the constructs of myths available to him and his narrator Saleem Sinai from the diverse traditions in the polyglot ethos of Indian culture. Rushdie depicts an overvelmingly syncretic mythological world in the novel. It draws from several traditions at the same time. For example, Saleem Sinai's birth is preceded by a prophecy announcing his birth. This prophecy echoes three separate traditions simultaneously: the Annunciation of Jesus, the foretelling of Zoroaster, and the heralding of the Buddha. However, this time it is Saleem Sinai's mother Amina Sinai who announces / foretells the arrival of her child to prevent the killing of a Hindu peddler of a peepshow, Lifafa Das at the hands of an angry Muslim crowd. This comic anticlimax — the foretelling grandeur of the announcement punctured by the mundane urgency of the moment— exemplifies the mock-epic mode that Rushdie deploys throughout the novel to hold mythological gravity and everyday absurdity in irresolvable tension. The technique is further illustrated when Saleem's future is prophesied a second time by the fortune teller Ram Ram Seth, and then by the holy man Purushottam who installs himself beneath the garden tap at Buckingham Villa in anticipation of "the coming of the One. The Mubarak — He who is Blessed" (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 113). Saleem's second birth — his emergence from the magician's wicker basket in which Parvati-the-Witch smuggles him from Bangladesh into Delhi — is yet another moment of mythological convergence in the novel. The wicker basket simultaneously evokes Moses discovered in the bulrushes of the Nile by Pharaoh's daughter, and the infant Krishna secretly transported from Kansa's prison at Mathura by his parents Vasudeva and Devaki. A single narrative moment concurrently invoking mythological echoes from Judaism and Hinduism is characteristic of Rushdie's palimpsestic technique.

Rushdie deploys an equally complex mythological doubling through the opposition between Saleem and Shiva — the two midnight's children born nearest to the hour of independence. Their conflict echoes a deep Hindu cosmological opposition: Vishnu is considered a preserver, whereas Shiva is called a destroyer. Saleem symbolises the characteristics of the preserver. He believes in dreams, humanity, and art. Shiva on the other hand embodies destruction. He values violence and material power. However, this opposition between the two is never made absolute as no one among them resembles his mythological counterpart completely. Although born at the same hour, both experience different circumstances and hence different trajectories in their lives. Therefore, only a mythological framework cannot determine their destinies. This is not a simple allegory rather a postmodernist remythologisation in its true sense. Another character, Padma too has mythological parallels. She is Saleem's interlocutor and audience throughout the novel. 'Padma' implies 'lotus' and constitutes one of the epithets of Lakshmi, consort of Vishnu. She is both an audience and sceptical interrupter of Saleem's narrative. She disrupts his digressions and pushes him to get to the point. This dynamic recreates the oral storytelling tradition and its characteristic interplay between the narrator and listener. Her identity as a version of Lakshmi deepens the novel's sustained Vishnu-Shiva mythological subtext as well. Moreover, the narrator Saleem's self-identification with the prophetic tradition — linking his own narrative vocation to those of Muhammad, Moses, Joan of Arc, and lesser-known Arabian prophets such as Maslama (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 163, 211, 305) — extends this mythological construct into the realm of religious and prophetic authority. While on one hand, Rushdie successfully establishes the very act of storytelling within a tradition of divinely inspired utterance, he deploys irony and satire to simultaneously undercut the same tradition in the novel. The novel borrows from several other religious and

mythical traditions as well. Drawing on Parsi funerary tradition, a human hand, for instance, chewed by vultures from a Parsi Tower of Silence, falls absurdly from the Delhi sky onto Ahmed Sinai's face (*Midnight's Children* 91). Mary Pereira, Saleem's Goan ayah, and his education at a Christian mission school – introduce the readers to the Christian tradition. The Islamic register appears in the description of the Midnite-Confidential Club as "a descent into Jahannum" (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 453). The novel's closing image brings these threads together. The holy hill at Srinagar holds both a Hindu temple and the Islamic Takht-e-Sulaiman, or Seat of Solomon (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 10, 31, 278). This spatial image captures the novel's syncretic vision.

The episode of Saleem's amnesiac wandering through Bangladesh as "the buddha" — and his recovery of memory through a serpent's bite to the heel beneath a tree in the Sundarbans (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 345–64) — constitutes perhaps the novel's most elaborate mythological moment. The intertextual resonances are both multiple and simultaneous. The serpent bite in the heel on one hand invokes Achilles' fatal wound in Homer's Iliad and the death of Krishna from a poisoned arrow in his heel at the close of the Mahabharata on the other hand. Further, the posture of sitting cross-legged beneath a tree under which enlightenment arrives evokes the Buddha's awakening under the Bodhi tree; and the name "buddha" itself, applied to an amnesiac wanderer who cannot remember his own identity, constitutes a penetrating ironic commentary on the tradition of enlightened self-knowledge. Yet, as Rushdie characteristically ensures, the mythological pattern is not simply reproduced but critically inverted. While, the source myths - the wound in the heel signifies death or vulnerability, in Rushdie's text it becomes paradoxically the instrument of recovery and renewed narrative agency. Also, the historical event of the 1971 war is personalised through Saleem's participation in it, and remythologised by the introduction of an emblematic mythological motif into Saleem's trajectory during this war. Further, Uncle Hanif's persistence at playing the game of cards and yet not being able to win even a single hand at it, brings to our mind, the eldest Pandava brother, Yudhishthir who had wagered all his wealth, brothers and even Draupadi playing the game of dice against Shakuni and Duryodhana. The text is replete with allusions from diverse cultural, religious and literary traditions. For example, the narrator Saleem Sinai is a modern Scheherazade narrating his tale to Padma. At the same time, this entire act of narrating the tale is in resonance with Valmiki narrating the tale to Ganesh in the Indian epic *Ramayana*.

Conclusion

What makes Rushdie's fiction unique is its refusal to be confined by any single tradition or any particular form of narration. It does not confirm to any authoritative version of events. Rushdie emerges as an author for whom the act of storytelling is neither objective nor apolitical. History and truth have several versions – each claiming for its prevalence over the others. Similarly, myths can be inherited as well as reinvented. Rushdie makes a conscious choice to use the strategies of appropriation, subversion, and remythologisation, to negotiate with the elements of fragmentation, displacement, and the haunting burden of postcolonial ways of knowing the postcolonial modernity. He deliberately positions himself within multiple literary lineages and makes intertextual borrowings from diverse sources, but refuses to pledge allegiance to any single one. Rushdie draws freely from different religions, oral traditions, and contemporary literary trends, to create a narrative voice which is neither Eastern nor Western, rather hybrid. Myth and history come across in a mutual relationship with each other- each rewriting the other. Palimpsest is used as a key strategy to define the postcolonial identity. Rushdie's characters, like his narratives, carry within them the traces of everything that has come before, yet they remain open to new inscriptions, new possibilities, new stories waiting to be told.

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