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The Conundrum of Reference in Postmodern Fiction: Confronting the *Subject* in/of History in Salman Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence*

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Abstract: Salman Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008) interplays the historical accounts with fictional narratives in order to question the whole discourse of history in recent times. The idea of postmodern historiography attempts to undermine the authority of text that was once the fundamental medium of 'reference' about the past events. The paper deals with the assumptions and possibilities of the subject in/of history in fiction, and fiction in history. It examines the notion of 'sacred' history, world history, and contemporary Indian history with reference to Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence*, and argues that the novel is not a passive reflection of history but makes and remakes historical events in the course of its narration. It further explores how the novel uses experimental techniques in rewriting the historical events, and how self-reflexive mode challenges the historical discourse in fictional narratives.

Keywords: Postmodern historiography, Reference, Subject, Narrative, Salman Rushdie

The idea of "reference in history" has received severe criticism from the postmodern philosophers and historians. These scholars reflect on the contradictions in historical documents and challenge their veracity, yet they offer no viable alternative. It is on these lines that the present paper problematises the Rankenian idea of historical reference ("*wie es eigentlich gewesen*") "writing history as it actually happened" through a reading of Salman Rushdie's novel, *The Enchantress of Florence*. Roland Barthes espouses "as we can see, simply from looking at its structure and without having to invoke the substance of its content,

historical discourse is in its essence a form of ideological elaboration . . . through which the utterer of the discourse (a purely linguistic entity) ‘fills out’ the place of the subject of the utterance (a psychological or ideological entity)” (Barthes, “The Discourse of History” 16-17). Therefore, history is the story of past events presented through language in a particular structure, which have no meaning in them. These events can be presented in multiple ways that will lead to different versions of the same referent. The subjectivity of the historian plays a major role in the construction of history. This inevitable position of the historian as the creator of history debunks the whole idea of history as a truthful and objective account of past events since the historian is always ideologically motivated to choose between significant and insignificant events. As Hayden White says, “[s]ince no given set or sequence of real events is intrinsically tragic, comic, farcical, and so on but can be constructed as such only by the imposition of the structure of a given story type on the events, it is the choice of the story type and its imposition on the events that endow them with meaning” (White, *Content of the Form* 44). Thus, history describes the story of the past by systematizing itself in a ‘reasonable’ manner by including or excluding certain details.

The novel *The Enchantress of Florence*, set in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, tells many stories about the period, all woven together by a common narrative thread. The frame narrative of the novel takes up the story of the Mughal Emperor, Akbar, who with his Nine Stars “conjure(s) a new world, a world beyond religion, region, rank and tribe” (Rushdie, *The Enchantress of Florence* 43). He finds himself fascinated by the philosophical inquiries in matters of love, life, and death, and is disturbed to see his sons addicted to opium and become lecherous perverts. Secondly, the novel tells the story of three friends, Niccolo, Ago, and Argalia, from Florence in the age of Lorenzo de Medici, who also happen to be storytellers. Orphaned at the age of nine, and known as “little storyteller,” Argalia impresses Andrea Daria, a liberator-commander, and joins his band of Gold to fight against the Ottoman navy. Niccolo “il Machia” works hard to earn his fortune, and highlights the ugly side of power and authority over the subjects in his narration. Ago Vespucci maintains that “it wasn’t necessary to go questing across the world and die among guttural strangers to find your heart’s desire” (145). So, he remains in his hometown since for him “the city was his religion, a world as perfect as any heaven” (145). Lastly, it tells the story of the enchantress, Qara Koz, who embarks on a journey to

discover her family roots. Princess Qara Koz, the Lady Black Eyes, a product of Rushdie's imagination happens to be "the most beautiful woman in the world, and an enchantress beyond compare" (111). The three stories find a common thread in the narration of the traveller who claims to be Akbar's relative. Engelbert Jorrisen comments on the different stories,

The novel comprises at least four stories, which quite independent, are nonetheless intertwined meticulously, what at first may seem not so easily be undone, or to be accepted by the reader, because the stories develop in most different historical times – and places. For India, this is the time of the Mughal emperor's grandfather Babur and Akbar's own time. For Europe, mainly Italy, and for the "New World", this is the time of Machiavelli, and the parallel time to that of Akbar's reign. ("Travelling through times and spaces" 51)

Though the novel follows the traditional storytelling techniques ("Once upon a time . . ."/ "There was once . . ."). This kind of metafictional drive in the narrative evinces the impossibility of rewriting the past as it was. The novel draws parallels between the characters' lives. In addition, the novel draws out many similarities between Renaissance Florence and the Mughal capital Fatehpur Sikri. Given the different life periods of Niccolo Machiavelli (1469- 1527) and Emperor Akbar (1542- 1605), the two cannot have contact with each other. It is through the mesmerizing storyteller that their life and ideas are positioned in one context. From its very beginning, the novel blends real characters with fictional characters and settings. It also de-chronologizes history. The novel opens with the arrival of a mysterious yellow-haired traveller to Akbar's court in a ship under the command of a Spanish Captain, George Louis Hauksbank. The Florentine traveller, who calls himself "Uccello di Firenze, enchanter and scholar" (14), enters the ship as a stowaway and dupes Hauksbank. The traveller, disguised as "Uccello di Firenze," an Italian ambassador to Akbar's court, puts many doubts in the Emperor's mind when he compares himself to the ambassador of Spanish King Philip who "brought a full retinue, and elephants laden with gifts, and twenty-one gift horses of finest Arab stock, and jewels" (68). But the traveller did not bring anything of this kind with him. Secondly, he spends his first night in Fatehpur Sikri in a "whorehouse" (67), which is not expected of a royal ambassador. Akbar awards him jail and death punishment for his fake claim as the Queen's

ambassador, which he manages to turn into his favour and succeeds in saving his life.

In one of his interviews, Rushdie remarks that it is a deep human desire to have your story told¹ and it is for this reason that the storyteller risks his life and comes to Akbar's court to tell his story. The traveller also feels the compulsion to have his story told or hear stories himself. He murmurs in the dungeon:

All men needed to hear their stories told. He was a man, but if he died without telling his story he would be something less than that, an albino cockroach, a louse. The dungeon did not understand the idea of a story. The dungeon was static, eternal, black, and a story needed motion and time and light. He felt his story slipping away from him, becoming inconsequential, ceasing to be. He had no story. There was no story. He was not a man. There was no man here. (Rushdie, *Enchantress of Florence* 91)

However, the storyteller should tell his story in a mesmerizing manner and should be aware of the fact that “[a]nybody can tell stories . . . Liars, cheats, and crooks, for example. But for stories with that Extra Ingredient, ah, for those, even the best storytellers need the Story Waters. Storytelling needs fuel, just like a car” (Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* 58). The traveller-storyteller plays a new trick thinking that “A man who always tells his story in the same words is exposed as a liar” (Rushdie, *Enchantress of Florence* 100). He tells Akbar that his name is Mogor dell Amore, and claims: “That I, my lord, am none other than . . . your relative by blood. In point of fact your uncle” (100). There is nothing like a DNA test with which he could prove his relation to the Emperor except his treasure of “stories of wonder, and by one in particular, a story which could make his fortune or else cost him his life” (156). To prove his kinship to the emperor, the traveller tells the story of the last princess, Akbar's missing great aunt, who made her way to Italy and made claims to have descended from her. When Akbar's mother, Hamida Bano, and aunt Gulbadan Begum confirm his claim about the missing princess, the traveller's story gets some credibility and lures the Emperor into listening to the three different stories the characters of which meet one another, and which stories are finally made into one about the traveller himself. He unfolds the story about his ancestry and about the hidden Mughal princess named Qara Koz to fill in the gaps in the Mughal history. Birbal refutes the storyteller's account saying that it

“was princess Khanzada, if I make no mistake? And of course, Princess Khanzada’s story is known” (108). Akbar’s mother Hamida Bano and aunt Gulbadan Begum confirm that “[t]here was a second princess” (109, emphasis as in the original). Thus, even pedigree becomes a matter of narration, and gives another version of the story maintaining that along with Khanzada Begum, Qara Koz and her mirror were taken by Shaibani Khan. After defeating Shaibani Khan, Persian King Shah Ishmael got them and as a token of friendship returned Khanzada to Babar whereas Qara Koz refused to go back. In a fit of anger, Babar the Beaver “cast his younger sibling out of history” for preferring “life among foreigners to an honoured place in her own home” (110). It is through Qara Koz’s adventurous journey through the Middle East and Florence, as she was possessed by one conqueror after another, that the traveller forms his link to the Mughal Emperor. He also mentions to the emperor that this is the story told him by his dying mother. But what actually happened and who the foreigner was, is revealed by Qara Koz herself to Akbar in his dream with another version of that. She tells him that she was barren and it was “the mirror” that gave birth to a girl child named Angelica by Ago, and she was told by her parents that she is a princess. She further tells him that the foreign traveller is Angelica’s son by her father since they got trapped in a world where they formed an incestuous relation:

The blurring of generations, the loss of the words *father* and *daughter*, the substitution of other, incestuous words. And the thing you dreamed her father did, yes, that was so. Her father who became her husband. . . . So the truth of it is this. Niccolo Vespucci who was raised to believe that he was born of a princess was the child of a Mirror’s child. Both he and his mother were innocent of all deception. They were the deceived. (Rushdie, *Enchantress of Florence* 348)

Thus, in Akbar’s dream, Qara Koz resolves all the contradictions about the foreigner and his ancestry, and unites the different strings of the story into one. By reshaping the flawed and fractured vision of the narrator about his ancestry through imaginative art, Rushdie destabilizes the modern idea of history as the true account of the past. Further, Rushdie creates an imaginative comparison between 16th century Florentine Renaissance and Mughal emperor Akbar’s regime in order to problematize monolithic history. White also argues that history is an imaginative work like a story:

The events are *made* as story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motif repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like – in short, all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or a play. (White, “The Historical Text as Literary artefact” 84; emphasis as in the original)

In this way, both literary and historical texts are works of fiction – “a complex of symbols, an extended metaphor, figurative. In this sense history is literature” (Curthoys, *Is History Fiction?* 193). In *The Enchantress of Florence*, Rushdie gives an account of European history and Mughal history, and emphasizes that history is an imaginative work by telling and retelling the narratives related to the traveller Nicollo Vespucci’s past by pulling inside out, flipping over, and finally approving the account which Akbar dreams about him as related to his past. Thus, Florentine Renaissance is viewed and looked at from a cross-cultural perspective represented by the Mughal Emperor Akbar’s court. Similarly, about the interlinking of all the tales with Akbar’s story, Nicole Weickgenannt Thiara maintains that

Akbar’s narrative is the frame story as well as a story that is both informed and influenced by the telling of Niccolò Vespucci’s tales. Akbar’s own story is not contained by Vespucci’s but determines it up to that point, makes it possible and invalidates its ending. Thus, Akbar’s story is the unifying structure of the hybrid tale and Fatehpur Sikiri becomes the site from where the Persian, Ottoman and Florentine tales are judged. (Thiara, “Enabling Spaces and the Architecture of Hybridity in Salman Rushdie’s *The Enchantress of Florence*” 421)

In *The Enchantress of Florence*, Rushdie writes history through many stories to suggest how a particular history is constructed through the narrative and ideology. The traveller in the novel is aware that he is telling his story to the great Mughal Emperor Akbar and if his story is taken he is royal blood otherwise he will be in great fix. The Emperor warns him that he should understand the relationship between the listener and the teller, and states that “[t]he Hindustani storyteller always knows when he loses his audience . . . Because the audience simply gets up and leaves, or else it throws vegetables, or if the audience is the king, it

occasionally throws the storyteller head-first off the city ramparts. And in this case, my dear Mogor-Uncle, the audience is indeed the king” (Rushdie, *The Enchantress of Florence* 113). The reader is reminded that in order to fill in the blanks in history the narrator foregrounds and emphasizes imagination as a connecting device. Even some of the historical figures are portrayed as products of imagination. For instance, Akbar’s favourite wife is the result of imagination, “an imaginary wife dreamed up by Akbar . . . the emperor was of the opinion that it was the real queens who were the phantoms and the non-existent beloved who was real . . . no man dared gainsay him” (27). This incident suggests that through the power of imagination and perception things become real. We perceive things in the process of inventing them. Besides, it emphasizes the Foucauldian notion of history that “[k]nowledge is not innocent but profoundly connected with the operations of power” (Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* 43). Through *The Enchantress of Florence*, Rushdie reveals that the perception of historical reality is largely a mythic construction. The incident of the painter Dashwant painting the enchantress, Qara Koz demonstrates that the real world and the dream world are the same, and one cannot separate them since “the borderline between the worlds could be crossed . . . A dreamer could become his dream” (Rushdie, *Enchantress of Florence* 128). While painting Qara Koz into life, the Painter Dashwant turns himself “into an imaginary being,” “in the margins of history” (128). This episode makes the novel a story about a story, and this metafictional turn creates suspicion about history and postulates the idea that the writing of history is like writing a story, which is a work of imagination, perspective, and invention.

END NOTES

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o6SDEjQTI0>

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