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Myth and Orality in Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*

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Abstract: The vision of traditional folklore has been highlighted by many of great storytellers. In this paper, I'll try to explain, Salman Rushdie's concept of myth and orality in his popular later novel, *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995). Apart from that, the paper also discusses the postcolonial project of repulsion for Euro-American's hegemony and supremacy towards the 'other'. The novel is concerned with the Indian myth and orality, and it links the western tradition and folklore. In order to deal with the ideas of Rushdie, we need to consult the study of myth and orality to explore fairytale initiated by the British practitioners of western folklore.

Keywords: Myth, Orality, Folklore, Hegemony, Postcolonialism.

Salman Rushdie is popularized as a *modus operandi* in Indian English Literature. Many of his employed genres, styles and techniques mark him a unique figure among Indian English writers. He has broken down the old traditional way of storytelling technique and employed a new way of writing in his novels that is well-known as 'magic realism' in his *Midnight's Children* (1981). His writings make him different from those of other Indian and non-Indian contemporary writers. The imaginative reworking of Indian history in a hybrid environment and the merging of old traditional mythology and folklore are the major themes of his work. The use of fantasy, symbols and metaphor along with the colloquial English of India is reflected in his pieces of works.

The paper argues how Rushdie's attempt to create his own postcolonial myths and oralities. Then it discusses the role of Moraes, one of the best storyteller of Rushdie's ideas and his narrative technique in the context of storytelling strategy. Justyna Deszcz rightly points out:

Moraes's Iberian-Indian tale about the Moorish sultan Boabdil, one of the numerous intriguing fairy-tale intertextualities in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, in turn, is shaped by the fairy-tale Utopian creativity of his family, especially of his mother Aurora. I will concentrate on the most important of such creative ventures, that is, Aurora's Moorish project, as well as Moraes's participation in and continuation of his mother's endeavour, as particularly illustrative of fairy-tale utopia in the novel. (Deszcz 2004: 29)

Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* is considered as a latter novel, based on folkloristic accounts which tell the complicated story of four generations of a Christian-Jewish family, and the family is involved in the spice trade in India. The novel signifies the issues of Indian myths and mythology from India and its sub-continent. The chief narrator of the novel is the Moor who is the son of the spice merchant, Abraham Zogoiby, a Spanish Jew who is presumably the illegitimate descendant of the Arab sultan Abu Abdullah of Andalusia (known as Boabdil), and the Catholic matriarch-cum-artist Aurora da Gama, a descendant of the renowned Portuguese explorer, Vasco da Gama. Like Scheherazade, the Moor protracts his own life by spinning the yarn of the Zogoiby-da Gama saga from within an Alhambra-like citadel in Benengeli, Spain. Here he is held captive by Vasco Miranda, who is a decidedly second-rate artist and Aurora's spurned lover. It is for Vasco Miranda that Moor writes the story of his family's life, from his premature birth and high-speed ageing, through his family's business feuds, to his fatal visit to Benengeli to recuperate his mother's painting, also called *The Moor's Last Sigh*, which Vasco has stolen by way of revenge.

The novel starts with the story of a spice trader, Moraes Zogoiby who is popularly called 'Moor' who takes care for his ancestral spice trade business with full of enthusiasm at Cochin. Albeit under pressure of lots of troubles, he feels capable of how to carry out the risky task of spice trade well, such as:

...the menace of emerald smugglers, the mechanisation of business rivals, the growing nervousness of the British colony in Fort Cochin, the cash demands of the staff and of the plantation workers in the spice Mountain, the tales of communists trouble making and congress wallah politics.(Rushdie 1995:9)

It is "a last sigh," in Moor's words," for a lost world, a tear for its passing" The Moor's narrative shows not only what the myth has become but what it has promised at the birth: reflecting such as A. K. Mehrotra argues that "a historical generosity of spirit," an Indian folkloristic account was supposed to be "above religion ... above class ... above hatred ... above vengeance ... above tribe ... above language ... above ignorance ... above stupidity".(Mehrotra 2003: 316)

The Moor's Last Sigh concerns with the way in which "a definition of myth has to struggle to incorporate the individual". It does so by inventing historical and ethnic categories in their attempts to create cultural and traditional cohesion. The history of myth and orality made the novel the paradigmatic site for "imagining" the foundation's folklore. A marked preoccupation with history and orality and an urge to re-visit and critically re-examine the past has been at the crucial concern of the novel. The identity of the narrator Moor is allocated and imposed from outside, where memories are systematically suppressed in the pre-colonial past, and the urge to revisit the past becomes indispensable for the processes of reconciliation and identity reconstruction. By the time, Moor tells folklore to the narrator-in-exile, he is "alone now, motherless . . . appear[ing] to lose his metaphorical role as a unifier of opposites, a standard bearer of pluralism, ceasing to stand as a symbol – however approximate – of the new nation". (Rushdie 1995: 66) Thus, Moor is polarized between his own narration of folklore and History, wherein his long-awaited vision of family (i.e., myth and tradition) unity stands in bleak contrast to the rupture body politic of the Zogoiby family. The greater the layers of deceit underlying his family's history, therefore, the lesser the Moor's inclination to piece together the fractured narrative of his past. Moor is caught within the paradox of exile: he is living with the illusions of the past is to live with "folly" of imagination and to step out from the past is possible only through imagination, which is a creative act that can liberate him from the shackles of his story and History. The root of Moor's family is typically mixed Indian heritage. On one side, the depiction of Indian myth and tradition as an escalating/ethnocentric movement, with a "Hindu preference for the eternal stability of caste" and "natural residents" (299) is emphasized by the Moor's parallel universe of the darkest side of Spain's modern history, where "folk had been plunged into deep morning" (387) over Franco's death. The formation of ethnic and cultural enlightenment is entangled in the "large and liminal image of the myth, tradition and folklore" which escalates in

Habermas's words "Enlightenment contradicts myth and therefore escape its violence". (Heehs 1994:13)

Rushdie applies the concept of the myth of "Mother India". He talks of the women of the past and the present, explains the dissimilarity between his mother Negin Rushdie and his wife Clarisse Lard. The contrast between the ancient Bombay and the modern Bombay; and the former one was full of love and affection, while the latter one has turned into a crime city. Just as the mothers of India, Bombay admits all types of crime within it. In Indian society, the image of a mother is accepted to be a divine being. The typical traditional "Indian mother" is loving, caring and bears everything for the sake of their family. Moraes himself tells of this concept of motherhood:

Motherless – excuse me if I underline the point - is a big idea in India, may be our biggest: the land as mother, the mother as land, the firm ground beneath our feet. Ladies – O, gents - O: I'm taking a major mother country. The year I was born, Mehboob Productions' all-conquering movie mother it's India –three years in the making, three hundred shooting days, in the top three all-time mega an uncrushability of village India made by the most cynical urbanites in the word. (Rushdie 1995: 137)

Moraes also comments on the Nargis of Mehboob Khan's movie "Mother India," where he supplants the traditional image of the kind, compassionate, rural, heroic mother. Rukmini Bhaya Nair in "What did Rushdie mean and Why?" states his opinion that "Own sort of Mother India ...metropolitan, sophisticated, noisy, angry and different", Rushdie provides Aurora as the typical mother India. She takes place on the semi-realistic terrace of the Malabar Hill Palace, Elephant, in which a legendary sacred mother-son relationship is demolished by the funny narrator: "In Mother India, a piece of Hindu myth making directed by a Muslim socialist, Mehboob Khan, the Indian Peasant women is idealized as bride, mother, and producer of sons, as long-suffering, stoical, loving, redemptive and conservatively wedded to the maintenance of the social status quo" (138-39). The image of the Indian women "Bharat Nari" has been fostered for ages by writers, artists and popular media. The Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have shown ideal figures of women. The media have nourished this image over the decades. Rushdie's concept of traditional motherhood has undergone a number of

changes due to globalization, which has changed Indian society rapidly over the years. According to Rushdie Indian women are no longer confined to the four walls playing the part of traditional women bearing mother. P. Balaswamy points out in "A Postmodern, Proactive, Metropolitan Mother India: Aurora Zogoiby of Rushdie's *The Moor Last Sigh*": ...has witnessed far-reaching changes being effected not only in its social and economic spheres but, in the psychological, cultural, ethical make up of the individuals. The changes are more daringly and glaringly adopted among the Indian women in their outlook, behaviour and attitude. The 'Bharat Nari' image, in particular, has received many severe beatings, the ramifications of which are yet to be felt on a large scale. (89). Moraes describes Aurora images as "...an image of an aggressive, treacherous, annihilating mother who haunts the fantasy life of Indian males" (139). Rushdie's mother India systematically breaks the traditional image when they provide the characteristics of the urban mother India. Aurora in her girlhood proves herself to be a ruthless, exploitative, calculative and even cruel female. And Aurora's mother Isabella had run a cold war with her mother – in - law Epifania, from the moment her son Camoens choose to marry Isabella with old lady's opinion, a "hussy from somewhere" (23). Isabella's only child Aurora also harbours a deep hatred and ill will towards her grandmother, her reactions to Epifania's last dying moments on the chapel floor on the Christmas eve of 1938 are so cold and intended that they would have shocked any other family member present these. Epifania is struck by a deadly paralysis, as she is praying alone in the chapel in which Aurora, the sixteen-year-old girl looking for a diversion from her monthly pains, accidentally peeps at her. She quickly grasped the situation, the young one sits down on the floor, cross-legged and watches on the death of her grandmother but does not even lift the suffering old lady. It is cold-blooded murder that shows Aurora to be some kind of evil which is equal to the horror of Sufiya Zinobia: Just then, in complete silence, Epifania Menezes da Gama fell sideways and lay still... Aurora - Did she, like a loving child, run forward,- she approached slowly, circling along the walls of the chapel, moving in towards the immobile form in gradual, deliberate steps. Did she cry out..?- She did not – Epifania was already beyond help: that death had been swift and merciful?

When Aurora reached Epifania, she saw that the hand that helps the rosary was still twitching feebly at the beads; that the old woman's eyes were open, and met

hers with recognition; that the old woman's lips moved faintly, though no audible word emerged. (63) After pausing, she took two steps backwards; and sat down, cross-legged, on the floor; and watched. ... This was cold-blooded murder, then. ... If murder can be committed by inaction, then yes. (Rushdie 1995: 64)

Aurora's marriage with Abraham, in contrast, is a public scandal as she was just fifteen, fresh and innocent whereas Abraham is of her father's age thirty-five. She is a rich Christian heiress and he is a poor insignificant Jewish employee of her father's spices company. Accidentally meeting him in a pepper warehouse, Aurora instantly falls in love with the handsome Jew, draws him "by the chin" literally and has an illegal relationship with him then and there on pepper sacks stacked up to the godown roof. She even defies her Uncle Aires and Abraham deserts his mother Flory for the sake of this mad "pepper love". She even demands that he will become a Christian in order to marry her; therefore Aurora is thus "a shameless hussy", as her grandmother would put it. The beautiful bride of traditional Christian who marries a man even without looking at his face becomes the scandal at every one: Beauty is destiny of a sort, beauty speaks to beauty, it recognizes and assents, it believes it can excuse everything, so that even though they knew no more about each other than the words Christian heiress and Jewish employee, they had already made the most important decision of all. ... That she had been first held, that it had been a simple case of innocence being drawn towards experience.

Mad love! It drove Abraham back to confront Flory Zogoiby and the nit made him walk away from his race, looking back only once. That for this favour, He presently become a Christian, *The Merchant of Venice* insisted in his moment of victory over Shylock, showing only a limited understanding of the quality of mercy; and the Duke agreed,...what was forced upon Shylock would have been freely chosen by Abraham, who preferred my mother's love to God's. (Rushdie 1995: 89-90)

Rushdie's treatment of the myth of hybridity as the opposite version of the myth of authenticity is manifest in Aurora's Moor paintings. Superimposing public commentary with personal experience, Aurora's paintings are divided into three phases. The first phase (1957-77), which she painted between Moraes's birth and Indira Gandhi's electoral defeat,

is defined by their colourful, optimistic variations upon the Boabdil story. The second phase (1977–81), established her as India's uncontested artistic voice but marked by a sense of loss and despair. The third and final phase (1981–87), presents "'the dark Moors,' those pictures of exile and terror," in which the Arab King becomes for the first and last time her primary subject matter (Rushdie 218). Aurora's final Moor paintings begin to exhibit a postmodern sense of disintegration and fragmentation:

Aurora had apparently decided that the ideas of impurity, cultural admixture and *mélange* which had been, for most of her creative life, the closest things she had found to a notion of the Good, were, in fact, capable of distortion, and contained a potential for darkness as well as for light.... This "black Moor"....became a haunted figure, fluttered about by phantoms of his past which tormented him though he covered and bid them be gone. Then slowly he grew phantomlike himself.... was robbed of his lozenges and jewels and the last vestiges of his glory; obliged to become a soldier in some petty warlord's army....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. The garbage piled up, and buried him. (Rushdie 1995:303)

To conclude, the fiction of Rushdie deconstructs simplistic construction of myth and orality based on tradition, geographical origin, and cultural location, thus, it challenges the very categories on which the folkloristic identities are forged. Rushdie's narrative de-narrates the concepts of the myth and orality by not making a distinction between fantasy and realism. The nation is neither romanticized nor sentimentalized, but it is nevertheless acknowledged as a palimpsest construct in the imagination. In this way, the narrative of the novel embodies the trends of the fairytale on the way of fantasy, that is, it does not follow a linear, realistic and progressive structure of the narrative. The breaks in narrative open multiplicity and heterogeneity leading innumerable interpretations of the novel. In consequence, what Saleem Sinai calls "the chutnification of history" in *Midnight's Children* has now become Aurora's "junkyard collage" in *The Moor's Last Sigh* (315). It also asserts Stuart Hall's sense of the postcolonial relation with the past as "always-already 'after the break'". The novel evinces Hall's awareness of that

relationship as “always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth” (Hall 1990: 226). Rushdie’s own art is the best example of the cultural hybridity he celebrates. For Rushdie, all culture, and especially Indian, is palimpsestic in nature.

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