

Chapter VIII

The Moor's Last Sigh

The Moor's Last Sigh incarnates Rushdie's hybrid and philosophic vision of his native India, a panorama condensed within the story of the last surviving member, a Moor called Moraes Zogoiby. The entire novel is a triumphant tribute to the composite culture and the glory of the Moors. The very ending of the novel bears witness to the cross cultural weaving and interweaving of several strains of migrant identities and insulated narratives in a hybrid Mooristan.

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...that monument to a lost possibility that nevertheless has gone on standing, long after its conquerors have fallen; like a testament...to the defeated love that is greater than what defeats it, to that most profound of our needs, to our need for flowing together, for putting an end to frontiers, for the dropping of the boundaries of the self (M.L.S., 433).

Moraes Zogoiby narrates the fabulous story of his life within a family who exemplify the glorious plurality of India. His mother is India's greatest artist and is a descendent of the Portuguese, albeit on the wrong side of the sheet from the famous Vasco da Gama. His father is also an illegitimate descendent of Boabdil, the last Moorish Sultan of Grenada, expelled from Spain in 1492 by Ferdinand and Isabella. Like his ancestor, Boabdil (who belongs to one of the ancient community of Cochin Jews) looks back in retrospect at the penultimate end of his life towards his brilliant, ruined family and on India we knew as a young man — a lost paradise of possibilities. In this novel, Rushdie had employed the device of a "double-quick" life for the Moor, who is destined to progress through his life at double-speed. He is aged about thirty-six but he has the physique of a seventy-two-year-old.

Rushdie has woven a fascinating arabesque of cross cultural contexts within the story of Zogoiby and da Gama families like the Spanish reconquista of Grenada and the expulsion of Moors, the founding of the spice between Europe and India, Portuguese colonial expansion in India as well as political and social events of twentieth century India. In a sense the Portuguese have left India, but the legends of the battling da Gamas of Cochin are still alive since they come down to the Moor, "polished" and "fantasticated by many re-tellings". According to the Moor these are "old ghosts, distant shadows" but it is his self-professed vocation to set them free from Cochin harbour to that of Bombay,

throughout Malabar so that these Spanish, Portuguese and Indian narrative can be re-mixed again in a hybrid entourage of stories.

Indeed the entire legend of Moraes Zogoiby incarnates tales of decadence and a downward drift of morals. Moraes confesses that:

While we're getting down to it, to the root of the whole matter of family rifts and premature deaths and thwarted loves and mad passions and weak chests and power and money and the even more morally dubious seductions and mysteries of art, let's not forget who started the whole thing... and began the dumping me in the pit: Francisco da Gama, Epifania's defunct spouse (M.L.S., 14-15).

In Epifania's terms the "art-short" Francisco was the concourse of conflicting impulses and which the source of his full, gentle humanity (16). On the one hand Francisco was incapable of living of settled life like ordinary folks and on the other, he was a patron of the arts.

Rum-and-whisky-drinking-hamp-chewing persons of low birth and revolting dress sense were important for long periods and filed up the trendy horses with jangling music, poetry, marathons, naked models, reefer-stubs, all night card-schools and other manifestations of their in-all-ways incorrect behaviour (M.L.S., 16).

On the other hand Francisco "was handsome as sin but twice as virtuous", since he was "hero material from the day he was born, destined

for questions and quests, as ill-at-ease, with domesticating as Quixote" (17). Again, at college "he was the most brilliant student physicist of his year", besides being "an adept of the age-old da Gama art of turning spice and nuts into Gold" (17). He was also noted "philanthropic, funding orphanages, opening free health clinics, building schools" (17).

In 1916 Francisco da Gama joined the Home Rule campaign of Annie Besant and Bal Gangadhar Tilak confirming his calling as a patriot. As a result he was frequently prisoned during the same year and it was during his spell inside the prison that he enunciated his theory which turned him from an emerging hero into national laughing-stock. His paper, which was published in the leading journals was entitled "Towards a Provisional Theory of Transformational Fields of Conscience" in which he proposed:

The existence, all around us, of invisible dynamic networks of spiritual energy similar to electromagnetic fields, arguing that these 'fields of conscience were nothing less than the repositories of memory — both practical and moral — of the human species, that they are in fact what Joyce's Stephen had recently spoken (in the *Egoist* magazine) of wishing to forge in his soul's smithy; viz., the uncreated conscience of our race' (20).

Rushdie's insistence on the forging of conscience within the repositories of Francisco's memory has a direct and important bearing on

the metaphor of palimpsest in the art-works of Aurora Zogoiby within the novel. The panorama of memory, individual and racial provides an apt setting for one of Rushdie's principal themes and subjects for investigation in the world.

How does the narrator represent, in his own person, India's pluralism and the pluralism of the entire world?

Rushdie unhesitatingly and unceasingly stresses, through his narration the Moor, the beauty and the cultural implications of plurality. Speaking of his family's history, the Moor asks,

Christians, Portuguese and Jews; Chinese tiles promoting godless views, pushy ladies, skirts — not — sorts, Spanish shenanigans, Moorish crowns...can this really be India? (87).

In fact, Rushdie's novel highlights the grandiose figure of the Moor as a hybrid. In Aurora's paintings of the "Moor in exile" series, the cross-cultural sequence of the Moor is easily manifest. She has given expression to the controversial and mysterious "dark Moors, born of a passionate irony" and which has always characterised the intractable character of her paintings.

Almost every piece contained elements of college, and over time these elements became the most dominant features of the series. The unifying narrator/narrated figure of the Moor was usually still present, but was increasingly

characterised as jetsam, and located in an environment of broken and discarded objects, many of which were “found” items, pieces of crates or vanaspati tins that were fixed to the surface of the work and painted over (M.L.S., 301).

What is apparent in Aurora's art-setting has already been noticed in the figure of the hybrid Moor, this that in both cases the cross cultural contexts harmonise with each other, bringing together a very complex-artistic effect. Thus the cultural...in the Moor dovetails with the hybrid culture of twentieth century Indians. Thus

When the Moor did reappear it was in a highly fabulated milieu, a kind of human rag-and-bone-yard that took its inspiration from the jopadpatti shades and lean-to's of the pavement dwellers and the patched-together edifices of the great slums and chawls of Bombay. Here everything was a collage.... But Aurora, for whom reportage had never been enough, had pushed her vision several stages further; in her pieces it was the people themselves who were made of rubbish, who were collages composed of what the metropolis did not value: lost buttons, broken windscreen wipers, torn cloth, burned books, exposed camera film (M.L.S., 302).

What is apparent in this cultural pluralism is the idea of hybridity which finds expression in Aurora's paintings. In the New Critical Sights

on Salman Rushdie, vol. II, John Clement Ball, in his essay on "Acid in the Nation's Bloodstream: Satire, Violence and the Indian Body Politic in Salman Rushdie's The Moor's Last Sigh", has drawn attention to the use of ekphrasis by which Rushdie infuses into or alternately pulls out of her images some of the aesthetic and moral perspectives from which he would have the reader approach his novel.

Full of grotesque figures fusing human and animal parts, with breasts for buttocks or whole bodies made from urban rubbish, Aurora's teeming canvases signify a grand, all-encompassing vision. Her blending of realities is geographic as well as social.... As chief moral touchstone, Aurora's canvases not only seem to be the visual equivalent of Rushdie's encyclopaedic, grotesque, magic-realist novels, but they also help explain a unique feature of this particular novel. Hue blurring of "the dividing line between two world" (M.L.S., 226) is part of a grand merging and palimpsesting of worlds that both she and Rushdie performed to advance their more-or-less mutual idea of contemporary India as the type of Moorish Spain (2003, 41-42).

Actually the fact is that prior to some of the crucial events of the late fifteenth century like the Inquisition, the expulsion of Jews, and the closure of the Moorish regime in Granada, the Iberian peninsula had for

some time harboured a heterodox, pluralist society. It is a fact that at one historical moment, medieval Spain consisted of Western Europe's most multiracial and religiously pluralist populace. Under the reign of tolerant Christian rulers, three monotheistic groups (Christians, Muslims and Jews) had co-existed, inspired by the belief that by under a benign God they could live peacefully in a pluralistic society.

However, from the thirteenth century onwards they became largely separated and hostile, repressing from their belief in a pluralist and synoptic society. Gradually the purist idea of Christian Spain promoted so fiercely by Ferdinand and Isabella identified the interests of the nation-state with those of a single religious group. The idea of purity of blood gathered in the mind of the rulers and such a conception was appreciated by Christians as a weapon against Jewish and Mudjehar (Moor) minorities (Read, 1974, 202-07). J.C. Bell has correctly indicated that such an identification is "anathema to Rushdie in the Indian context. But when he, like Aurora, starts "using Arab Spain to re-imagine India" (M.L.S., 227), the parallel enable a prophetic critique" (Mittapalli and Kuortti, 42).

Coetzee in his article "Palimpsest Ragained" has suggested in The Moor's Last Sigh

The Arab penetration of Iberia, like the later Iberian penetration of India, led to a creative mingling of peoples and cultures; that the victory of Christian intolerance in Spain was a tragic turn in history; and that Hindu

intolerance in India bodes as ill for the world as did the sixteenth century Inquisition in Spain (Coetzee, 1996, 14).

As a return to the metaphor of the palimpsest the year 1992 in India becomes a recalling of the Spanish context of 1492, thereby bringing about an historical process of national "purification" through which Rushdie can mirror and satirise an event still in process in India. Thus, medieval Spain can be likened to the earlier, pluralist nationalisation of Gandhi and Nehru as against the ascendant Christian Spain of the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, which may be a precursor of the future course of events, India might adopt under the power of resurgent Hindu nationalism. The artistic montage which dovetails segments of historical time and phases through the career of Moor as well as Aurora's paintings has several functions as it highlights the positive implications of an all-inclusive society as well as the threatening forces which lead towards a disruption of such hybridity and ideal co-existence. In many ways The Moor's Last Sigh like Midnight's Children is a national celebration of a cross-cultural, historical event which acts both as an analysis of a social past and that of the present political realities in India.

Such a state of affairs is reflected in the degeneration of the Moor. Aurora's paintings force into our visibility by the strength of her artistic will. The figure of the Moor, sinking into immorality, isolated by his mother and degraded in

tableaux of debauchery and crime. 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 semi-allegorical figure of decay (M.L.S., 303).

As such the paintings of Aurora grew “steadily, less colourful” until she was working only in black, white and occasional shades of grey. The Moor was working an abstract figure, a pattern of black and white diamonds covering him from head to foot. Indeed, “he was black and white. He was the living proof of the possibility of the union of opposites” (M.L.S., 259). But Ayxa the Black pulled one way, and Chimene the while, the other. They began to break him in half. As the Moor made love to Chimene in cheap hotels, Ayxa, the mother was “always somewhere in these pictures, behind a curtain, stooped at a keyhole, flying up to the window of the lover’s eyeries” (M.L.S., 259). Even though the Moor was attracted to his white love, his black dam was also very much a part of his personality.

Behind, the introduction of the “Chimene” lay the figure of a beautiful young woman — Uma, “Uma fictionalised, Hispanicised, as this “Chimene”, Uma incorporating aspects of Sophia Loren in El Cid, pinched from the story of Rodrigo De Vivar and introduced without explanation into the hybrid universe of the Moor” (M.L.S., 247).

Ayxa, Boabdil's mother and Chimene or Uma comprised the weaving or interweaving of the Moor's world — Mooristan — it was a place “where worlds collide, flow in and out from another, and washofy away. Place where an air an air-man can downs in water, or else grow gills; where a water-creature can get drunk, but also chokeofy, on air. One universe, one dimension, one country, one dream, bumping into another, or being under, or on top of it, call it Palimostine” (226), and yet in Aurora's last paintings the Moor seemed to lose his earlier metaphysical role as a unifier of opposite. In fact, he could not symbolise his previous configuration of opposites and pluralism in view of recent developments in the Indian state:

Aurora has 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 God, were in fact capable of distortion, and contained a potential for darkness as well as for light. This “black Moor” was a new imaging of the idea of the hybrid — a *Bandelairean* flower, it could not be too far-fetched to suggest, of evil... (M.L.S., 303).

Viewed from this angle, the notion of hybridity as portrayed in this novel; in the image of the Moor as seen in Aurora's paintings is a organic component of a historical process both in Spain and in India, and which is the victim of a process of putrefaction, a poisoning of the social and body politic.

What started with perfume ended with a very big stink indeed...there is a thing that bursts out of us at time, a thing that lives in us, eating our food, breathing our air, out through our eyes, and when it comes to play nobody is immense, we turn murderously upon one another (M.L.S., 36).

Interestingly enough, Rushdie never debar his protagonist from the condition he critiques. And "even as he laments the violence of divisive forces Moraes adheres to his vision of himself as part of the crowd" (Mittapalli and Kuortti, 44). The image of the degeneration of the body, leading to a frightening image of parasitic contagious actually refers to the "plague-spores of communal fantacism" (208) and to Uma, whose embodiment of pluralism hides a reality of self-seeking devastation. She grafts "pestilential seeds" to produce a "menu" of "misery", "catastrophe, grief" and division for Moraes's family to consume (M.L.S., 320).

The degeneration within the Moor and the decapitation of the seeds of hybridity, sowed by Gandhi and Nehru in India has been consumed together in a fictionalizing of a historico-political reality in 1992. Following the destruction of the Ayodha mosque in 1992 with the inflammation of fundamental ideologies, Moraes has described the national conditional in an apt, multilayered image.

The barbarians were not only at our gates but within our skins. We were our own wooden horses, each one of us full

of our doom...the explosions burst out of our very own bodies. We were both the bombers and the bombs. The explosions were our own evil — no need to look for foreign explanations, though there was and is evil beyond our frontiers as well as within, we have chopped away our own legs, we engineered our own fall.... Excuse, please, the outburst. Got carried away. Old Moor will sigh no more (M.L.S., 372-73).

This account not only bears upon the transhistorical fusions of military and body imagery, but also for its insistence on the collective “we” in acknowledging such obligation and responsibility. This notion of collective responsibility where the narrator Moraes envisions himself as part of society which is in turn split by divisive forces, is a unique standpoint where the idea of hybridity suffers expansion horizontally as well as vertically. J.C. Ball has noted that “Rushdie does not exclude his protagonist from the condition he critiques” (Ball, 44). When the notion of hybridity is explained and illustrated through the ideals of purity and impurity; as unity and disunity; and as synthesis and putrefaction, there is a linear proliferation of the idea as well as a vertical deepening where the protagonist narrator records such expansion within himself.

Harvey in Islamic Spain (1990) has shown that (like his predecessor) Boabdil the unlucky had cemented a secret alliance with the Christians and this held helpful him to end Moorish sovereignty in

Granada (301). Similarly, in the novel Moraes's duplicity is exposed as he spends time as an agent of the intolerant enemy. The fact is, Moraes represents the notions of multiplicity in terms of this hybrid ancestry, his briefs, and his "metaphorical role" in Aurora's paintings as "a unifier of opposites, a standard-bearer of pluralism... a symbol...of the new nations" but when he acts as a thug for a Roman Fielding, or Mainduck, he is chosen as the novel's primary exemplar of the new fundamentalism (303). J.C. Ball has explained that Moraes's change is the effect of his realisation of Uma's duplicity, his ostracism from family, his imprisonment in Bombay Central prison ("the stomach, the intestine of the city", M.L.S. 287), and his rescue by Mainduck. But he is never worried about his betrayal (Ball, 44).

Indeed, Moraes exults in his new capacity of playing a dual role:

Unhesitating, I embraced my fate, without pausing to ask what connection there might be between Fielding's anti-Abrahamic tirade and his alleged intimacy with Mrs. Zogoiby; without let or hindrance; willingly, even joyfully, I leapt, where you have sent me, mother — into the darkness, out of your sight — there I elect to go. The names you have given me — outcast, outflow, untouchable, disgusting, vile — I clasp my hand to bosom and make my own. The curse you have laid upon me will be my blessing and the hatred you have splashed across my

face I will drink down like a potion of love. Disgraced, I will wear my shame and name it pride — will wear it, great Aurora, like scarlet letter blazed on my breast. Now I am plunging downwards from your hill, but I'm not angel, my tumble is not Lucifer's, but Adam's. I fall into my manhood. I am happy so to fall (M.L.S., 295-96).

Henceforth Moraes illustrates the ideal of inductiveness, which can alternately include and then be overcome by powerful forces of exclusiveness. In a certain sense if he can embody the force of opposites, Moraes can provide a supreme instance of self-critique as well as give access to the primary target of Rushdie's satire so that we can gain insight into the deformities of society. On the one hand his hybridity opens our consciousness towards Rushdie's negative grotesque imagery where we witness the physical putrefaction and material distortion, which nauseates (232); on the other hand, we can observe through Moraes, Mainduck's reactionary public policies, which involve the coercive and decadent Mafia, anti-women and pro-sati policies as well as the intolerance of religious fundamentalists which foregrounds representational violence.

Actually the notion of hybridity was an integral part of the Indian psyche. The events happening in today's Indian scenario is a discrediting and destruction of a tradition of cultural *mélange* and purity, which was more than two thousand years old. Such cross cultural currents bolstered the birth of the Indian nation, and which, Rushdie shows through the

figure of Moraes has been forgotten and done away within India today.

Thus,

The mosque of Ayodhya was destroyed. Alphabet-sophists, fanatics', or alternatively, 'devout liberators of the sacred site's...swarmed over the seventeenth-century Babri Masjid and torn it apart with their bare hands, with their teeth, with the elemental power of what Sir. V. Naipaul has approvingly called their 'awakening of history'.... It was...both joyful and tragic, both authentic and spurious.... Nobody could even be sure...that the present-day town of Ayodhya in U.P. stood at the same site as the mythical Ayodhya.... Not was the notion of the existence there of Rama's birthplace, the Ramjanambhoomi, an ancient tradition — it wasn't a hundred years old. It had actually been a Muslim worshipper at the old Babri Mosque, who had first claimed to see a vision of Lord Ram there, and so started the ball rolling; what could be a finer image of religious tolerance and plurality than that (M.L.S., 363).

Such events led to the plunder of cultural monuments discrediting an entire race and civilization. Muslims were branded as invaders and after two thousand years, they still did not belong to the cultural mainstream and ran the risk of being erased from the memory of a nation.

Thus four paintings were stolen from the Zogoiby Bequest at Bombay, but supreme canvas, The Moor's Last Sigh. The expert comment highlighted the fact that "when such alien artifacts disappear from India's holy soil, let no mass mourn.... If the new nation is to be born, there is much invader — history that may have to be erased" (364). This fomented the notion of putrefaction in Indian blood culture, which was erstwhile pure in the sense of positive, enlightened hybridity, a kind of efflorescence of national spirit through a cultural *mélange*. But this cultural integrity was overcome with a fatality and religious fanaticism which led to the stink of impurity within the idea of hybridity itself. Rushdie comments that

There comes a point in the unfurling of communal violence in which it becomes irrelevant to ask, "who started it"? The lethal conjugations of death part company with any possibility of justification, let alone justice. They surge among us, left and right, Hindu and Muslim, knife and pistol, killing, burning, looting and raising into the smoky air their clenched and bloody fists. Both their houses are damned by their deeds; both sides sacrifice the right to any shred of virtue; they are each there's plaques (M.L.S., 365).

Moraes Zogoiby does not exempt himself from such violence because he himself has been a man of violence for too long and on the

night after Raman Belding insulted his mother on T.V., he brutally put an end to his accursed life. And in doing so he cached upon him a terrible curse (365).

From the viewpoint Moraes's hybrid character indicates and illustrates Rushdie's complex analysis of Morrasthan as well as Hindusthan, taken together. He begins his career in the novel and also in Aurora's "Moor" paintings, as an allegorical embodiment of India as pluralistic, hybrid, gentle giant. He develops fast and although he is deformed, he might not be a monster. However, as he comes in context with Mainduck, he betrays his roots and his ideals. As he becomes frustrated during the course of his relationship with Uma, he allows himself to become an agent of the forces that would deny him as individual and as national principle. This ambivalence becomes a characteristic trait in his new role, organising punishments with cool expertise, relieved that he can give up his old confusing complexity for the 'simplicity' and 'straight forwardness' of Mainduck's brutal program (305). His acceptance of an alien cause suggests that Moraes who was the symbolical representation of a 'semi-allegorical figure of decay' (303), now represents a nation increasingly detached from its origins and willing to violate its founding principle of pluralistic secularism. At the most it might be hazarded that the body politic which responds to the factionalising message in the grab of the collective "we" is actually a burlesque of the earlier, historical collective entity and unity.

Tragedy was not in our natures. A tragedy was taking place all right, a national tragedy on a grand scale, but those of us who played out parts were...clowns. Clowns! Burlesque buffoons, drafted into history's theatre on account of the lack of greater man. Once indeed, there were giants on our stage; but at the fag-end of an age, Modern History must do with what she can get. Jewa Harlal, in these latter days, was just the name of a stuffed dog (M.L.S., 352).

It is this consciousness of society guilt which has been echoed numerous times by Moraes. He confesses that they lack humanity, these Mainduck-style 'Littler Hitlers' and it is in their 'humanity that we must locate our collective guilt' (299). Behind this critique lies the pessimistic notion of Aurora that mixture and *mélange* can breed and spread darkness and distortion, and that 'inclusiveness can breed exclusiveness. Even 'Bombayness' is not powerful enough to overwhelm negating energies" (Mittapalli and Kuortti, 2003, 48). J.C. Ball has noted this special tone of the all-embracing pessimism at the heart of Rushdie's hybridity, which, in spite and despite his valorisation of its alternate intermingling of purity and impurity, fails to illustrate the true rejoicing of the Bakhtimian carnivalesque. Rather, it evinces an anemic spirit of joy, carnival and optimism in the Manippean strain of the grotesque in art.

The result is that Rushdie challenges more strongly than ever the moral and generic dualities he has always invoked

— of enabling Manippean multiplicity as the normative position from which violent exclusivity is satirised. If one can turn into the other — not just at the level of genre or textuality as in Midnight's Children, but on the societal level too — the distinction becomes impossible to maintain. As 'the (apparently) pluralist Uma, with her multiple selves...turned out to be the bad egg' (M.L.S., 272) and as the mongrel Moraes, excluded from love, is co-opted by those who would reverse the principles of secular — democratic tolerance, so India as a whole is increasingly hijacked by forces that would deny it (Mittapalli and Kuortti, 2003, II. 48).

We can, therefore, conclude that where hybridity is in question, and becomes the central issue at stake in postcolonial literature we may be at liberty to emphasise that colonial identities are in a constant state of flux. The dualities of the colonial encounter become evident in Rushdie's analyses of the trans-historical situation — that if Mooristhan and Hindusthan — where the hybrid, colonial subject in split and may be termed as being both, homogeneous and heterogeneous (Loomba, 178).