

Chapter IX

The Ground Beneath Her Feet

The Ground Beneath Her Feet retells the myth of Orphyus and Eurydice in pop-cultural terms that sometimes border on the ludicrous. Ormus descends into the underworld to find Vina, who has been swallowed by an earthquake. Narrated by the photographer Rai (actual name Umeed Merchant), who is actually obsessed with Vina, their epic romance thunders its way through the cosmopolitan Bombay of the 1950s and the vivid London of the 1960s, to fester capriciously in frenzied contemporary Manhattan and then to plummet to oblivion and eternal grief.

Inventive, ambitious and complex, Rushdie's novel addresses the cosmopolitan experience of his audience. Cultures begin fusing page one and continue mutating until the end. This cultural mutation has its origin in the 'paradigmatic hybridity' of the heroine, Vina Apsara, as well as that of the hero, Ormus Cama, who is also well known as Rai Merchant (Umeed Merchant). Vina is a formidable hybrid of bombshell rock star — a la Madonna/Whitney Houston/Country Love — and goddess — a la (according to Rushdie) Helen/Eurydice/Sita/Rati/ Persephone. Likewise Ormus/Rai is a combination of Elvis, John Lenon and Dylan (Limaye, 1-2).

The novel presents a hybrid world, where Mullens Standish, a housewife pirate with two children can be found in association with a bullock driver and a lungi-wearing Indian country farmer. It is a world in which Ormus' father, Sir Darius Cama, an Anglophile barrister, devotes his later life to unearthing the similarities between Homeric and Indian myth. It is a world where Sam's Pleasure Island, a popular joint for music business honchos that resembled the intergalactic far in the original Star Wars replete with space gods form on Martian asteroids. It is a place where Ormus, a Bombay-born-and-fed musician, flies to London wearing black European hipster jeans, but also a Yankees baseball cap and a cutaway beat-generation T-shirt.

A stray sense of migrant identity haunts Vina Apsara. She is a symbol of hybridity and can be seen to incarnate a stable matrix or a homogeneous self. Ormus describes her thus:

To her last day, I could always see in her the skittish, disintegrated creature she'd have been when first came to us.... What a piece of jetsam she was then, what a casualty! Literally selfless, her personality smashed, like a mirror, by the first of her life. Her name, her mother and family, her sense of place and home and safety and belonging and being loved, her belief in the future, all things had been pulled out from under her, like a rug. She

floating in avoid, denatured, or dehistoricized, clawing at the shapelessness, trying to make some sort of mark....

She was a rag-bag of selves, torn fragments of people she might have become.... Sweet or savage, serene or stormy, funny or sad! She had as many moods as the Old Man of the Sea, who would transform himself over and over again if you tried to grab him, for he knew that if you did capture him he would have grant your deepest wish (TGBHF, 132-33).

It is though her understanding of music that she could put together the disparate elements in her personality; her polyphonic selves into a sort of mosaic so that the whole world fell in love with the goddess, the Galatea or Vina Apsara. But wherein lies the power of songs?

Maybe it derives from the sheer strangeness of there being singing in the world. The note, the scale, the chord; melodies, harmonies, arrangements; symphonies, ragas, Chinese operas, jazz, the blues: that such things should exist, that we should have discovered the magical intervals and distances that yield the poor cluster of notes, all within the span of a human hand, from which we can build our cathedrals of sound, is as alchemical a mystery as a

mathematics, or wine, or love.... Our lives are not what we deserve.... Song turns into something else (TGBHF, 19).

It was through the alchemy of music that Vina Apsara redeemed an entire world. She came to be seen as an emblem, an ideal by more than half the population of the world. She was no angel, but she was worshipped. And it was in America, that her talents found their culmination because in this land of migrant identities, where fineries were broken and a hybrid music was located, one could find the centripetal force of cultural syncretism which could cement the passion of Apsara and Lama. Rushdie's novel is almost like a rock 'n' roll love paean of America's self-inventing chaos, complete with the yikitaka-yikitaka and boom-chicka-booms Ormus' drum-beat-laden inner voice. American hybridity is a conglomerate of Polish dances, Italian weddings, Zonba-slithering Greeks and the drunken rhythms of the salsa saints. Our wounded souls are soothed by the cool music and we are enticed to dance by the hot democratic music.

Ormus possesses for Jewish, Italian, Spanish, Roman, French, Latin American, "Red" Indian, and Greek. Race can never be a fixed point but is subject to redefinition as Rai arrives in Manhattan. Ormus and Vina's music crosses all frontiers, rising above the limits of family, clan, nation, and race and flying over the minefields of turf and taboo. Though Ormus has always hoped that humans would rub out the colour line — not just

cross it — it is Vina who finally brings about this larger sense of global kinship. Her death causes mourners on the frontlines of the world's armed conflicts to lay down their weapons and embrace each other.

Rushdie's novel is about hybridity and migrant identity, of rootlessness and exile, and angst. At the same time, it eulogises and celebrates the values of the tramp, the rebel, the assassin, the thief, the mutant, the outcast, the delinquent, the devil, the sinner, the traveler, the gangster and the escapist. Our literature recognises and accepts the course of their existence, by finding and locating in them our least-fulfilled needs. Hence, time and again, the outcast, the rebel and the mutant has been reinvented to give expression to a timeless need. Thus

in every generation there are a few souls...who are simply born out of belonging, who come into the world semi-detached, if you like, without strong affiliation to family or location or nations or race; that there may even be millions, billions of such souls, as many non-belongs as belongs.... And not only by that: for those who value stability, who fear transience, uncertainty, change, have erected a powerful system of stigmas and taboos against rootlessness, that disruptive anti-social force, so that we mostly conform, we pretend to be motivated by loyalties and solidarities we do not really feel, we hide our secret identities beneath the false skin of those identities which

bear the belongers' seal of approval. But the truth leaks out in our dreams; alone in our beds (...) we soar, we fly, we flee. And in the walking dreams over societies permit, in our myths, our arts, our songs, we celebrate the non-belongers, the different ones, the outlaws, the freaks, what we forbid ourselves we pay good money to watch, in a playhouse or movie theatre, or to read about between the secret covers of a book. Our libraries, our palaces of entertainment tell the truth (TGBHF, 78-79).

Through *Ormus and Vina*, Rushdie has tried to explain the uncertainties and fluidity of the migrant's hybrid discourse which transcends any geographical location and sense of time and place. Militating against the traditional impulse to conform and be loyal to the demands of religion, race, the migrant has developed and evolved a new psychology — the psyche of the mutant, who is fearless and candid enough to admit of his secret desires and identities which would have otherwise suffered repression and containment in an insular society. The orthodox and the conservative ethos in society has been ironically portrayed and guilt-ridden by contradictions. Society both adulates and castigates the mutant and the hybrid because it is riddled with ambivalence and double existence, to put it differently, the mutant and the migrant is a part of the very society it is alienated and the hidden impulses, with which we sympathise and are emotionally found but from

which we detach ourselves consciously, fearing our dissolution in the larger global music of universalisation.

Limaye agrees with Tony Morrison that The Ground Beneath Her Feet is a “global novel”. As Limaye observes, on its surface, the term would seem to describe the work of those writers with mixed cultural backgrounds who seem not to fit into any of the usual modern regional traditions. Whole schools of “post-colonial” literature have arisen at the end of the century featuring novelists who draw on mixed cultural sources. This especially apparent among Indian and Asian authors: the Seth/ Ghosh/ Tharoor/ Roy/ Amit Chaudhuri/ Kiran Desai/ Divya-Karuni. Indian expatriates who have earned their fame in the West by writing about an eroticised East. And there’s the P.C.-obsessed “Asian-American”/ diaspora writer tradition, the Amy Tan/Bharati Mukherjee/ Jhumpa Lahiri types, whose reputations have come from writing about American encounters between East and West.

Some readers may encounter a novel about expatriate displacement... and see globalism...but they are about the opposite of globalism: they are about difference. “Globalism”, if the idea is to describe anything, is about cultural weddings, about dynamic syncretism. At their core, such works are not merely geographically diffuse. On the contrary, they draw their strength from highly specific contexts of places and cultures in flux (Limaye, 4-5).

Placed within the context of such critical opinion, The Ground Beneath Her Feet may be considered to be truly representative of such “global novel” since it draws upon a plethora of various cultures and which defies the limiting boundaries of regional traditions. More than any other novelist, Rushdie celebrated this unique medley of several identities within a polyphonic self, as Vina Apsara and Ormus Cama travel from country to country. In this depiction of the mutability of identity in multiple cultural contexts lies Rushdie’s special brand of hybridity. Thus Vina’s person has been rendered ‘selfless’, and ‘her personality smashed, like a mirror, by the fist of her life’ (TGBHF, 132).

Her name, her mother and family, her sense of place, and home and safety and belonging and being loved, her belief in the future, all these things had been pulled out from under her, like a rug. She was floating in a void, denatured, dehistoricized, clawing at the shapelessness, trying to make sort of mark....

She was a rag-bag of selves, torn fragments of people she might have become (TGBHF, 132).

According to Rushdie, the problematics of identity-crisis begins at the nature when man developed his own identity as differentiated from his own tribe in primitive times. The tribe and its existence had ensured a multi-bodied but single collective entity, but when man broke away from the herd, with his own distinctive individuality, this gave rise to a wide

fracturing of selfhood. All this was the result of a complex process of entrapping or self-liberation. As a result the categories of time and space were diluted and violated. This began the movement of deconceptualisation (TGBHF, 378).

Well, we weren't expecting to be followed, we didn't realise we were-starting anything, and it looks like it's scared us so profoundly, this fracturing, this tumbling of walls, this forgodsake freedom, that at top speed we're rushing back into our skins and war paint, postmodern into pre-modern, back to the future (TGBHF, 378-79).

In the postmodern era we inhabit a fractured world of ourselves, as well as that of time and space. But somehow, Rushdie vividly paints such a world where the individual is at home. No more, an individual, we have already seen that man is a conglomerate of polyphonic selves. It is here that Vina's and Ormus Cama's identity merge in movements of flux, and rebirth. They become unique figures in both, processes of fracture and reunion (rebirth).

He clings to her, without touching her. They meet and whisper and short and make each other up. Each is Pygmalion, both are Galatea. They are a single entity in two bodies; male and female, constructed they themselves. You are my only earth. There are heavy burdens, but she bears them willingly, asks for more, burdens him

identically in return. They have both been damaged, are both repairers of damage. Later, entering that world of ruined selves, music's world, they will already have learned that such damage is the normal condition of life, as is the closeness of the crumbling edge, as is the fissured ground. In that inferno, they will feel at home (TGBHF, 162).

This notion of fracture is an essential element of postmodernity and governs today's world. It finds its into the dissolution of identities, selves and beliefs. Such a sense of schism and loss finds its way in Rushdie's hybrid world; where one has to part from one's beloved, kindred world of dreams and strike out into the unknown, into strange cultural realms.

This break away from one culture and entry into another is a poignant and heartbreaking movement. Hereafter Rushdie's peregrinations involves a journey into imaginary possibilities; either clinging to roots or evolving towards rootlessness. On the one hand the epic romance of Ormus and Vina thunders its way through cosmopolitan Bombay of the 1950s and the vivid London of the 1960s, only to fester capriciously in frenzied contemporary Manhattan and then to plummet into the other world and oblivion, into the frightening world of obsession, the realm of rock 'n' roll (TGBHF, 481). On the other hand Anita Dharkar refused to leave her country even after being brutally raped by it because

according to her, there is no escape from her roots, where she actually belongs.

'They have finished with me now'.... 'So, no problem'. She meant that India was still the only place on earth to which she could imagine herself belonging, corrupt and crooked and heartless and violent as it was. She belonged, and optimism and home were still not dead in her in spite of her appalling violation. She could not define herself, could not give herself any meaning, except here, where her roots had gone too deep and spread too wide (TGBHF, 270).

According to Rushdie, however, both adherence of roots and breaking away from them becomes a matter of interpretation. Rai, the philosopher, would pose the question thus: "Something required me to leave. Something else required her to stay" (270). The nature of Rai's schism from his home country is to be understood in the context of a divorce between husband and wife.

At the end of a marriage the moment comes when you have to turn away from your wife, from the unbearably memory of the way you were, and turn towards the rest of your life. That's me at this point in this story. Once again, I'm the dumpee.

And so fare well, my country, don't worry; in won't come knocking at your door.... My home is burned, my parents dead, and those I loved have mostly gone away.... I go — I hurt — alone (TGBHF, 272).

Rai feels that today's India has been precipitated into a crisis of several identities. This melting of a stable matrix or self provides the pattern of a polyphonic discourse.

Very well then: I have walked your filthy streets, India, I have ached in my bones from the illness engendered by your germs.... India, my *terra infirma*, my maelstrom, my cornucopia, my crowd, India, my too-muchness, my everything at once, my Hug-me, my fable, my mother, my father and my first great truth. It may be that I am not worthy of you, for I have been imperfect, I confess. I may not comprehend what you are becoming, what perhaps you already are, but I am old enough to say that this new self of yours is an entity I no longer want, or need, to understand. India, fount of my imagination, source of my savagery, breaker of heart. Goodbye (TGBHF, 272-73).

Rushdie's manner of bidding adieu to his mother country is ambiguous for a couple of reasons. First and foremost, his last moments in India is in a certain sense, an expression of his own hybridity. It is so

because his departure signals in another sense, his entry into a different country, here for example America. At the same time, however, Rushdie cannot completely cut his umbilical cord. He for instance, can never completely adjure his Indianness at the heart of America. This feeling has traumatised the current and flow of several cultures and traditions of different nations which in his psyche.

Through Ormus Cama's words Rushdie explains his own ambivalence by stating how his account of journey into his own motherland is just another way of bidding goodbye to it. He confesses that he is taking the boy way round to the exit because he can't agree with himself to let go, to be done with it, to turn away towards his new life, just to settle for that fortunate existence, lucky Rushdie: America (262).

But it's also because my life hinges on what happened out there, on the banks of the Wainganga River, within sight of the Seonee hills. That was the decisive moment that created the secret image which I have never revealed to anyone, the hidden self-portrait, the ghost in my machine.

Nowadays I can behave, most of the time, as it never happened. I'm a happy man, I can throw sticks for my dog on an American beach and let the turn-ups on my stone-grey chinos get met in the Atlantic tides, but sometimes in the night I wake and the past is hanging there

in front of me, rotating slowly, and all around me the jungle beasts are growling, the fire grows dim, and they are closing in (TGBHF, 262).

Ormus reveals his perception with his own lost self in the new world of America to Vina because he realises that he can neither get rid of his earlier identity, nor can he resurrect it in the context of what has happened earlier in India. His new identity in America can at best be understood as a *palimpsest*: a rejuvenation of an earlier life which is beset with irony. For one thing, Rushdie or Ormus' never forgets his origins in Bombay. Viewed from another context, he also is not content to remain in his own birthplace, Bombay. What then makes him a happy man in America? It is his own present conditions, his newness in a different country that makes Ormus alias Rushdie, resuscitate his own identities, for he has several. In his remaking of himself lies Ormus's own secret, of which he often boasts to Vina.

Vina: I promised you that would open my heart, I swore that nothing would be spared. So I must find the courage to reveal this also, this terrible thing I know about myself. I must confess it and stand defenceless before the court of anyone who can be bothered to judge. If anyone remains, you know the old song. Even the President of the United States sometimes must stand naked.

Or I washed my hands in muddy waters, I washed my hands but they wouldn't come clear (TGBHF, 262).

Ormus describes how, in his journey throughout the world, he has successfully mastered and conned several nationalities. He was diligently bribed and sweet-talked his own way past the road blocks of regional warlords in Angola and former Yugoslavia. He had also located several routes in and out of twenty-seven different revolutions and major wars. He has snapped his fingers under the collective nose of the security cordons at the Milan and Paris fashion collections. But Ormus feels that it requires a unique courage to look with one's own eyes into the eyes of the truth and stare it down. 'To see what was thus, and show it so. To stop away the veils and turn the thunderous racket of revelation into the pure-silence of the image and so possess it' becomes the main objective of Ormus, as he leaves his own country (263). As he reaches England, he gingerly reaches out for the ultimate experience of being present in a totally foreign land. 'His footprints are the only fixed points in his universe' and that 'Everything must be made real, step by step' (294). Ormus' imagined journey from the periphery to the centre envisages an abolishing of binaries; the dichotomies of race and nation. One who has crossed the boundaries of his own country had to shed the stifling peculiarities of his own tradition and identity. He, in Rushdie's words, has to be out of his native self and transcends by *stepping across the line* of nationality. In England and America

How throne leans in on Ormus, blasting him with a fog of whisky breath. Listen, Mowgli, he says not without aggression, you're our fucking guest here, see. How'd you expect to understand the fucking host culture if you insist on remaining teetotal, if you obstinately refuse to fucking integrate in this obstinate fucking Paki obstinate bastard away? (TGBHF, 302).

Slowly Ormus comes to realise that in England he must adjust to the new circumstances. His first 'wholeheartedly erotic encounter with London life' involves the daily purchase and consumption of great quantities of bread, instead of chapatti (318).

Soon it begins to feel like a long time ago that he was India, with family ties, with roots. In the white hear of present tense these things have shriveled and died. Race itself seems less of a fixed point than before. He finds that to these new eyes he looks indeterminate. He has already passed for Jewish...he is taken for an Italian, a Spaniard, a Romany, a Frenchman, a Latin American, a "Real" India, a Greek. He is not of these, but he denies nothing....

Here, he is at the frontier of the skin (TGBHF, 319).

Finally, it is rock music which involves the secret of alliance between nation and nation, race and class. It helps Ormus to cross all

frontiers of the East and West. He was the one to hear it first. It is the hybridity within Ormus and Vina who always claimed, never wavering for a moment that the genius of Ormus Cama did not emerge merely in response to or in invitation of America or the West. In a sense his early music, that of his unsinging childhood years was not of the West, except in the sense that the West was in Bombay from the beginning, impure old Bombay where West, East, North and South had always been scrambled, like codes, like eggs, and so Westernness was a legitimate part of Ormus, a Bombay part, inseparable from the rest of him (103). It was true that it was only Ormus, who had first felt and understood that rock music was the music of the present, of the metropolis and which crossed all frontiers of nation, class, religion and skin (103). It is here that Rushdie the novelist asks

What's a "culture"? Look it up. "A group of micro-organisms grown in a nutrient substance under controlled conditions." A squire of germs on a glass slide is all, a laboratory experiment calling itself a society.... Like slaves voting for slavery or brains for lobotomy, we kneel down before the God of all moronic micro-organisms and pray to be homogenised.... But if Vina and Ormus were bacteria too, they were pair of bugs who wouldn't take life lying down. One way of understanding their story is to think of it as an account of the creation of two bespoke

identities, tailored for the wearers by themselves. The rest of us get our personal of the peg, our religion, language, prejudices, demeanour, the works; but Vina and Ormus insisted on what one might call an auto-couture (TGBHF, 102-03).

Ormus and Vina can create, make and unmake their identities because they believe and participate in the power of love and of music, 'which is the sound of love' (465). Music and love not only help us to cross boundaries but also to bridge gaps between two personalities. They help us to change and liberate us from alienating influences. Rushdie does not mind words when he describes the enchanting power of music on the lives of Ormus and Vina, 'the music was their real lovemaking' (466). It was because of her musical genius that even after her death, she came to be looked up as either Persephone or Caesar. The astonishing after life of Vina rapidly spiraled beyond the power of any authority, temporal or spiritual, which could either control or censure it. It was through music, therefore, she could affirm and invent her sense of kinship with the family of mankind. Her songs appeal to all the races, at the frontiers of skin. It is in such instances that notions of hybridity or cross cultural interaction may be found and located.

Rushdie's novel, therefore, may be said to offer an adequate fictional representation of the dynamic contradiction within globalisation, which is a knife cutting both ways. It not only opens up Vina and Ormus

to American cultural domination but also offers avenues for limitless expression, exploitation of resources, of communication and understanding among nations and races. Both possibilities of domination and interaction are implied in any cross cultural encounter and in this sense Rushdie's novel is no exception. Finally, in the postmodern context, Rushdie's novel is a courageous statement of acceptance, of belief in the possibilities of changing; of metamorphosing unpredictably, where nothing can be relied anymore.