

RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM AND PLURALITY IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *THE MOOR'S LAST SIGH*

Srinivasa G. N., Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Karnataka University, Dharwad

Abstract: *Salman Rushdie engages with the issue of socio-political transformation of India during the 1980s and the 1990s in his novel The Moor's Last Sigh. He deals with this issue by depicting the transformation of the cosmopolitan Bombay from a vibrant Multi-cultural/Multi-lingual/Multi-religious city into a city dominated by the religiously extremist Hindu political party. The political agenda of this party is to transform India into a Hindu nation where other religious minorities are pushed to the margins of the nation. In Midnight's Children, the rise of Hindu nationalism was not devoted much narrative and ideological space. In The Moor's Last Sigh, Hindu nationalism is offered a central narrative space by depicting its rise in the city of Bombay which is the commercial capital of the postcolonial Indian nation-state.*

Key Words: *Cosmopolitan, Bombay, Multi-religious, Postcolonial, Nationalism.*

Salman Rushdie is one of the most important Indian English novelists who wrote novels on current issues related to India and globe. His novel like *The Moor's Last Sigh* deals with the gradual declension of the Nehruvian concept of the secular Indian nation with the rise of the religious nationalism by focusing upon the city of Bombay as the microcosm of India:

Bombay was central. In Bombay, as the old, founding myth of the nation faded, the new god-and-mammon India was being born. The wealth of the country flowed through its exchanges, its ports. Those who hated India, those who sought to ruin it, would need to ruin Bombay: that was one explanation for what happened. (TMLS: 351)

The rise of this religious nationalism in India is associated with the fall of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya by Hindu followers on 6 December, 1992 as a part of Ramjanmabhoomi Andolan. This resulted into the eruption of Hindu-Muslim riots in the city of Bombay. But Rushdie associates this transformation with the growth of global capitalism: "It was the birth of a new age in India, when money, as well as religion, was breaking all the shackles on its desires" (TMLS: 343-4).

The Moor's Last Sigh registers this process of transition of India from a religiously pluralist and politically liberal society into a monolithic and illiberal political order during the eighties and the nineties. Rushdie's thematic preoccupation with this process is motivated by his desire to affirm the viability of liberal political values such as cultural pluralism and religious tolerance as part of the political order for the postcolonial Indian nation-state.

In other words, he wants to bemoan "the tragedy of multiplicity destroyed by singularity, the defeat of many by one" (TMLS: 408). Rushdie accepts these liberal political ideals of cultural pluralism and religious co-existence in the novel through the character of Aurora Zogoiby, the middle-class socialite painter. Her art is described in the novel as being palimpsestic in its style and hybrid in its sources. The character of Aurora is depicted with considerable sympathy by Rushdie because she is the spokesperson for Rushdie's vision for the liberal Indian nation. In her paintings, "Aurora Zogoiby was seeking to paint a golden age. Jews, Christians, Muslims, Parsis, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains" are accommodated (TMLS: 227). The novel celebrates pluralism through Aurora and her art works.

In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Rushdie moves further in time in his offering of the narrative of the Indian

nation that he initiated in *Midnight's Children*. While *Midnight's Children* concluded with the after-effects of Emergency during the 1970s, *The Moor's Last Sigh* engages with the socio-political crises of the 1980s and the 1990s. But the narrative of nation in this novel is offered with Spanish history serving as its backdrop and a recurrent historical parallelism. The 'moor' of the title of the novel refers not only to its protagonist Moraes Zogoiby of the modern India; it alludes to the historical Sultan Boabdil who was the last Moorish ruler of Spanish Granada. His glorious era had come to an end when he was forced to abdicate his reign to Catholic monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella in the year 1492. According to history, while he was leaving the city, he turned his back to it with a sigh of regret escaping from him. The place where this had happened became known as 'Suspiro del Moro', i.e., *The Moor's sigh*. Rushdie's title emphasises the historical parallelism between the fourteenth century's kingdom of Spain and the postcolonial nation of India.

For Rushdie, the medieval Spain during the fourteenth century reached to the zenith of cultural blossoming in its fusion of the Eastern and the Western cultures. The practice of religious co-existence and tolerance by the Muslim rulers in Spain during these times had borne the outcome of a thriving multicultural and vibrant pluralistic society. But such a rarity of cultural heterogeneity was smothered as Spain became the victim of religious inquisition and the policy of forced Christian Baptisms/Conversion of Muslims and Jews imposed by the new Catholic monarchs. The political aim behind this inquisition was to bring the diverse population, made up of the mix of Muslims, Jews, and Christians, under the religious-political institution of the national church.

This phase of Spanish history witnessed the terror of religious persecution rising to its peak. As a result, the persecuted people of the 'other' religiosity, such as Jews and Moors, were forced to flee the country to defend their religious faith. As a result of the departure of these populations from Spain the multicultural and multi-religious culture of the country became disintegrated and deteriorated with the passage of time. Thus, in this novel Rushdie derides the political attempts at promoting the agenda of cultural nationalism.

Rushdie wants to celebrate the cultural diversity and religious plurality by examining the postcolonial Indian nation through its comparison with the Moorish Spain as a yardstick. Rushdie bemoans the fact that the postcolonial Indian nation has become the victim of sectarian divisions threatening its cultural pluralism as it had happened with the multicultural civilisation of the medieval Spain.

Rushdie represents the life of the protagonist Moraes Zogoiby as an allegory of the postcolonial nation-state of India. He is a product of mixed racial lineage and his hybridity is repeatedly emphasised in the novel to allude to the syncretic socio-cultural composition of India. His lineage is a fusion of the mundane reality and fantastic, it reaches back to Vasco de Gama, the Jews of Cochin, and the last Moorish Sultan of Spain.

The novel slyly alludes to the probability of the protagonist being the offspring of Nehru and Aurora. Thus, the protagonist, in his mixed and incredible lineage, mirrors the socio-cultural mix that has gone into the making of India. For Rushdie, Moraes is "a unifier of opposites, a standard-bearer of pluralism,... a symbol-however approximate-of the new nation" (TMLS: 303). The persona of the protagonist is used as analogy for the nation of India.

Thus, the characters of the mother and the son, i.e., the Moor and Aurora, are represented as example of hybridity and cultural mix. So is the case with the locations used in the novel, the metropolitan city of Bombay and the Spanish Granada, the historically real places where the conducive political atmosphere has ensured the flourishing of hybridity. As Saleem Sinai, in *Midnight's Children*, considers his 'self' as representing the entirety of the 'nation', the Moor in this novel also compares himself with the city of Bombay:

Like the city itself, Bombay of my joys and sorrows, I mushroomed into a huge urbane sprawl of a fellow, I expanded without time for proper planning, without any pauses to learn from my experiences or my mistakes or my contemporaries, without time for a reflection. How then could I have turned out to be anything but a mess? (TMLS: 161–162)

The novel relates to the fact that how this Moor comes to feel that he is a complete misfit as he cannot have a sense of belonging to the world of which he is a part. His complex genealogy and physiology make him feel that he has been “out of sync” (TMLS: 162). His biological/cultural origin as a Cochin Jew also deepens his sense of being alienated from the society to which he wants to belong. Referring to his Catholic-Jewish origins, he also connects himself with the city of Bombay:

I, however, was raised neither as Catholic nor as Jew. I was both, and nothing: a jewholic-anonymous, a cathjew nut, a stewpot, a mongrel cur. I was [...] atomised. [...] a real Bombay mix (TMLS: 104).

Thus, Rushdie represents the metropolitan city of Bombay as the mirror of India in its cultural eclecticism and fusion of contradictory ingredients.

The character of Aurora is represented in the novel as “the incarnation of the smarty boots metropolis” (TMLS: 139). She is an artist with virtues of open-mindedness and unprejudiced disposition. Aurora's home located in the city of Bombay is an oasis for artists of different artistic and ideological leanings:

Call it Mooristan, [...] This seaside, this hill, with the fort on top. Watergardens and hanging gardens, watch towers and towers of silence too. Place where worlds collide, flow in and out of one another, and wash away. Place where an air-man can drown in water, or else grow gills; where a water-creature can get drunk, but also choke off, on air. One universe, one dimension, one country, one dream bump'ing into another, or being under, or on top of. Call it Palimpsest. (TMLS: 226)

Even her paintings display her inclusive artistic imagination; they mark the triumph of pluralism in terms of theme and technique:

Around and about the figure of the Moor in his hybrid fortress she wove her vision, which in fact was a vision of weaving, or more accurately interweaving. In a way these were polemical pictures, in a way they were an attempt to create a romantic myth of the plural, hybrid nation; she was using Arab Spain to re-imagine India, and this land-sea-scape in which the land could be fluid and the sea stone-dry was her metaphor [...] of the present, and the future, that she hoped would evolve. (TMLS: 227)

The trajectory of Aurora's artistic career closely parallels the political journey of the postcolonial Indian nation-state. In the beginning of her career, Aurora had created a mural that covered the whole walls of her room. This mural was created by using all sorts of icons, except the divine ones. But with the passage of time, her art also takes on a darker hue that ends with a tragic palimpsest. The span of her career as an artist during which she focuses upon the intricate course of her family reflects the gradual deterioration of India's all-inclusive pluralism due to the rise of communalism and religious bigotry.

The novel shows the rise of religious nationalism as a threat to cosmopolitan pluralism of Bombay. The tragic event of post-Ayodhya bomb explosions that tore the city apart is, according to Rushdie, the nemesis that has been brought upon the nation by its own populace in the grip of divisive sectarianism. So the 'sigh' in the novel's title is also the author's sigh of utter regret for the Indian nation state that has embarked upon the path of parochialism. This is reflected in the way Moor surrenders to Main duck and in the way he transforms from his earlier self as “a standard-bearer of pluralism” into “a semi-allegorical figure of decay” (TMLS: 303).

Rushdie addresses the question of minority identity within the national body politic in his novel. They accommodate the minoritarian perspective in constructing the nation through narrator-protagonists

who are part of Indian minorities. The narrative of nation in Rushdie's novels is told from the minority perspective with a view to problematising the ideal of the national unity.

Through this, he wants to show how the dominant nationalist discourse excludes the diverse traditions of India. They emphasise the desirability of syncretism and plurality as viable policy measures for the Indian nation-state. Rushdie deals with this issue by depicting the transformation of the cosmopolitan India from a vibrant multi-cultural/multi-lingual/multi-religious country into the one in the grip of the religiously extremist Hinduised cultural nationalism. The political agenda of this brand of nationalism is to transform India into a Hindu nation where other religious minorities are pushed to the margins of the nation. Rushdie espouses liberal political ideals of cultural pluralism and religious co-existence in his novel.

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