
Tentative Transactions: The Ethics of Ambivalence in Salman Rushdie

Alok Kumar

Professor, Dept. of English
DDU Gorakhpur University

Abstract

The publication of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* in 1981 and its winning of the Booker prize announced that finally postmodernist writing had touched the shores of India in real earnest. However, the kind of postmodernism endorsed by Rushdie has been a matter of controversy since then, and the publication of his irreverent take on Islam and the Prophet, *The satanic Verses* in 1988, has further fuelled this controversy and the academic community has since then been vertically divided on the topic of Rushdie's commitment to postmodernity. This paper tries to situate Rushdie's practice of postmodernism in the proper critical perspective.

Keywords: Poststructuralism, Epistemic violence, Self-reflexivity, Nationalist historiography, Epistemological relativism, Metafiction.

Responding to the generalized and often encountered charge that the poststructuralists and postmodernists do not produce "rational arguments" with an appeal to evidence, Gayatri Spivak answers: "It is in a sense...an ideological project. To develop a mindset which allows one not to be nervous about the fact that what one is saying is undermined by the way one says it radically" (Spivak 1991:17). Elsewhere in the same exchange she talks of the postmodernist critique of objectivity as "a radical acceptance of vulnerability" (Spivak 1991:17).

As it is, the twin ideas of "History" and "Nation" as churned out by the great modernist project — wherein the nature of human nationality and truth could be seen as most conspicuously embodied — eminently registered the shattering impact of registered the shattering of the forward march of history, 'nation' as an idea came to subsume all other identities, these others being reduced to a derivative rather than constitutive status. The 'National Historiography' emerged as the most emotively seductive enterprise hawking the 'nation' as the most winsome model of rationally ordered historical necessity.

Now, the radical self-reflexivity of postmodernist thought problematised the idea of 'Truth' and despaired of the accessibility of the real. In its quarrel with Realist epistemology, postmodernism settled for contingency and provisionality. Belief in the transparency of language was displaced by the formulary of narrativity, charting the limits of narration. 'History' gave way to discreet histories, while the claims of the 'nation' were adjudged squarely spurious.

Salman Rushdie enters the postmodern debate by foregrounding his acute awareness of the utter fictionality and context sensitivity of nation and history, and a deep — though nuanced — suspicion of a variety of attempts at reification of the idea of nation. Rushdie subverts the transcendental associations of 'nation' and 'history' by his reductive — and therefore humanizing — strategy of treating the two as framed in time and space. For instance, in *Midnight's Children* it is the period between 1947 and '77 — the period from "Independence to Emergency" — that is treated, and the narrative space ranges over India and Pakistan. Meenakshi Mukherjee calls the *Midnight's Children* a 'Bombay novel' because Bombay for Rushdie "is a synecdoche for the teeming multiplicity of India" (Mukherjee: 15). From this recognition of patchy reality to

pastiche, from multiplicity to mélange; for Rushdie the shifts are logical. Frequent and random switching from one linguistic register to another, from realism to fantasy, from the representational to self-reflexive, has been recognized as one of the prominent features of postmodern art and for Rushdie it amounts to a celebration of the eclectic hybridity and multiculturalism of the Indian ethos and a conscious fling at the homogenizing and leveling impulses of linear historiography.

Born on the stroke of midnight August 14-15, 1947 Saleem Sinai the narrator of *Midnight's Children* is coeval with India and he quibbles over his connection with history:

I was linked to history both literally and metaphorically, both actively and passively, in what our (admirably modern) scientists might term 'modes of connection' composed of 'dualistically combined configurations' of the two pairs of opposed adverbs given above. This is why hyphens are necessary: actively — literally, passively — metaphorically, actively — metaphorically and passively — literally, I was inextricably intertwined with my world. (Rushdie 1982: 238)

Though, in Rushdie's oeuvre references should not be taken for preferences, yet — the postmodern free play notwithstanding — it is easy to see that in all his fiction Rushdie inscribes (without any intention of contesting) the passive metaphorical connection with history and the footloose ethical perspective it sanctions in its passivity.

It is on this point that Rushdie's very location in his postmodern topography becomes problematized, for almost all theorists of postmodern art are in agreement that it responds to two major postmodernist modes (important differences in approach, scope and theoretical positioning of the artist notwithstanding): "One mode that has given up referentiality and meaning, and another one that still seeks to be referential and sometimes even tries to establish local, temporary and provisional truths" (Bertens: 65).

Now, Rushdie's novels are wary of casting off referentially (and the resulting political resonances) while at the same time refusing the comfort of 'local and provisional truths'. Informative bits of facts are bandied about and a continuous engagement maintained simultaneously with the official and subaltern modes of history, and yet the truths (however tentative) are withheld in an endless charade. My contention here is that this particular shade of moral quandary that characterizes Rushdie's writing is the direct result of his failure to position himself in relation to the postmodern. In fact, as his writing reveals, the choice is never even considered, for there are writers in the postmodern pantheon who have deliberated over the choices and rejected or selected from among the alternatives available. Tony Morrison for instance or Ishmael Reed or Jorge Luis Borges. Borges called himself "rich in perplexities not certainties" and it is these honest perplexities that are absent from Rushdie's writing; instead, there is an uneasy sense of projected, hyped-up bewilderment.

There is an almost vertical split among theorists regarding the humanistic credentials of postmodernism. Linda Hutcheon argues that postmodernism is contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political" (Hutcheon: 4); while Frederic Jameson's position is that it is homogenizing, ahistorical and politically disinterested (Jameson 1991). A position somewhere midway between the two dichotomous stands is that of "historiographic metafiction". Linda Hutcheon defines it to mean "those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical novels and personages, a type of novel in which the theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs is made the ground for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past and which always works within conventions in order to subvert them" (Hutcheon: 5).

The fiction of Carlos Fuentes and John Fowles is cited by Hutcheon as illustrative instances of historiographic metafiction. However, even such a broad spectrum fails to

accommodate Rushdie's oeuvre for he flits vacuously between the alternatives postmodernisms without latching on to any in a gesture of affirmation.

Rushdie is astoundingly evasive about his choices, positing a serious limitation to his work. In this context it is useful to refer to Frederic Jameson's distinction between the modernist parody and postmodernist pastiche, for it has immediate relevance to Rushdie's case. For Jameson pastiche is a neutral practice without the implicit sense of norm or of the original which characterizes parody, and therefore as Jameson contends pastiche is symptomatic of a general loss of historicity and our incapacity to achieve aesthetic representations of our own current experience (Jameson: 21). In Rushdie's writing there is a nagging presence of historical events and personages with the regular connectives lopped so as, to short circuit historical design and logical and project a sense of the 'loss of historicity'.

Tabish Khair similarly alleged failures in case of Salman Rushdie. With serious reservations regarding Khair's view that the failure emerges out of Rushdie's perspective which is that of an "anglicized, upper/middle-class, diasporic or postcolonial (cosmopolitan) Indian" (2001: 281) we can still go along with the general thrust of the argument. Khair notes:

... the use of people as very often a polemical device. Like Padma in *Midnight's Children* the people are needed not only to 'temper the shameful cosmopolitanism that would make the writing inauthentic' but also to establish Rushdie as after all an Indian English Writer and a select commentator and interpreter of convoluted Third World realities. Again, like Padma the people aired or heard, but never enacted: their advice is seldom, if ever followed. (Khair: 284)

Khair also refers to Aijaz Ahmad's criticism of Rushdie's idea of migrancy: "excess of belonging; not that he belongs nowhere, but that he belongs to too many places" (Ahmad: 27), and collates it with Timothy Brennan's charge of elitism, "a Europe based intellectual radicalism shying away from affirmative action by other sections of society", in Rushdie's novels (Brennan: 266). Khair attributes this 'repulsion from acts of affirmation' to a class based (Babu) alienation. For Rushdie himself these multiple repulsions orchestrate into a final resolute refusal to choose:

But I too have ropes around my neck, I have them to this day, pulling me this way and that, east and West, the noose tightening, commanding, choose, choose. I buck, I snort, I whinny, I rear, I kick. Ropes, I do not choose between you. Lassoes, lariats, I choose neither of you and both. Do you hear? I refuse to choose. (Rushdie: 211)

Khair picks the cue and declares: "Rushdie has all along—at least from *Midnight's Children* onwards—refused to choose by his own lights" (Khair: 267).

For us however, Rushdie's limitations and failures issue from his faulty and ambiguous positioning in the 'postmodern field'. The whole issue ultimately comes to rest on the attitude one adopts to the question of postmodern ethics. As Christopher Cherniak has argued: "So long as we base our political analyses of culture on 'relativist' grounds (read postmodern grounds) avoiding the challenge posed by the competing claims of various rationalities we will surrender complex historical knowledge of others (Cherniak: 20). As he contends, we might remain wary of ethnocentric evaluation of alterity, but there is a basic evaluation involved in positing connection and perceiving similarities and differences. Central to this process of evaluative judgement with its minimal task of ordering and creating hierarchies of significance is "the understanding of humans across cultural and historical divides as capable of minimal rationality implicit in agency" (Cherniak: 20-21).

Again, as Satya Mohanty has noted:

The lure of epistemological relativism is especially strong when the justified and reasonable caution about ethnocentric idealizations of rationality and a narrow view of objectivity is inflated to a vague and undifferentiated skepticism toward

knowledge. This specifically postmodernist attitude is theoretically debilitating for cross-cultural enquiry. (Mohanty: 144)

And it is here that the anomalous cohabitation between the postmodern and the postcolonial in the novels of Salman Rushdie emerges as another relevant aspect of the wider issue we have been considering so far: the disastrous consequences of Rushdie's equivocal location within the postmodern paradigm. This basic postmodern equivocation has been theorized in different ways and most often it comes to a dead stop in Rushdie's treatment of history without any attempt to move from the symptoms to the underlying pathology. For instance, we have this conscientious objection from Fauzia Afzal Khan:

It must be said, however, that Rushdie's refusal to mythologize history in his books *Grimus*, *Midnight's Children*, *Shame* and *The Satanic Verses* must ultimately be seen as a failure to construct a viable alternative ideology for himself or for a postcolonial society in general. (Khan: 169)

In our view, however, the entire issue of the relation between postmodernism and postcolonialism needs a radical recasting. For though an initial advantage may accrue to the postcolonial cause by aligning with postmodern theory, ultimately the losses will more than offset the gains, and in all likelihood the postmodern agenda will co-opt the postcolonial cause. Rushdie's limitations arise out of his skewed vision which approaches the postcolonial via postmodern self-reflexivity without the necessary vigil that must attach to any such attempt. The vigil relates to the damage that an excessive reliance on postmodern hyper-reality may cause to the intent of situating postcolonial reality. This becomes amply clear when we collate two representative responses to *The Satanic Verses*. The first is by Fauzia Afzal Khan:

In his novel *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie continues to promulgate his theory of generic destruction as a prerequisite to renewal.... Religion has been a colonizing power too, one that has transformed men's thinking capabilities into slavish mentalities. This power to control men, religion shares with the rulers of empire and it is toward the destruction of just such power that the thrust of Rushdie's fictive strategies is aimed.... In other words, the point of view that emerges is not anti-Islam but anti-closure.... Rushdie's impulse toward blasphemy becomes really an impulse toward regeneration. (Khan: 164)

And here we have a piece from Tabish Khair:

By publicly doubting the undiluted, revelatory nature of the Quran and by using the name Mahound, Rushdie clearly committed acts of omission and commission that few unalienated Muslims would have dreamt of. Rushdie's questionable perception of the fixity of the written word in communal, oral, and religious works like the unrevisable Quran is essentialist in the sense that the fixity is implicitly or explicitly attributed to the Quran and its people instead of being seen in dialectical terms—as the attitude to writing in a certain phase of production or due to a certain class structure and ownership of production. (Khair: 283)

It is thus, that the postmodern crisis of orientation and positioning to which Rushdie abdicates his authorial agency, drastically limits his role and intervention in the multicultural debate. I have also tried to show with reference to the writings of Salman Rushdie that the ethical concerns of postcolonialism and postmodernism, though superficially coeval, do not coalesce or cohabit in any significant way. The relation of Salman Rushdie, the alienated postcolonial intellectual, to the postmodern heresy has also been explored.

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