

The Theme of Plurality in Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence*

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Abstract: Postcolonial literature expresses the plural versions of world's history. On one hand it dissolves the cultural boundaries by establishing universality. But on the other hand it also becomes the manifesto of alternative realities of any culture. Rushdie as a Postcolonial writer tries to break the colonial jinx of stereotype perception of 'us' and 'them'. He after challenging in his earlier works the colonial stereotype presentation of local history tries to re-interpret world's history of overlapping renaissances in his *The Enchantress of Florence*. Therefore, this paper intends to highlight the theme of plurality in Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence* from Postcolonial perspective. Postcolonial literature has always voiced against the universal imperialistic hegemony of colonial discourse. It represents cultural regeneration among the colonized people. It reflects diverse forms of resistances in varied cultures of people with colonized background against their composite picture of derivative civilizations promoted through the colonial discourse. But in the case with India this postcolonial resistance acquired varied dimensions. This happens only with India because since antiquity she remains a patron of pluralistic culture. The present endeavour discusses this plurality threadbare with special reference to Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence*.

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Indian civilization since her cradle days has been at home with righteousness. This righteousness withheld itself against the tides of many external aggressions by dint of her resilience and power of assimilation. Consequently, with plurality in their vein, Indian writers of Postcolonial literature in English have even appropriated English to redefine the finer points of India's relationship with the World. To name a few writers who through their writings has established Postcolonial literature of India in English in the high table of world culture are Sir Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth etc. Of all these writers Salman Rushdie founded a new trend of Historical novels/fictions dealing with pluralistic voices of India. His famous work *Midnight's Children* was awarded Booker of the Bookers, rocked the world wide readers with its inverted history of India. Similarly in his other works, Rushdie highlights different submerged perspectives of Indian history to enable the reader with more space for comprehension of reality. Hence we find the pluralistic version of history of Indian Sub-continent in his novels like *Shame*, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, *The Shalimar the Clown* and *The Enchantress of Florence*. But in the novel *The Enchantress of Florence* Rushdie revives not only medieval India but also the medieval world

during Renaissance period. The novel is a sort of travelogue. Rushdie weaves together the three contemporary Empires representing overlapping renaissances with the thread of Magic realism. The novel starts with the narration of a foreigner with the tale to be told only to the Mughal Emperor Akbar. The foreigner on his way to meet the Emperor charms us with his comparative analyses of the East and the West. The foreigner being fluent in various tongues represents the middle age's version of cosmopolitan person. He impersonates the British ambassador carrying a royal letter from the British Queen seeking to open trade relations with Mughal India. The course of his entrance in the city of Fatehpur Sikri to his meteoric rise to become a close associate of the Emperor Akbar stir our imagination about the Emperor and his liberal administration. In this novel, the Mughal Emperor Akbar is shown to become *Jahanpanah* or the Shelter of the World standing as a vanguard of plurality seeking to rediscover his multiple selves. He is seen in the novel as an enlightened despot. Through his soliloquies he reveals to us that his absolutism is inherited from his Chagatai blood thirsty ancestors and his sincere efforts to acquire Indian's characteristic tolerance to rule over his subjects of diverse origins. Thus his constant search for plurality within himself and in his Mughal Empire leads him to believe in turning his inherited blood stench Mughal Empire into an ideal World empire. Thus himself becoming *Jahanpanah* or the shelter of the world in the true sense of the term. Emperor Akbar ruling from his capital city *Fatehpur Sikri* or City of door to victory also symbolically stands as victory of pluralism over dogmatic views about Imperialistic ambition means legacy of subjugation and exploitations. This is evident in Emperor's desire to allow the subaltern truth or prohibited facts of his dynasty to be articulated by a foreigner! Niccolo Vespucci in his tale *The Enchantress of Florence*. His vigorous curiosity for the truth prompts him to seek confirmation of the stranger's tale from elderly lady members of his family in the royal court in an unprecedented manner for he realizes the importance of women as site of tradition and culture. As a consequence, another version of the stranger's tale surfaces. But this time the Emperor's aunt Gulbadan Begum narrates from the Mughal family history the episode of forgotten Princess Qara Koz as the Mughal version of the tale of the Enchantress of Florence. His pursuits for plural versions of the truth behind the tale of *The Enchantress of Florence* or the forgotten Mughal Princess Qara Koz inspires him to have them portrayed in his atelier overruling the provocations from his close quarters to ignore it. It establishes the Emperor as an unbiased seeker of truth and therefore suits his image of dispenser of true justice.

Rushdie in this novel *The Enchantress of Florence* has revived the cultural exchanges between the West and the East practiced during the middle ages. He has chosen the time of Renaissance Italy and India under the liberal rule of the Mughal Emperor Akbar as tokens to project the homogenous experiences of liberalism, treatment of women as commodity to be either consumed or rejected by men, cruelty, court intrigues, lecheries, greed etc. running across both the civilizations of

the East and the West. The celebration of individuality in Renaissance Florence is yoked with the liberal despotism of the Emperor Akbar's regime patronizing plurality of India. The three Italian friends : Nino Argalia ,Ill Machia and Ago Vespucci symbolically represents the characteristics of Renaissance culture of exploring from known to unknown, celebration of Humanism and Florence's cultural adaptation with foreign culture here embodied by the Mughal princess Qara Koz. Firstly , Araglia's journey to become a great general from a slave of Ottoman Sultan and then marrying the war spoil Mughal Princess Qara Koz and Occidentalized the Princess by christening her Angelica in order to present her as angel to the people of Florence. Secondly, Argalia's friend Ill Machia despite all odds has played the role of host to a foreign culture. And thirdly, celebration of humanism among Florentine people during renaissance is exhibited in the homebody Ago Vespucci act of escaping from Florence with the Princess Qara Koz and her dummy and marrying them amid hostile condition while the Condottieri Antonino Argalia sacrificing his life to secure her escape route from Florence for the sake of humanity. This incident also symbolizes the palimpsest existence of plural cultures in Florence. Both these cultures are at loggerhead on the case of Mughal princess Qara Koz alias Angelica, the Enchantress of Florence. We find that liberal renaissance culture of Florence struggles against the orthodox religious culture of Florence symbolize by the rage of people of Florence .These people of Florence blamed the Mughal princess as a foreign lady infecting their Medici ruler with some Eastern incurable disease and at his death next morning consider her as a witch not enchantress.

Witch. She bewitched him. He lay with the witch and sickened and died. He was not sick before .Witchcraft. She gave him the Devil's disease. Witch,witch,witch. (Rushdie374)

What a short journey from enchantress to witch. Only yesterday she had been the city 'sun official patron saint. Now there was a mob gathering at her door. (Rushdie 375)

When a crowd loses its fear of an army the world changes. (Rushdie 379)

This role of individualism played by these characters mark the rise of Humanism new learning to question the self sufficient world of theological surveillance. Almost similar type of things can be seen in the Mughal Emperor Akbar's policies. He developed matrimonial alliances with Hindu kings to strengthen his roots in India defying the diktats of orthodox Muslim advisors like Badauni. In India, Emperor Akbar restored her glorious heritage of plurality. Emperor Akbar's court is adorned with nine gems or great personalities of his time irrespective of their origin or background like *Navaratna* or Nine gems of Vikramaditya, the legendary Gupta Emperor of ancient India. This serve us with an example that plurality has reached its zenith in India during Akbar's reign. The steps taken by Emperor Akbar to Indianise the otherwise outsider Mughal dynasty by introducing scopes of Emperor's direct interaction with masses through *Jharoka Darshan* or Royal appearance

from balcony of royal palace pronounces his love for plurality. It is evident in the novel also, when we find the Emperor Akbar after learning the plight of his subject countermanded unlawful practice of forcefully keeping his subject silent during his stay in Sikri. "That was the day on which it became clear that a new kind of king was on the throne, and that nothing in the world would remain same." (Rushdie 37) But the most conspicuous is the royal permission to commoners of using water from the royal lake for their daily need astonishes Niccolo Vespucci a foreigner can be taken as an example of Emperor's acceptance of the importance of his subject.

Nor were there guards at the golden water's edge; was the king so generous, then, that he allowed all his subjects, and perhaps even strangers and visitors like the traveler himself, without hindrance to draw up liquid bounty from the lake? That would indeed be a prince among men, a veritable Prester John, whose lost kingdom of song and fable contained impossible wonders (Rushdie 5)

In the novel, Emperor Akbar's personality is split up into public and personal one. His public self is the embodiment of pluralistic culture of India.

He, Akbar, had never referred to himself as 'I' not even in private, Not even in anger or dreams. He was-what else could he be? - 'we' He was the definition, the incarnation of the We. He had been born into plurality. When he said 'we', he naturally and truly meant himself as an incarnation of all his subjects, of all his cities and lands and rivers and mountains and lakes, as well as all the animals and plants and trees within his frontiers, and also the birds that flew overhead and the mordant twilight mosquitoes and the nameless monster in their underworld lairs, gnawing slowly at the roots of things; he meant himself as the sum total of all his victories, himself as containing the characters, the abilities, the histories, perhaps even the souls of his decapitated or merely pacified opponents; and, in addition, he meant himself as the apogee of his people's past and present, and the engine of their future. (Rushdie 38-39)

Thus we find occasionally, the Emperor is seen in the novel, hearing to his personal murmuring. This murmuring whisper in reader's ear with a dissent overtone against overwhelming dominance of his public self. His desire for an ideal wife and showing interest in the forbidden tale of Mughal Princess Qara Koz from a foreigner are all his personal bearing of individuality over his public or plural self of an Emperor. He as an Emperor must be conventional to formulate his strategies to emerge as almighty hence always victorious. But his patronage of *Din-E-lahi* as an epitome of plurality can be treated as a way to leave his mark of his individuality over conventional thinking of that age. Similarly, Mughal Princess Qara koz's defiance to the male dominated societies of both the East and the West is also an articulation of marginal voice against the central one of Patriarchy. She was ordered to be forgotten by her brother, Babar as she has chosen her own destiny of true love and not royal prestige or masculine pride of her brother, the Mughal Prince Babar. She represents the spirit of renaissance. Hence unlike any king or rather any

man, tried to spread the name and fame of Mughal dynasty by dint of her power of enchantment of love only.

Finally, Rushdie in his novel *The Enchantress of Florence* tries to undermine the Western pejorative about the plural existence of the East and vice versa. Rather he tries to bring into existence a sort of cultural homogeneity prevailed between the city of Florence and Fatehpur Shikri at their high point of overlapping renaissance cultures during fifteenth century. Florence for example at that time was under the influence of renaissance or new learning and Fatehpur Sikri., the seat of Mughal Emperor Akbar .the great, was experiencing the Emperor's mind and might to take his empire to its highest watermark in every possible way. Rushdie, through magic realism is able to mirror us the tale of two cities and three empires of medieval age in their true colours and not in the light of our modern world. His depiction of Mughal Princess Qara Koz along with an array of both western and eastern prostitutes as common denominator of the role played by the women in medieval period to determine the course of history of the age also lead us to believe in cultural homogeneity. But still, in his novel, it seems to us that history is articulating from roads to royal palaces, from battlefields to boudoir. After unknitting the tale of the forgotten Mughal princess Qara koz we find Rushdie unfolds multiple voices of medieval age to us.

This novel depicts the journey of Mughal Princess Qara koz to found a self entitled Mughal Empire in the West with the sheer power of her enchantment and not by military might, establishes the realization of Feminine ambition to be at the centre of power and glory in a completely different way than that of Masculine one. Now the Mughal Emperor Akbar's desire of an ideal global Mughal Empire could not be fulfilled through military expeditions but by recognizing the existence of voices of the 'Other' here a free feminine identity of the bold and beautiful Mughal Princess Qara Koz alias Princess Angelica The Enchantress of Florence.

It seems to us that Rushdie in first place has reversed the usual prejudiced binaries of Europe as masculine and Orient as feminine. Rushdie has portrayed the Orient as masculine symbolized by Mughal Emperor Akbar and Florence as feminine symbolized by the Enchantress QaraKoz. However, Rushdie's search for middle age history is limited to whore house and royal house may come up with plural voices, but still throughout the novel portrayal of life statement of middleclass people of both the cities is excluded.

Therefore, we may assume that unlike other works of historical novels like Sir Walter Scot's *Ivanhoe*, Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence* records superficially the life of two cities of Florence and Fatehpur Sikri in Medieval ages. But in spite of this, Rushdie's thorough research in writing the novel bore fruit when we find Mughal Emperor Akbar emerged as a champion of plurality. On one hand, he justifies his title *Jahanpanah* or the shelter of the world by offering *panah* or shelter to the forgotten Mughal Princess Qara Koz as his ideal wife despite severe criticism from his near ones. On the other hand, he acknowledges Princess Qara koz's desire of worldwide

spreading of the Mughal empire and always remaining on the victorious side, which also fulfill his ambition of winning the whole world Thus, in this way he puts an end of the journey of Mughal Princess Qara koz to reunite with her earlier self or her origin her Mughal family, which she left on her own for her pursuit of love. In the end, her pursuit for ideal love got requited by none but the Mughal Emperor Akbar himself.

'I have come home after all,' she told him. 'You have allowed me to return, and so here I am, at my journey's end. And now, Shelter of The World, I am yours.'

Until you're not, the Universal Ruler thought.

My love, until you're not. (Rushdie 442-443)

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