

SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *THE ENCHANTRESS OF FLORENCE*: AN INTERTEXTUAL REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

In recent years research is done in wider spectrum. It is replenished with postmodern and postcolonial inter-contextual studies. Intertextuality has been the unfailing tool for the recent literary critics to yield complete and critical value of works of art. In this light, the critic enjoys examining cross-textual references and derives the aesthetics of both criticality and creativity. It is worth saying that the postmodern as well as postcolonial novels are the fit medium to reflect upon the variables available in art and research. For the postmodern readers the shift from the writer to reader centric advent has provided the avenue hitherto never prevalent. The paper, thus, foregrounds history, magic, fantasy and reality through the novel in Salman Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008). It narrates the visit of a mysterious stranger Mogor from Italy to the imperial capital of Akbar named Fatehpur Sikri. The trickster-traveler is fluent in many tongues yet apparently homeless. However, he could put Akbar into disillusionment in different ways. The paper also focuses on how Rushdie succeeds in recreating a New World by assimilating history of the East and the West. The fantasy, romantic and artistic notions, the narrative technique, the magic and realistic elements and linguistic carnival in the novel can be better analyzed by bringing forth a study through reader-centric and text-centric approaches.

Keywords: Intertextuality, postmodern, sikri, history, fantasy

INTRODUCTION

In recent years research is done in wider spectrum. It is replenished with postmodern and post-colonial inter-contextual studies. Intertextuality has been the unfailing tool for the recent literary critics to yield complete and critical value of works of art. In this light, the critic enjoys examining cross-textual references and derives the aesthetics of both criticality and creativity. It is worth saying that the post-modern as well as postcolonial novels are the fit medium to reflect upon the variables available in art and research. For the postmodern readers the shift from the writer to reader centric advent has provided the avenue hitherto never prevalent. In traditional literary theory has assumed that by reading a work of literature meaning is being extracted out which lies inside that work. Literary texts possess meaning, and

that is why readers extract meaning from them. The process of extracting meaning from texts is called interpretation. However, in contemporary literary and cultural theory such ideas have been radically changed. It is now believed that works of literature are built from systems, codes, and traditions established by previous works of literature. Crucial to the meaning of a work of literature are also the systems, codes, and traditions of other art forms, such as films, and of culture in general.

The origins of intertextuality, like modern literary and cultural theory itself, can be traced back to 20th-century linguistics. A major role was played by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913). By emphasizing the systematic features of language, he established the relational nature of meaning and texts. Another literary theorist who had a major influence on the theory of intertextuality was the Russian literary theorist and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975). The founder of a school of literary criticism known as dialogism, Bakhtin emphasized the relation between an author and his work, the work and its readers, and the relation of all three to the social and historical forces that surround them. Thereby it is claimed that the act of reading, rather than the interpretation of one work, engages the reader in discovering a **network of textual relations**. Reading thus becomes a process of 'touring between texts.' According to Allen, "Meaning becomes something which exists between a text and all the other texts to which it refers and relates, moving out from the independent text into a network of textual relations" (1).

The paper, thus, foregrounds history, magic, fantasy and reality through Salman Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008). The dexterous intertextuality of the novel is one of the parameters. The term intertextuality is popularized by Julia Kristeva in 1960s. It is used to signify the number of ways in which one literary citation and allusion is linked to the other in natural and creative cross-textual ways both at factual, formal and functional levels. Thus, it results in interweaving solidity of multiple meanings by interpretation of texts as potential relatively interconnected signs (Kristeva, 1980 and Culler, 1981).

The importance of stories in our lives has always been a central part of the power of Salman Rushdie's writing. Storytelling, Rushdie has argued in many places, is what makes us human; it is essential to our nature. Rushdie's tenth novel, *The Enchantress of Florence*, reexamines the function of stories, as well as the significance of the storyteller, in what is his first attempt at historical fiction. *The Enchantress of Florence* is an intricately woven narrative that takes place in sixteenth-century India and Italy. The scenes are neither Indian nor European, just as the characters are not quite historically accurate. It is at best a wonder of intertextual thought, and, at worst, a burdensome game at the reader's expense.

The *Enchantress of Florence* is the story of a mysterious woman, a great beauty believed to possess the powers of enchantment and sorcery, attempting to command her own destiny in a man's world. It is the story of two cities at the height of their powers—the hedonistic Mughal capital, in which the brilliant emperor Akbar the Great wrestles daily with questions of belief, desire, and the treachery of his sons, and the equally sensual city of Florence during the High Renaissance, where Niccolò Machiavelli takes a starring role as he learns, the hard way, about the true brutality of power. Profoundly moving and completely absorbing, *The Enchantress of Florence* is a dazzling book full of wonders. The story is written in a post-modern style, employing the frame narrative. Every chapter is a story in itself, and each chapter functions as a little piece that belongs to a larger scenario.

The novel begins with the arrival of a mysterious yellow-haired stranger at the palace of Akbar the Great. The trickster-traveler is fluent in many tongues yet apparently homeless. The stranger, calling himself "Mogor dell' Amore," the Mughal of Love, claims that he has a story to tell, and a secret, which can only be recounted to the emperor himself. Once admitted to the court of Akbar, Mogor dell' Amore begins to spin a tale as intricate, absurd, and perplexing as any postmodern yarn. The story involves three childhood friends, Antonio Argalia, Niccolò "il Machia" (Niccolò Machiavelli), and Ago Vespucci, who happens to also be the storyteller. At the heart of *The Enchantress of Florence* is a mysterious woman named Qara Koz, who has the beguiling power to place all those who behold her under the power of her charm. The paper also through lights on how Rushdie succeeds in recreating a New World by assimilating history of the East and the West. The fantasy, romantic and artistic notions, the narrative technique, the magic and realistic elements in the novel can be better analyzed by bringing forth a study through reader-centric and text-centric approaches.

The Enchantress of Florence reveals Rushdie's excellent creativity and narrative engineering. It represents a turn from present to past, from politics to poetics. It is a historical romance reflecting the mutual suspicion and mistrust between the East and the West. The reader-centric approach gives a critical idea about the theme and its ethical, mythical, social, neohistorical, religious, cultural, psychoanalytical aspects. In this light, it is found that the novel, in fact, refers to an imaginary time when both Queen Elizabeth and Emperor Akbar were ruling over in their respective kingdoms. It starts with an impressive description of the setting sun. The stranger comes all the way to Surat, an old city of India and rides a bullock-cart to reach Fatehpur Sikri to meet Akbar. As the cart goes on, he keeps himself standing on it. The cart-driver takes him to be a fool. But, later on, he admires his courage. He then gets down the cart and enjoys his stay in Caravanserai. He recollects his memory how he managed to land at Surat

escaping from a Scottish pirate ship. Then, he crosses Burhanpur, Handia, Sironj, Narwar, Gwalior, and Agra to reach this new capital. The moment he rests, he dreams of many impossible and fanciful things.

He is on his mission to 'Hindustan' to make his fortune. Arriving at Fatehpur, he declares that he is a secret guest and he has a secret which he would disclose before Akbar only. A provision was made for him to meet Emperor Akbar. Before him, he mentions about one lady named Angelica. Hearing the name, Akbar becomes disturbed and loses his sense. The traveler realizes how "a man under the enchantment of love... is a man easily distracted and led" (26). He says that he has escaped all the way to meet him only. He has also "the letter in Elizabeth Tudor's own hand and under her personal seal, the message from the queen of England to the Emperor of India . . . He was England's ambassador now" (29).

In the meantime, he reads the letter of the queen in which she welcomes the emperor and calls for business and diplomatic alliance. The Emperor is appreciative of the contents of the letter. The messenger gives a locket to him in which the photo of the Queen is pasted. His dream of forming a joint global empire by uniting the eastern and the western hemispheres remains unfulfilled. Gradually, his love for her disappears and remains as a nostalgic memory only.

Akbar takes the messenger to the temple of argument, where learned people sit and debate over different ideas. He says beautifully there, "Ideas were like tides of the sea or the phases of the moon; they came into being, rose and grew in their proper time, and then ebbed. Darkened and vanished when the great wheel turned" (98). The other day Akbar takes Mogor on a boating in his favorite boat Asayish. But it so happened that Abul Fazl and his crew was presented in another boat spying Mogor because they got some shocking news about him. They circled him. At that time, he was describing a story of a prince named Angelica to the emperor. Then, the soldiers gripped his throat and he lost his sense. Then he was sent to prison. The guard informed him that the next day would be the day of his trial for murder.

The next day he was made present in the court. Akbar being irritated by his answers ordered to throw him before the wild elephant. By that time, he had revealed three identities of himself in the names of Uccello or Mogor or Vespucci. His second trial took place in the garden of Hiran, named after emperor's favorite elephant, which was kept carefully although he is mad and blind. Then, the man was sent before the elephant so that it would kill him. But strangely, when the man stretched his hands towards the elephant, it stood calm and quiet and allowed Mogor to caress him. The yellow-haired foreigner went up the back of the elephant and sat like a prince.

Then, while talking to the emperor that he gave surprising information that he happened to be his blood relation. The foreigner went on narrating that he had heard that his mother was a princess of the

true Chaghatai blood, a direct descent of Genghis Khan, a member of the house of Timur, and the sister of the first Mughal Emperor of India, whom she called "the Bearer". Her mother's name was Angelica and she was a Mughal Princess, and the most beautiful one. She was tortured by one Uzbek warlord named Lord Wormwood, after defeating her brother. The Persian king Ishmael defeated Lord Wormwood and Ottoman defeated Ishmael.

The two mothers of Akbar, Hamida Bano and Bibi Fatima could not control themselves. They agreed with the story and also claimed that there was a hidden story in their family. The women also went on describing the genealogy of women and the foreigner was encouraged to continue the story. Bibi Fatima interfered and told that really the Princess of mirror that you tell was in love with a foreigner. This Princess was an enchantress beyond compare. The foreigner added that her name was Angelica, and with Ottoman, she went to Italy and she was supposed to be the mother of the foreigner.

The Emperor wanted Dashwant, his talented painter to paint the details of the story of that enchanted Princess and his forefathers in his private rooms. Dashwant painted the princess as a four year-old girl with bright eyes and extraordinary beauty. She was then believed to possess super human powers. Then Dashwant draws her as an adolescent girl, which even attracts Birbal. Dashwant paints her as "the rediscovered protagonist and her new lover – the hidden Princess Lady Black Eyes or QaraKooz or Angelica, and the Shah of Persia – standing face to face" (160). In Chapter 10, the setting shifts to Florence. Mogor says that Simonetta Cattaneo is a beautiful lady. She marries Ago's cousin, Marco Vespucci. This Marco dies of consumption and the Simonetta becomes a powerful enchantress. She can put people in utter misery if they look at her with bad eyes or try to harm in anyway.

The story of QoraKooz continues to dominate the later part of the novel. From an enchantress to witch, she leads her journey. Hearing all these stories, Abul Fazl concludes that the messenger has many experiences, many contacts, and many resources. So he is extraordinary. The Emperor is still in the midst of his association of his imaginary queen. She somehow resembles Jodha, but even then, she resembles QoraKooz. "Yet she was the one who came, more and more often and there were things she understood that Jodha had grasped. She understood, for example, silence" (389).

The haunting sandstone palaces of Sikri are fantastic. The emperor has many queens. Still then, the visitor makes Akbar think of an imaginary wife. He says that, ". . . it was the real queens who were the phantoms and the non-existent beloved who was real" (33). He gives her name Jodha. Tansen writes songs for her and Master Abdus Samad, the Persian portrays her himself from memory. The nine Stars, that is, the nine great countries under Akbar's regime, acknowledge her existence, her beauty, and her

wisdom, the grace of her movements and the softness of her voice. Gradually, that becomes a love story of the age. When Akbar comes back to the palace from his tour outside, he feels as if the queen in picture inspires him saying different things about the subjects and about himself. People believe that Jodhabai, the mother of his first son Prince Salim may be in the mind of Akbar as he reflects over the imaginary queen. However, she happens to be a creation of imagination entirely.

After coming across Mogor, Akbar happens to develop many and varied feelings. He experiences “amusement, interest, disappointment, disillusion, surprise, amazement, fascination, irritation, pleasure, perplexity, suspicion, affection, boredom, and increasingly . . . fondness and admiration” (393). He finds the young man has athletics and military skills. He has a strong memory. He speaks very well. He remembers *mansobdar*, plays all the indoor games of the court. People gradually come to know that the foreigner has become the “Mughal of love” (396).

In the meantime, both the stalwart supporters of Akbar, Birbal and AbulFazl die. Akbar becomes helpless and sad for many days. Then, one day, one fakir comes and foretells that his dynasty’s rule will finally end after him. Then again, Mogor goes on telling him the story of the creation of the New World. He claims that he is the son of that enchantress QaraKooz, but Akbar is still not ready to accept that. Akbar even plans to adopt him as his honorary son. But that never happens in reality.

One midnight, when he sits at the top of the Panch Mahal, he finds a blaze of fire in the house of Skanda. Mogor burns and dies in the fire. Commenting on his death the author writes:

He had crossed over into the empty page after the last page, beyond the illuminated borders of the existing world, and has entered their universe of the undead, those poor souls whose lives terminate before they stop breathing. The emperor at the lakeside wished the Mughal of Love a gentle after life and a painless ending; and turned away” (435).

Next day, the emperor finds that the water of the Sikri Lake is drying up. His best engineers cannot even tell the cause for the drying up of water. Then Akbar recognizes the death of Sikri too. Then, immediately, he orders the evacuation of the city. Prince Salim’s wife, Lady Man Bai also dies of the shock and depression. That night, the hidden Princess comes to him. Her beauty is like a flame. She says that, like her, Mogor is the mirror’s child. The city is ruined because of the mistreatment of her child. She is, as if life was a river . . . She had crossed the liquid years and returned to command his dreams, usurping another woman’s place in his Khayal, his godlike omnipotent fancy “ . . . , 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" (441-42).

The novel thus comes to an end with yet another unexpected ending that transcends a historic fiction. The novel moves from history to mystery and achieves artistry. According to Dersiewicz, the novel is, "...the purest expression of his fabulating impulse set in a faraway time, the 1500s, and dividing its pages between two storied lands...Rushdie is working here with the twinned powers of erotic charm and artistic imagination. Men enslave women and are enslaved by in turn." (2). Rushdie's architectural paradigm is found to reflect the fictionalization of cross-continental renaissance coupled with the two prototypes cum archetypes like polyglot Mogor and imaginable Kara Koz in a Rushdiean style further paving the way to unveil bewitching stories in digression and become prevalent bridge between two cultures.

By the way, even in this sentence of the story, as everywhere in the novel, there seems to be at least two levels or a double sense of meaning that is "the illuminated borders may be read as well as the borders of the painted Mughals' world in its miniatures" (Jorissen 2). Rushdie adds a "Bibliography" of "Books" and "Web Sites" at the end of the novel to make it authentic about the resources. The novel is an intertext of Rushdie's earlier novels, history of India, and the art of Florence. In the novel, the motifs of travel, departing and coming home are present everywhere. Rushdie's novel is, indeed, so full of details and literary citations that it is sometimes not so easy to follow. Rushdie's narrator describes, for example, Argalia's "parti-colored greatcoat", a coat of marvelous abilities as he says:

He had won the coat at cards in a hand of scarabocion played against an astonished Venetian diamond merchant who could not believe that a mere Florentine could come to the Rialto and beat the locals at their own game. The merchant, a bearded and ringleted Jew named Shalakh Cormorano, had had the coat specially made at the most famous tailor's shop in Venice, known as Il Moro Invidioso because of the picture of a green-eyed Arab on the shingle over its door, and it was an occultist marvel of a greatcoat, its lining a catacomb of secret pockets and hidden folds within which a diamond merchant could stash his valuable wares, and a chancer such as "Uccello di Firenze" [i.e. Arcalia] could conceal all manner of tricks. (19-20)

This fine 'miniature' of description reminds the reader of the important role of Shakespeare's *Othello* ("Il Moro Invidioso") and *The Merchant of Venice* ("The merchant, a bearded and ringleted Jew named ShalakhCormorano") as referred to in Rushdie's novel *The Moor's Last Sigh* too.

The structure of the novel comprises at least four stories, which are quite independent, and are, nonetheless, intertwined. The stories develop in most different historical times and places. For India, the time is the Mughal emperor's grandfather Babur and Akbar's own time. For Europe, mainly Italy, and for the "New World", this is the time of Machiavelli, and the parallel time to that of Akbar's reign, when three Jesuits were sent to Akbar's court in 1580. This is yet another example of timelessness, or mixing up various periods.

Niccolò Vespucci himself has been deceived by time and believes to be what he is not, Akbar's uncle. But this belief enables him to tell Akbar his fantastic story, which brings together, among other things, Machiavelli's and Akbar's time. The novel reflects a special kind of comparative culture and cultural history, by mirroring places and times, which in history lay so much afar from themselves, but are made, humanly, so similar in the novel. Rushdie himself seems to say that with all historical (colonial), social, religious etc. problems it is still worth to write a story to invite the reader into something transcending these, not by making them forget, but to put them into a place on which light falls from astonishing angles.

In asserting the rights of magic, Rushdie also tests the power of the imagination to affect reality by compressing the already known heterogeneous facts and fictions in the frame story model. As discussed by Dersiewicz, this is his highest theme, and his persistent obsession in the novel. Imagination has the power to affect reality at personal, social, political levels. Rushdie has proved this in his writings. In *The Enchantress of Florence*, he imagines a fantastic life and seems to go out and live it.

The story of Lady of Black Eyes drives a whole city mad. Lines are drawn on a map, and a nation conjectures itself into being. The novel is set in a remote time and decorated with the language and properties of legend. We accept and even expect a certain quantum of the marvelous instances like Niccolò's magic cloak, for example, passes without trouble. However, Jodha is a different matter. She is central to Rushdie's thematic conception that men create women to fall in love with but he leaves her stranded between imagination and reality. She is more than an idea for Akbar but remains less than a full person. She has interiority, but she has no agency, no force in the world. As a result, she has little force in the novel, little hold on our imaginations, remaining nothing more than a nice idea that never fully comes to life (Dersiewicz 5-6).

As a text, *The Enchantress of Florence* is divided into three parts: the first third concerns Mogor-dell'Amore and his travels to reach Akbar; the second relates the story of three friends in Florence, Italy; and the third tells the tale of QaraKooz, a forgotten Mughal princess whose beauty enchants all who see

her. As the story progresses, imaginary fiction meets the factual and real-life personages such as Amerigo Vespucci, Niccolo Machiavelli, and Botticelli. They appear side by side with their literary counterparts. The characters and their various situations form the backdrop against which Rushdie formulates his ideas regarding beauty, power, art, and even the nature of humanity. Rushdie powerfully brings both India and Italy to life, and the sumptuousness of the prose is the best aspect of the work. The stylistic aspects of the novel are immense. The textual, ideational, and interpersonal functions of language are visible in the narrative technique. In the end, when the author writes reflecting the hallucinated character's the enchantress's voice, "...and so here I am, at journey's end" (443), a sort of loss of textual narrative miracle is felt abruptly. The novel is an account of nightmare of history shrouded very much in mystery.

CONCLUSION

The text intervenes in cultural systems in many ways through an interesting presentation of cultural signs of Mughal Empire in India and the then flourishing artistic and diplomatic Western nations. Thus, reading takes us into a network of textual relations. The first is the intertextual relationship becomes interesting in the novel only when the connection can be clearly verified fancifully and this textual relationship usually takes the form of allusions, quotations, annexations, etc. The second is the deconstructive view which says that intertextuality is the basis and requirement of all communications among all the fanciful notions of the novel. The historiographic metafiction of fantasizing Akbar, Her Majesty, the enchantress of Florence and the mock-heroic tradition of the life and manners of Mogor arouses curiosity to find the spontaneity and blend of centuries and spaces across the world together to give shape to magic realism.

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