# A Return to Roots: Revisiting the Imagined Homeland in The Moor's Last Sigh

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**Abstract**

Rushdie traverses geographical, political and cultural boundaries in the course of his writing only to return to the Indian homeland in *The Moor's Last Sigh.* In this novel the Indian nation assumes a fundamental thematic focus. The experience of alienation within a third world context is deliberated upon. Rushdie takes a look at the history of India fraught with turbulence in the last century in *The Moor's Last Sigh,* the deliberation on the nation that that began in *Midnight's Children* is carried forward in *The Moor's Last Sigh.* Whereas *Midnight's Children* ended with the Emergency, The Moor's Last Sigh moves into the crises of the 1980s and 1990s, furthering the political critique. The Moor's Last Sigh locates itself in modern India and draws upon Spanish history, which forms the backdrop and a recurrent motif in the text. The 'Moor' of the title of the novel is historically Sultan Boabdil, the last Arabic-Islamic ruler of Granada, the final bastion of Moorish governance in Spain. The legend goes that when King Boabdil surrendered the city to Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain in 1492, he turned back and released a sigh at the spot that continues to be called `Suspiro del Moro' — the Moor's sigh. It is this sigh that is referred to in the title. Medieval Spain had been a blend of Eastern and Western culture.

Keywords: - **Rushdie, politics, history, fundamentalism, diversity, pluralism, imperialism, monoculturalism, palimpsest**

## Introduction

Paul Cantor' argues that *The Moor's Last Sigh* furthers Rushdie's "interrogation of the postcolonial myth of cultural authenticity." According to him, the novel is an attempt to celebrate cultural hybridity wherein Rushdie reviews Indian society in the light of Moorish Spain. He feels that Rushdie's fascination with Spanish history owes to his perception of Spain as an exemplar of a multicultural civilisation, in the light of sectarian conflicts that have rent India apart in the twentieth century. Cantor

holds out a note of caution against the tendency to form simplistic equations between imperialism and "monoculturalism" on the one hand, and to equate anti-imperialism with multiculturalism on the other. He lauds Rushdie's exploration of the complexity of the issue he raises wherein "his use of Spanish history turns out to be part of a larger project of rethinking imperial history in general."

In his review of *The Moor's Last Sigh,* J. M. Coetzee highlights Rushdie's argument that the tolerant Arab rule led to a creative co-mingling of cultures that the Spanish inquisition brought to an end. He feels this view tends to ignore the weaknesses of the historical Boabdil. In actuality, Boabdil is supposed to have been a diffident person controlled by his mother and deceived by Ferdinand of Spain. However, Coetzee admits that the modelling of Moraes on Boabdil is an interesting proposition. He concedes that the thesis of Rushdie's novel that: "Hindu intolerance in India bodes as ill for the world as did the sixteenth-century Inquisition in Spain", is a provocative one.

The narrative begins in retrospect with the narrator Moraes Zogoiby - nicknamed Moor - recounting his story after having escaped incarceration in Spain. Moor charts down his story while he is held captive by Vasco Miranda in the latter's tower in Benengeli, situated in Spain. Following his escape, he is engaged in nailing the pages of his story to the trees around, evoking Martin Luther's famous nailing of his theses to the church door at Wittenberg. A reference to this act is made on the opening page itself. Unlike Martin Luther, however, the Moor has no lofty agenda. He mainly wants his story to be known before his likely arrest.

The story charts four generations of the Da Gama—Zogoiby clan. It takes into account their origins in Cochin on the Malabar Coast, follows their life of power and opulence on Malabar Hill, the elitist locale in Mumbai, and plays out its finale in Spain. Rushdie chooses to approach the story from the standpoint of two small minorities in the nation — the Jews and Christians. Francisco Da Gama and Epifania Menezes get married in 1900. They subsequently build an empire on the spice trade. Their marriage leads to the birth of two sons, Camoens and Aires. The homosexually inclined Aires and his wife Carmen bear no children while the union of Camoens and Isabella leads to the birth of a daughter, Aurora. The only heir to the family, Aurora Da Gama finds a mate in the Jew, Abraham Zogoiby. The four children born of their union include Christina, Inamorata, Philomena and Moraes - the central character.

Moraes' life becomes an allegory for that of the Indian nation. He is a hybrid character in terms of race. His lineage interweaves history and the fabulous, tracing back to Vasco da Gama, the Jews of Cochin, and Boabdil - the last Moorish sultan of Spain. The probability of Moraes Zogoiby being

Prime Minister Nehru's son is also proposed, with the insinuation that Nehru and Aurora could have been lovers. Through this suggestion of multiple paternities, Farhad Idris feels that Rushdie is making an attempt to let Moraes embody the turmoil of the entire nation.

> Like Boabdil, the Spanish Moor that he is palimpsested over, Moraes Zogoiby, in his metaphorical role is "a unifier of opposites... a symbol — however approximate — of the new nation . ." (MLS 303).

The personal self thus becomes an analogy for the nation. Like the city of Bombay, the Moor and his mother Aurora exemplify hybridity. In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem's life mirrors that of the nation. In Shame Sufiya's mind refuses to keep pace with the development of her body. Similarly, in The Moor's Last Sigh, Moor is afflicted by an irredeemable premature ageing condition wherein his body ages at twice the normal speed. An accelerated gestational period of just four and a half months - instead of the usual nine months - foreshadows his development. "A double-speed existence permits only half a life" (MLS 145), thus, at the age of ten the Moor "was a child trapped in the six-foot-six body of a twenty-year-old giant, and possessed, from these early moments of self-consciousness, by a terror of running out of time" (MLS 152). "My inside and outside have always been out of sync", Moraes declares. He subsequently goes on to compare himself with the city of Bombay:

> I mushroomed into a huge urban 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? (MLS 161-162)

**Discussion**

Besides the Moor ageing far too quickly, he has a congenital abnormality in the form of a clubbed right hand. In addition to his woes, he is later rendered impotent. The Moor is a misfit because he cannot belong to the world he lives in – his genealogy and physiology render this problematic. His origins as a Cochin Jew and his physiological condition ensure that he is alienated from the society to which he craves to belong. He jokes about his Catholic — Jewish origins: "I, however, was raised neither as a Catholic nor as a Jew. I was both, and nothing: a jewholicanonymous, a cathjew nut, a stewpot, a mongrel cur. I was ... a real Bombay mix" (MLS 104). For Rushdie, his beloved metropolis Bombay with its eclectic mix, its cosmopolitanism, its resilience, its contradictions, its excesses, is the quintessence of India. Similarly, Aurora is regarded as an "incarnation of the smartyboots metropolis" (MLS 139). Her home in Bombay welcomes all kinds of artists with an open-minded,

unprejudiced attitude. Likewise, her artistic imagination was characterised by inclusion. Her paintings offered an affirmation of pluralism in theme and technique. Worlds bled into each other and collided on her canvasses. "Call it Palimpstine" was her exhortation regarding this merger of "universe", "dimension", "country" and "dream" (MLS 226). Her art was:

> an attempt to create a romantic myth of the plural, 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. (MLS 227)

Aurora had embarked upon her artistic career with a huge mural covering every inch of the walls of her room, populated with every kind of icon apart from the divine. But the trajectory of her art only gets darker. Over the span of her artistic career she traces the course of her family and the nation, depicting the decline of India's idealistic pluralism and ending with a tragic palimpsest.

John Ball Clement notes that the parallel between the Spanish and Indian context enables a "prophetic critique". Medieval Spain with its multicultural ethos can be viewed as a kind of parallel to the secular pluralist ideals of Gandhi and Nehru. However, like this European counterpart that became coercive, India's fate could run a similar course under the shadow of dangerous sectarian forces like communalism.

The proponent of communalism in the text is a character that caricatures the Shiv Sena leader Bal Thackeray. Called Raman Fielding in the novel and nicknamed Mainduck, this political cartoonist later becomes a full-time communalist politician and founder of the Hindu nationalist party `Mumbai's Axis'. When the Moor is disowned by his family following Uma's ploy, and deceived by Uma, the love of his life, it is Mainduck who comes to his rescue. After Moor's release from prison, he unhesitatingly becomes an agent of Mainduck for six years, embracing his role without ado. This period gives him a clear idea of Mainduck's ideology. The Moor finds that in Mainduck's bizarre conception, cricket was regarded as an essentially Hindu game under constant threat from other communities within the country. He makes the following observation about Mainduck's austere agenda:

> He was against unions, in favour of breaking strikes, against working women, in favour of sati, against poverty and in favour of wealth. He was against 'immigrants' to the city, by which he meant all nonMarathi speakers, including those who had been born there, and in favour of its 'natural residents', which included Marathi-medium types who had

> just stepped off the bus.... He derided the Marxist analysis of society as class struggle and lauded the Hindu preference for the eternal stability of caste. In the national flag he was in favour of the colour saffron and against the colour green. He spoke of a golden age `before the invasions' when good Hindu men and women could roam free. 'Now our freedom, our beloved nation, is buried beneath the things the invaders have built. This true nation is what we must reclaim from beneath the layers of alien empires.' (MLS 298-99)

The religious fundamentalism in *The Moor's Last Sigh* is accompanied by what Idris terms "fascist xenophobia". The divisive rhetoric impacts even the cultural arena. The novel sees the rise of religious nationalism culminating in the destruction of the city of Bombay. Events like the seizure of the golden temple by Sikh terrorists, the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, and the destruction of the Ayodhya mosque in 1992 had a domino effect. Subsequently, men like Mainduck whose scheme was to subdue the minority factions in the country, gained momentum. It is noteworthy that such divisive forces had staunch support from the youth and the powerful classes in the city. The Moor is well aware that:

> ...they are not inhuman, these Mainduck-style Hitlers, and it is in their humanity that we must locate our collective guilt, humanity's guilt for human beings' misdeeds; for if they are just monsters — if it is just a question of King Kong and Godzilla wreaking havoc until the aeroplanes bring them down — then the rest of us are excused. (MLS 297)

The onus for the state of affairs is a collective one. The culprits are identified by the narrator as the individual self:

> ...the barbarians were not only at our gates but within our skins. We were our own wooden horses, each one of us full of our doom...We were both the bombers and the bombs. The explosions were our own evil — no need to look for foreign explanations, though there was and is evil beyond our frontiers as well as within. We have chopped away our own legs, we engineered our own fall. (MLS 372)

J. C. Ball regards the act of the Moor joining Mainduck's forces as a narrative device employed to give the reader an insight into the world of the fundamentalist leader and thereby facilitate Rushdie's satire. The Moor surrenders his quest for normality when he realises that it is beyond his grasp. Instead, he begins to use his deformed limb in a renewed attempt at self-definition.

In the Moor's complicity with forces of fundamentalism, J. C. Ball views signs of a satiric despair and all-embracing pessimism in the writer. It is in the act of the Moor embracing Mainduck's way as the future, that the concept of hybridity that he embodies at the outset, reaches its nadir. From his role as a "standard-bearer of pluralism", the Moor is thus transformed "into a semi-allegorical figure of decay" (MLS 303). The victim turns into the victimiser, the very perpetrator of violence. As a symbol of the new nation, the Moor is equated with a nation that is readily embracing partisan forces.

Rushdie's pessimism bears itself out in the fate of Adam Braganza. If *The Moor's Last Sigh* updates the political agenda of Midnight's Children, even the characters have advanced from one text to the other. In *Midnight's Children* Aadam Sinai is invested with the hope for a new forward-looking India. Saleem envisages this second magical generation of "potent kiddies, growing waiting listening, rehearsing the moment when the world would become their plaything" (MC 448). The infant Aadam Sinai, son of Shiva and Parvati in *Midnight's Children* who was adopted by Saleem Sinai, reappears in *The Moor's Last Sigh* as Adam Braganza. After Saleem's mysterious disappearance, he takes on the name 'Braganza' after the Braganza sisters who take care of him. Adam makes an appearance in *The Moor's Last Sigh* as a smart suave articulate, techno-savvy seventeen year old; whose management principles make an impression on Moor's father Abraham Zogoiby, the formidable owner of `Siodi Corp' enterprises. Abraham is so impressed that he adopts Adam as his own son and gives him the Zogoiby family name. But Adam Zogoiby comes to no good. Beneath his charismatic veneer he is a hypocritical and glib manipulator. By the end of the novel he is implicated in the financial scam and relegated to prison. Charges against him include smuggling, dealing in arms, corruption, and money laundering.

Abraham's flourishing business is in actuality a distraction, a decoy, for his large-scale smuggling operations. It is a secret he guards closely. His wealthy empire is built on such covert activities. On the night of India's independence, a drunken Vasco Miranda is unable to control his rage. He is incensed by the Hindu-Muslim violence, the growth of fundamentalism and the dishonesty in the country. His definition of Indian democracy is: "one man one bribe" (MLS 167). In an outburst of anger he tells Abraham Zogoiby:

> Let me give you a tip. Only one power in this damn counts is strong enough to stand up against those gods and it isn't blankety blank sockular specialism [secular socialism]. It isn't blankety blank Pundit Nehru and his blankety blank protection-of-minorities Congress watchwallahs. You know what it is? I'll tell you what it is. Corruption. You get me? Bribery. (MLS 166)

Abraham's financial success owes much to corruption. Farhad Idris reads *The Moor's Last Sigh* in the light of Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth.* He observes that Fanon's view that the "national bourgeoisie plays a detrimental role in the development of a decolonized country", is borne out in the Indian context. 8Idris feels that Rushdie insinuates that this class is responsible for many of India's postindependence troubles. Rushdie draws attention to the imbalanced distribution of wealth in the country, with a few large corporations controlling most of the wealth.

**Conclusion**

The end of the novel sweeps back to the beginning. It finds the Moor nailing the pages of his tale to the trees around. Art seems to triumph ultimately. The novel has been regarded as "a paean to the power of the aesthetic". The notion of art does seem to temper the pessimism in the novel. J. C. Ball, on the other hand, finds the structure of the work - with the beginning containing the end - reflective of the "gloomy fatalism". Moor knows his days are numbered. His strength seems to be leaving him. He is after all, a thirty-six-year-old, trapped in a seventy-two-year-old physique. Just as the dissolution of Saleem in *Midnight's Children* is reflective of the national degeneration; the accelerated ageing and impending arrest of the Moor mirror the collapse of the Indian nation The last line contains his "hope to awaken, renewed and joyful, into a better time" (MLS 434). He gazes upon the Spanish Alhambra in the distance which stands as a testament "to our need for flowing together, for putting an end to frontiers, for the dropping of the boundaries of the self (MLS 433).

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