

ART AS TECHNIQUE IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN AND SHAME*

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Modern paintings have always been the most conspicuous as well as inseparably integrated aspect of the technique of narrations of the novels of Salman Rushdie. Many critics are of the view that the painterly imagination crept in the narrative technique of Rushdie for the first time in his novel *The Moor's Last Sigh*, (1995), for the obvious reason that one of the major characters of the novel is a renowned painter who owes her genesis to the famous Indian painter of the first half of the twentieth century-Amrita Sher Gill. However, the fact cannot be denied that since his first novel- *Grimus*, (1975) the masterpieces of the painters of the first half of the century have been contributing significantly to the narratives in delineating the meaning and experience inherent therein. It is undisputable that the paintings come out with great aesthetic significance in *The Moor's Last Sigh* for the obvious reason that one of the major characters of the novel is a renowned painter, thus, the author has more specific opportunity to use paintings in the narrative. The second and third novel of Rushdie *Midnight's Children* (1980) and *Shame* (1983) are exclusive about the socio- political and cultural transition of the Indian subcontinent which offers a close comparison with the cultural upheavals that took place in the first of the twentieth century in Europe as a follow up of the First World War.

Salman Rushdie's first novel- *Grimus*, though failed to invite optimum critical attention, hold importance from the point of view of technical and thematic predilections set by the author for the further development of his art as a novelist. *Grimus* makes use of the masterpieces of the twentieth century surrealist masters like Salvador Dali, Marc Chagall and Pablo Picasso in delineating the characters and painting landscapes. The opening paragraph of the novel reminds us of the famous painting of Salvador Dali- *Persistence of Memory* (1931), which deals with the contrasting images of the timeless and time bound manifest in mutual correlation with the images of time and space. The views of Dali on the limp watches used in the painting further ratify the

function of the masterpiece in the narrative. ‘Like fillets of sole,’ he comments, ‘they are destined to be swallowed by the sharks of time.’ (quoted by Januszczak,152). The delineation of the characters in the novel also owes it aesthetic magnificence of the ornithological imagery of masterpieces of Marc Chagall. *Paris through the Window* (1913) is one of the great works of Chagall which shares the aesthetic domain with *Grimus*. The painting unifies a cat with human figure and in the perspective, depicts a flying man. *The Juggler* (1943) is another painting which capitalizes the form and function of ornithological images in order to delineate the complex idea of human predicaments. Shearer West, commenting on this painting of Chagall, points out that Chagall’s Juggler is both, ‘an acrobat and a rooster standing in a ring which contains Russian village.’ It becomes clear that there is re echo of Chagall’s *The Juggler* in Rushdie’s *Grimus*. Rushdie’s debt to Chagall becomes more obvious when he delineates Flapping Eagle on a donkey “

The Griibbs’ donkey, perhaps the most obedient, least mulish donkey that ever was, jogged demurely along the cobble way with a divided Flapping Eagle upon its back”. (Rushdie, *Grimus*,157)

The description of the protagonist in the lines quoted above owes its origin to the masterpiece of Marc Chagall which depicts a nude on a donkey.

The above discussion makes it clear that the *Grimus* sows the seeds of the technical preferences that are capitalized by Rushdie in his later novels that acquire the apogee in the succeeding two novels.

Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* and *Shame*, from the point of view of the form and function of the novel, invite a very close comparison with Picasso’s *Guernica* (1939) painted as a reaction of the destruction of the small town Guernica in Spain by the fascist army. The painting has a complex array of symbols- a bull, a horse, a distorted image of the sun, crying women and the butchered children and a hand holding a lamp. These symbol in complementation with one another issue forth an impression of waste, a composite feeling of rage, indignation and impotent revolt. The comparison may however be objected to as Picasso’s *Guernica* is an immediate reaction to a single event and *Midnight’s Children* and *Shame* are Rushdie’s response to the long political processes of the two main countries of the Indian Subcontinent, namely India and Pakistan. However, it is undeniable that *Guernica* foretells a gory, inhuman future of human race which cannot be limited to a time period or a country. The views of Hans L C Jaffe on *Guernica*, further confirms the comparability between the masterpiece of Picasso and the two novels of Rushdie. He opines that *Guernica* ‘constitutes a warning to mankind of unleashing the forces of darkness.’ Jaffe further explains the inherent implications of *Guernica* and says;

But the meaning, the emotional expressiveness of the signs has become more tense and more explosive; the horse and the bull are graven more deeply on the viewer’s memory than are the human figures; thus it is the mythological signs of suffering and ruthlessness that dominate the work. (Jaffe37)

The views of Picasso on the function of painting further ratify the parallel between the masterpiece and the novels. He says that the painting is ‘an instrument of war for attack and defense against the enemy.’ He further intensifies the comparison when he says that ‘one must fight everything that threatens the freedom of imagination.’ (Read, 160) It is obvious that the two masters had similar intentions and points of view and they created with similar passion and convictions that owe their genesis to their love for the origin despite displacement.

The characterization in *Midnight's Children* owes its metaphorical magnificence to the use of dream imagery. It is evident that the characters peopling the fictional domain of *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* are realized through a process of fantasy that denies chronological development. They are generally types or caricatures. The cubistic technique used by Pablo Picasso seems to be the main source of inspiration. The fantasy reduces these characters to a caricature through mockery or parody. Picasso, in his portraits, opts for the complete elimination of the third dimension. The elimination of the third dimension makes the human figure, a representative of the time and place that is contemporary Europe which is characterized by spiritual hollowness and emotional and ideological void. Rushdie by using the cubistic technique in drawing the verbal portraits of the human figures, draws a close metaphorical parallel between Europe of the first half of the twentieth century and the Indian subcontinent of the post Independence era. Many cubistic paintings of Picasso portray the contemporary in flat tones and fragmented figures.

The characterization in both these novels is the main area of the application of modern paintings in the narratives. The distortion of human image has always been the favorite device of the painters of the first half of the twentieth century. Almost all the characters in *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* undergo the distortion of normal proportions. Rushdie portrays the protagonist of the *Midnight's Children* exactly in the cadence of the cubistic figures of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, the pioneers of cubistic movement in the history of modern painting. The outright denial to the conventional modes of characterization makes a reader feel like viewing a cubistic painting. The three dimensional appearance of the protagonist is reduced to two dimensions which is the most eye catching aspects of the portraits painted in cubistic manner. Saleem's face in his childhood was 'too perfectly round.' (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*,144) The roundity of the face of Saleem reminds of a number of cubistic portraits painted with elimination of the third dimension. The character of Widow is an important testimony of Rushdie's debt to surrealist painters. She is delineated with ghostly hallucinations and prophetic intensity that have always been the defining features of the surrealist paintings of the first half of the twentieth century. Widow, an embodiment of political evil pervading the country, is delineated with surrealist monstrosity in black and green background and foreground. It is remarkable that the black on one hand is symbolic of darkness and green on the other hand symbolizes envy. Saleem introduced Widow in the backdrop of surrealistic nightmarish hallucination to Padma. He narrates;

Now one by one the children mmff are stifled quite the Widow's hand is lifting one by one the children green their blood is black unloosed by cutting fingernails it splashes black on the walls (of green) as one by one the curling hand lifts children high as sky the sky is black there are no stars the Widow laughs her tongue is green but see her teeth are black. (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, 249)

The character of Widow reminds us of the famous painting of Salvador Dali titled *Premonition of the Civil War* painted in 1936. The character of the Widow is identified with that of Mrs. Indira Gandhi however to associated the character directly with an individual is not justified as in the larger context we come to understand that the character is an embodiment of the political vices pervading the system. The parallel between the India of *Midnight's Children* and the Europe of Salvador Dali becomes obvious as India of *Midnight's Children* was enduring the fright and horror of suspension of human rights and freedom of imagination and expression

during the Emergency and the condition of Europe, under the dark clouds of the Second World War had similar socio-political uncertainties and the fear of unpredictable holocaust. The beast holding the woman figure by her breasts draws an obvious parallel with the character of Widow and the woman enduring nerve rending cruelty is obviously a figurative parallel of the midnight children subjected to political atrocities that is the aftermath of the abuse of political power. The comparison between the painting and the character of Widow also confirms the parallel between the Civil War of Spain and the Emergency of India.

Sufiya Zinobia is realized through a process of fantasy. She is undoubtedly the most important of all characters in the novel. Rushdie himself elaborates the idea of mutual interdependence of these two emotions. He says;

“I suppose Sufiya Zinobia came out because I wanted some kind of the idea the book dealt with. You have to make the connection between shame and violence.” (*Gentleman*, February 1984, 59)

She is the embodiment of shame with violent outlet and illustrates the universal interdependence of these two paradoxical aspects of human behavior manifest at political level. The first spark of the violence is seen when innocent Sufiya, at the age of twelve, kills as many as seventeen turkeys of Pinky Aurangzeb with astounding brutality “Sufiya Zinobia had torn off their heads and then reached down into their bodies to draw into their guts up through their necks with her tiny and weaponless hands.” (Rushdie, *Shame*, 138)

Sufiya Zinobia finally turns into a complex metaphor representing the suppression of shame, guilt, humiliation and libidos and thus aptly represents the future of a country like Pakistan routed by the religious fanaticism and consequently exploited by the political heads of the country. Irony rules supreme in the delineation of the character of Sufiya Zinobia which, in mutual complementation with surrealist fantasy, strengthens the metaphorical status of the character. Irony creeps in delineation of the character right from the birth. Uma Parmeswaran rightly remarks that ‘she is not the sex her parents desired her to be,’ and it is because of this ‘humiliation’ that she ‘becomes sensitive from birth to the emotion of shame.’ (Parmeswaran 78) Sufiya Zinobia soon grows into a metaphorical illustration of shame and violence

The use of irony acquires graver dimensions when the narrator tells about the growth of the character. Sufiya Zinobia ‘has grown,’ the narrator confides, ‘her mind more slowly than her body.’ The irony acquires a graver twist when the narrator, ‘for his slowness,’ takes her to be somehow clean (pak) in the midst of this dirty world.’ (Rushdie, *Shame*, 120) The importance of the character along metaphorical dimension continue to grow as the idea of suppression is not limited to political motifs but the suppression of sexual desires contribute to the making of the character with comparable significance. Sufiya’s conjugation with the protagonist- Omar Khayyam Shakil, is a step towards the realization of the ironic pervading within and around the character. The narrator confides that ‘she was his wife yet she was not his wife.’ (Rushdie, *Shame*, 210) About marital conjugation, Sufiya only knows that ‘there is a thing which woman at night with husbands,’ but ‘she does not do it.’ The irony acquires assiduous turn when Sufiya realizes that ‘Shahbanou does it for her.’ (Rushdie, *Shame*, 215) The suppression of sexual desires fused with the emotion of shame is the axis around which the character moves and the dynamics of violence is aptly defined around this axis. The natural interdependence of unsatisfied libidos and the emotion of shame seek outlet in form of violence of melodramatic intensity. The narrator confides;

Shame walks the streets of night. In the slums, four youths are transfixed by those appalling eyes, whose deadly yellow fire blows out like a wind through the lattice-work of the veil. They follow her to the rubbish dump of doom, rats to her piper, automata dancing in all consuming light from the black veiled eyes. Down she lies and what Shahbabou took upon herself is finally done to Sufiyya. (Rushdie, *Shame*, 219)

It is clear from the above discussion that Sufiyya Zinobia is a complex character with strong metaphorical suggestions sprawling over a vast space covering numerous aspects of socio-political realities of a country like Pakistan which is ruined by fanaticism and political malpractices.

The origin of the character of Sufiyya Zinobia can however be traced in the works of Pablo Picasso and Salvador Dali. The character of Sufiyya Zinobia draws a close parallel with the woman in the works of Pablo Picasso painted during the Second World War. *The Weeping Woman* (1937) is the most outstanding work done during this period which enshrines all the pains and humiliation of a common man aptly represented by Sufiyya in the narrative. *The Weeping Woman* is one of the series paintings and drawings connected with *Guernica*. It is an expression of grief and frustration expressed through the portrait of Picasso's mistress, Dora Maar. Picasso adopts the technique of fusion. In the painting, the fingernails of the weeping woman become one with the tears of her and her handkerchief, clenched in her teeth become one with her face. Picasso portrays the woman and the background in dark shades which draws an ironic parallel with her frustration and misery. Jesse Mc Donald expresses surprise on the use of colors in this painting and says

The Weeping Woman reappears in similarly apocalyptic works of the period, but in this case, in strikingly dissonant colors, in contrast to the austere palette of black, white and grey, which helps to reinforce the paralyzing terror of *Guernica*." (Mc Donald,17)

The surprise of Jesse Mc Donald is however well answered by Hans LC Jaffe who discussing the distinction in the choice of colors in these two paintings- *Guernica* and *The Weeping Woman*, says

In one respect the picture differs from *Guernica* – in the strident dissonance of the colors. They help to elevate the dramatic conflict to the timelessness of myth." (Jaffe,108)

It is interesting to note that the ironic contrast of the dark and stark shades of *The Weeping Woman* makes it more readily comparable with Sufiyya Zinobia of *Shame*. Sufiyya embodies numerous shades of human emotions and human relationship that remind us of the ironic emphasis of the portrait. The woman is subject to nerve rendering pain and soul tormenting frustration manifest chiefly at political level painting the landscape of contemporary Spain in pain and grief. The woman in Picasso's masterpiece is the same as Sufiyya in Salman Rushdie's *Shame*.

The sexual frustration of Sufiyya Zinobia can be traced in the masterpiece of Salvador Dali titled *Young Virgin Autosodomized by her own Chastity* (1954). In this painting the surrealist master paints a young virgin as nude, leaning against the wall of the terrace being surrounded, rather attacked by the horns of rhinoceros. The painting justly juxtaposes the modern with the classical and structures a new myth defining the sexuality of the modern woman. Dali's views on the symbolic worth of the horns of the rhinoceros, confirms the motif. He says

The horn of the rhinoceros, the former uniceros is in fact the horn of legendry unicorn, symbol of chastity. The young virgin can lean on it, play with it morally as was practiced in time of courtly love. (Maddox80)

Dali's views on the use of the symbol in this painting, justly ratifies the parallel between the young virgin chafing against her own chastity and Sufiya Zinobia enduring suppression and helplessness. The reference to courtly love further confirms the parallel between Dalinean figure and the character of Rushdie. The irony in portraying the young virgin becomes sharper when the inward movement of the horns of the rhinoceros, in an ironic manner, illustrate the outward movement of the desires pervading the psyche of the young virgin. Both the young virgins are delineated with similar intentions and comparable motifs. Rushdie, however, doesn't limit his character to endurance and goes beyond to delineate her with retaliation and revenge.

It is clear from the above discussion that the two masterpieces- Picasso's *The Weeping Woman* and Salvador Dali's *Young Virgin Autosodomized by her own Chastity* make the foundation of the most important character of Rushdie's masterpiece- *Shame*. The socio-political implication of the character can be traced back in the masterpiece of Picasso who portray the fear and frustration of the common man in the times of the Second World War through this portrait of tremendous intensity. Sufiya, in the narrative, emerges is an embodiments of same emotions of fear and frustration. However Picasso's Spain was at war with Germany whereas Rushdie's Pakistan is more at war with itself than with any external power. The subjectivity of Sufiya Zinobia can easily be defined in terms of the leers and libidos seeking outlet which owes its origin to Dalinean masterpiece. The young virgin of Dalinean masterpiece invite our attention for suppression and endurance whereas in Rushdie's *Shame* action of the young virgin- Sufiya Zinobia is not limited to endurance but it enters the realm of retaliation.

It is clear from the above discussion that the most conspicuous aspect of the technique of narration in the novels of Salman Rushdie is the use of modern paintings. There are however various domains of the technical frame work where the art influence operates, yet, the delineation of the characters is no doubted the most widely operated area of technicalities where the twentieth century art seeks invasion and redefines and motif and intentions of the master. Pablo Picasso is unquestionably the most outstanding influence on him which determines the essential nature of the narrative.

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