

THE ELEMENTS OF DIASPORA IN RUSHDIE'S NOVEL *THE MOOR'S LAST SIGH*

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Abstract: Salman Rushdie, the world famous postcolonial writer of Indian Diaspora revisited the palimpsest multicultural history of India in his fifth novel *The Moor's Last Sigh*. In the novel, he represents India and interrogates Indian secularism from the perspectives of minority communities like Jews and Portuguese with strong European diasporic backgrounds. This paper studies these elements of Diasporas interpreting the changing nature of secularism in India.

Keywords: Diaspora, Secularism, Communalism, Race, Cosmopolitan, Multiculturalism.

“‘Exile,’ it says somewhere in *The Satanic Verses*, ‘is a dream of glorious return.’ But the dream fades, the imagined return to stops feeling glorious. The dreamer awakes. I almost gave up on India, almost believed the love affair was over for good (Step across this line 197).”

Rushdie's fifth novel, *The Moor's Last Sigh* was first published in the year 1995 is a sort of microcosm of India in the nineties. As a postcolonial writer he revisited history. So in the novel once again we find Rushdie handcuffing the history of secular India with the family and life of a peripheral hero Moor or Moraes Zogoiby from peripheral communities of Christian and Jews in India. His obsessions of postcolonial re –interpreting history from the margin drives him to write novel with characters as mouth-pieces of their exilic experiences interlinking with the standard one.

In *The Moor's Last Sigh* like his earlier historical fictions we find marginal narratives interacting with the central one, unfolds the overwritten layered or palimpsest history of India. The novel highlights communalism in multicultural postcolonial Indian society with Babri Mosque demolition 1992 as its foci. This history of communalism if we retrospect to colonial period we may find its root in colonial diaspora in India. Colonial rulers generally maintain their distance from the assimilative pluralistic culture of India. But Diaspora the very term stands as a symbol of transplantation or adaptation with new environment keeping ones identity intact. Hence in many ways Rushdie in this novel traces back to the origin of the element of essentialism in Diasporic condition as the tendency of maintaining racial purity among the European colonialist in their overseas colonies like India. It reflects the European struck in ‘home-away-home’ kind of condition in the colonies, which manifest their longing for their original homeland. It refers to a static but composite picture of their ‘Homeland’ ingrained in their minds when they

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left it for new destinations. This memory of 'Homeland' because of its static nature Rushdie calls it as 'Imaginary Homeland'. In fact, in colonial context it originates from a more or less Evangelical European missions to civilize the world. But the European colonial power gradually turned those religious missions into political force. They set up settlements outside Europe called colonies in different parts of the world. They by dint of their remarkable progress in science and technology since renaissance turned almost the whole world into their colonies. They rule the world outside Europe with the ideology of White man's Burden to civilize the uncivilized colonized Black man. But in practice they treat themselves as master race. This thinking legitimized their right to ill-treat colonized native as subject race. Hence in colonies in order to maintain their racial purity these European rulers remained secluded from their so called uncivilized subjects and culture. They formed diaspora in terms of their racial superiority for example European clubs at Chittagong in British India (now in Bangladesh) used to put up notice "The dogs and the Indian are not allowed" as writ. Thus during colonial period this mutual hatred of exclusive cultures between the master and their subject race has acquired legendary status. But this act of maintaining immunity from the subject race of colonized people and their culture by the white colonial master, in changed scenario of post-colonial period of their former colonies like post-Independent India has turned them into minority community. For example the novel *The Moor's Last Sigh* explores this diasporic feeling in the English priest.

D'Aeth

India was uncertainty. It was deception and illusion. Here at Fort Cochin the English had striven mightily to construct a mirage of Englishness, where English bungalows clustered around an English green, where there were Rotarians and golfers and tea dances and cricket and a Masonic Lodge. But D'Aeth could not help seeing through the conjuring trick, couldn't help hearing false vowels of the coir traders lying about their education, or wincing at the coarse dancing of their to-tell-the-truth-mostly –rather –common wives, or seeing the blocksucker lizards beneath the English hedges, the parrots flying over the rather un-Home – Counties Jacaranda trees. And when he looked out to sea the illusion of England vanished entirely; for the harbour could not be disguised, and no matter how Anglicised the land might be, it was contradicted by the water; as if England were being washed by an alien sea. Alien, and encroaching; for Oliver D'Aeth knew enough to be sure that the frontier between the English enclaves and the surrounding foreignness had become permeable, was beginning to dissolve. India would reclaim it all. They, the British, would – as Aurora had prophesied – be driven into the Indian Ocean-which, by an Indian perversity, was known as the Arabian Sea. (Rushdie 95)

Rushdie's novel *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995) critically analyzes the representation of India from the looking glass of marginalized Indian with Portuguese and Jewish origins having very strong diasporic cultural backgrounds of Europe. Rushdie from his concern for minority wrote this novel as a sequel to his *Midnight's Children* to interrogate the limitations of Nehruvian political experiment of developing India as a modern secular and democratic state.

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He shows through the novel, the alternative versions of communal politics frequently raising its ugly head from dormancy. These communal forces pollute the Indian secular political scenario by encouraging sectarian politics for narrow political gain. Thus Rushdie presents a very bleaker side of Indian politics, whose enforcers in the name of the tradition of majority community mark and forcefully promote these minority communities as mere outsiders. Thus these communal politicians impose a diasporic identity crisis on the minority communities in their own country India. In this way forcing the people of minority communities to feel and seek solidarity with their fraternity lives as majority in other countries. For example Muslims seek solidarity with Arab countries, Christian with the continents of Europe and America etc.

Since the 1950's, an ugly kind of regionalism has been widely prevalent in the form of the 'sons of the soils' doctrine. Underlying it is the view that a state specifically belongs to the main linguistic group inhabiting it or that the state

constitute the exclusive ‘homeland’ of its main language speakers who are the ‘sons of the soil’ or the ‘local’ residents. All others who live there or are settled there and whose mother tongue is not the state’s main language are declared to be ‘outsiders’. These ‘outsiders’ might have lived in the state for a long time, or have migrated there more recently, but they are not to be regarded as the ‘sons of the soils’. This doctrine is particularly popularly in cities, especially in some them. (Chandra 160)

Therefore in *The Moor’s Last Sigh* before discussing about the presence of Catholic, Jewish and Moorish Diasporas in India and their marginalization in post-Independent postcolonial secular India, it is instructive to discuss their diasporic history in India.

Down the ages the profitable spice trade with India had lured foreign traders of diverse origin to the harbours of Cochin (Kerala) and the south western part of India. Various European powers tried to discover the sea route to India in order to carry out this profitable spice trade with India and to put an end of the monopoly of Arab traders. Efforts in this direction were made under the enthusiastic royal patron like Prince Henry the navigator and by many courageous navigators like Christopher Columbus. But it was left to the Portuguese navigator Vasco da Gama to finally discover it with the help of an Arab pilot. He landed in Cochin in the year 1498 with his ships and thus came the Portuguese in India for trade. Gradually they acquired political base in Bombay (Mumbai) and Goa and establish colonies there. These Portuguese settlers managed to maintain their hold on Goa until it was finally annexed to Indian domain through arm action in 1961, fourteen years after Indian independence in 1947. The Reminiscent of Portuguese culture in Goa, Mumbai and along the south western coast of India is still very prominent. On the other hand, the Jews came to settle in South Western India as a part of their exodus from Europe and Middle East to survive against anti-Semitism and also for the attraction of lucrative trade in India.

In 70 CE, the Roman capture of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Second Temple scattered a wave of Jewish immigrants across the globe. One group – attracted by the tropical environment and a history of lucrative trade – chose to settle in the Kerala region of southwestern India. Feted as foreign kings by Kerala’s rajas, and lavished with land, privilege, and autonomy, they enjoyed a harmony that is rare in their history. Despite living in peace with their Hindu, Muslim, and Christian neighbors, they were plagued by division from within. Separated by a narrow stretched of swamp and the color of their skin, the White Jews of Mattancherry and the Black Jews of Ernakulam engaged in centuries of acrimonious dispute over who arrived first in India. The resulting apartheid led to too few marriages, too few children, and an ever declining population. (Fernandez, jacket of *The Last Jews of Kerala*)

The novel begins with a family tree of Da Gammas and Zogoiby families as the ancestors of Moraes Zogoiby or Moor, the main character of the novel. Da Gammas are Portuguese Catholic, whereas Zogoiby family belongs to the Jewish communities. Both these communities rather sects (here Catholics and White Jews) are bearing antagonistic history against each other in their European mainland came to India for different reasons and settled in Cochin. Da Gammas claims themselves to be the descendant of the historical figure Vasco Da Gama, the great Portuguese navigator. Moor's great grandfather Francisco Da Gamma flourished in spice trade. But going against the colonial tendencies of white man in India during British period, he disregards his colonial lineage and identified himself as an Indian. He never took the white man's exclusive advantages of colonial period to adopt colonial means to expand his business. On the contrary he is amiable and philanthropist in nature. He emerges as a leading figure of secularist Indian National Congress party in Kochi, leading upfront Indian anti-colonialist freedom movements in Cochin against another colonialist British power.

The Indian National Congress, which was born in December 1885, tried from the very beginning to eliminate such regional differences. The first

Congress declared that one of its major objectives would be the "the development and consolidation of those sentiments of national unity". The decision to hold the Congress session every year in different parts of the country and to choose the president from a region other than the one where the session being held, was meant to break this regional barriers and misunderstandings. In 1888 it was decided that no resolution would be passed if it was objected to by an overwhelming majority or Muslim delegates; a minority clause figured prominently in a resolution adopted in 1889 demanding reform of the legislative councils. The avowed objectives of all these endeavours was to create a forum through which the politically conscious people of different regions of India could unite. It was meant to be organized in the way of a parliament and the sessions were conducted democratically. It represented, in a true sense of the term, the modern politics in India and obviously therefore, it signalled the coming of new trend in Indian public life. (Bandyopadhyay 222)

But his house remains divided on this colonialist and anti-colonialist question. His wife Epifania and son Aires believe in security of being Portuguese colonialist than an Indian. Hence they supported British colonialist power and thus isolating themselves in exclusive diasporic community of fair skin in India, while his younger son Camoens choose to be progressive minded like him. Camoens follows his father's footsteps to believe himself more Indian than a Portuguese and plunges into nationalist movement of India. The division in the family is so sharp that in order to hurt his brother's nationalistic sentiments Aires acquired a pet British Bulldog and gave it an anti-colonialist name Jawaharlal after the name Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru at that time a leading nationalist later on becomes the first Prime Minister of

independent India to humiliate the ongoing nationalistic movement. This preference to Portuguese diaspora turned Epifania and her son Aires da Gama into a prisoner of static and stereotype colonialist outlook towards India. Hence they fail to appreciate any change in Indian political scenario from their narrow cocoon of colonialist ideology. This love for homogeneity perhaps symbolically corresponds to Aires's unproductive gay relationship with one whom he ironically gave a colonialist name Prince Henry the Navigator after the historic figure Prince Henry the navigator. In the same way the old stagnant figure of Epifania was left to die with her old convictions by her granddaughter Aurora da Gama to take her grandmother's place with all her flamboyant plurality a symbol of India. Here Aurora da Gama seems to allude to Roman Goddess of dawn Aurora, she welcomes the sunrise of pluralistic India removing the darkness of ignorance of worn out communal prejudices borne to this land from Europe and transplanted in this land as Portuguese diaspora in particular and European diaspora at large. Then she trumpets her gospel of secularism and heterogeneity by violating class, age and religious barrier by marrying her twenty years senior lowly duty manager Abraham Zogoiby, a Jew or to be specific a White Jew and in this way she endangers another homogenous Jewish diaspora in Cochin (Kerala).

Moraes's father Abraham Zogoiby is a 'family employee' (69), and a descendant of what his mother calls the 'White Jews of India, Sephardim from Palestine [who] arrived in numbers (ten thousands approx.) in Year 72 of the Christian Era, fleeing from Roman persecution (70-71). Indeed, it is Abraham's identity as a Cochin Jew that prompts his mother's resistance to his marriage to Aurora da Gama. For while the Jewish population of Cochin have historically co-existed with other ethnic groups in India, such as the majority Hindu population, they have also defined their ethnic identity as separate. One of the ways in which the Cochin Jews attempted to define their identity as separate, as Nathan Katz explains, is to become accepted as a caste within the mainstream Indian society(Katz2000:60). This attempt has involved not only the observation of strict moral and social codes, regarding diet and the use of a sacred language but also compulsory endogamy (Katz2000:72). Such strict moral codes would certainly account for Flory Zogoiby's to her son's marriage to Aurora da Gama. Yet, as Abraham subsequently discovers from reading an old Spanish manuscript, the Zogoiby family is itself the product of an exogamous relationship between the exiled Sultan of Boabdil and an ejected Spanish Jew: 'two powerless lovers making a common cause against the power of the Catholic Kings.' (Morton 82)

Thus Aurora's effort to marry Abraham and taking his Jewish name Zogoiby not only dissolves the long standing prejudices of anti-Semitism between Catholics and Jews but also goes a long way to reveal his husband's heterogeneous Moorish and Jewish lineage of Multi-cultural medieval Moorish Spain.

Now this 'Cath-Jew' Zogoiby's couple left Kerala, their ancestral diasporic backyard and settled in Bombay (Mumbai). Their only son our narrator Moraes or Moor Zogoiby is born in Bombay (Mumbai), a microcosm of multicultural India. Hence we find that Moor or Moraes undertakes a trajectory from womb to tomb to realize different stages of pluralistic art of his mother Aurora Zogoiby. This can also be interpreted as a diasporic journey of Moor's realization of India's pluralistic culture. He goes to Spain to recover his mother's painting entitled *The Moor's Last Sigh* on the subject of collapse of Secular and Multicultural medieval Spain at the decline of Muslim rule in Spain. From Spain he looks back to India narrates the whole story of his four generations in India interrogating the standard and practice of secularity in Postcolonial India. He realizes various selves of his mother Aurora Zogoiby projected in the novel as an embodiment cosmopolitan version of Mother India manifested in her pluralistic art through his various real life realizations. He undergoes these experiences under the tutelage of various personalities of diverse backgrounds; each representing his or her particular tendency of their own. This act also corresponds to Hindu custom of pilgrimage to realize integration of diverse Indian culture. According to Indian Philosophy, life itself is a constant journey towards meeting with the Almighty. In this sense, one's experiences of different phases of one's life are a sort of different diasporic experiences of a soul which yearns for its original Homeland, the abode of God to meet the Almighty. However, Moor's orbiting around his parents' heterogeneous backgrounds is a symbolical quest to know the pluralistic and palimpsest history of multi-culture India and world as well by collecting all the versions of his parent's life from others. Moor's realizations of whole multi-cultural India in parts comes very close to Rushdie's earlier work *Midnight's Children* where Dr Aadam Sinai's is made to see his patient (who later on becomes his wife) in parts through the perforated sheet. It left Dr. Aadam contemplating her as a whole. This process of contemplating the whole by its parts rather integrating its parts according Kortenner alludes to myth of Sati in Hindu mythology, where the dead body of Devi Sati is dispersed in different directions of India to form fifty two Sati or Shakti Piths. Now if all these parts are integrated then the composite picture of Bharat Mata (Mother India) with all her pluralities emerges as a cult. This cult of Bharat Mata was imagined by novelist Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay in his novel *Anandamath*, considered as the bible book of Indian freedom struggle. This cult later on appropriated by votaries of *Hindutva* to miss-represent the nationalist movements as essentially Hindu movements against the foreign rule for a nation of Hindus, the son of the soil. Therefore This incident of Moraes or Moor's quest for the inter-links between multi-cultural India and a multi-cultural Spanish diaspora through his parents' lives and lineages also alludes to Hindu myth of Lord Ganesha (the deity largely worshiped by the people of Mumbai) winning the race with his brother Lord Kartik of revolving around the world in shortest possible time by metaphorically taking his

parents Lord Shiva (God of Death and Destruction) and Goddess Parvati or Shakti (Goddesses of Energies) as the world itself. This also connotes the Hindu beliefs of considering one's parents as God from where one takes one's origin or original homeland both biologically and sociologically and then disseminates into the wider world forming personal diaspora of experiencing the life on the basis of one own original background. Hence in *The Moor's Last Sigh* we find him pointing out the overlapping of secularism and communalism through the eyes of his narrator Moor. Moor's sigh while narrating the loss of India's inherent multicultural society in the labyrinth of conflict between standard and practice of Secular and Communal politics in India articulates his diasporic anxiety in communal India and longing for his imaginary but original homeland in secular and multicultural India.

History repeats itself in our narrator's life when he goes to his ancestral land Spain to recover his mother's portrait The Moor's Last Sigh, a symbol plural art metaphorically depicting this transition phase of Indian politics during and after Babri Mosque demolition at Ajodhya. There he sighs for the loss of his motherland India's secularity and could relate his feelings with Spanish history of once being a home of secular Multicultural society during his ancestral Sultanate. His mother's portrait painting also reveals this same feeling as it is based on his ancestor Sultan Boabdil, the moor, the last Nashrid Sultan of multicultural medieval Spain who also sighed like him many centuries ago in Spain at the loss of Multicultural Sultanate to Fundamentalist Christian monarch Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand. Moor's retrospective narration of his marginalization in Communal India betrays the root cause of endangered Indian secularism. He narrates from his life experiences how the excess of secularism based on scientific progress leads its followers to become superstitious about the religions and the traditional religious identity of Indian. They become open communal at the very mention about any religion and summarily reject Indian religions as a set of superstition leading to communalism and therefore untouchable. In the novel, it is evident in *Elephanta* the name of the house of Zogoiby's house in Mumbai represents a tussle between Aurora's Secular nationalism and Raman fielding chauvinistic communal Hindu nationalism. Aurora names their house *Elephanta* after Hindu God Ganesha in the spirit to ridicule the God's seemingly disproportionate body. To show it she mimics the dancing statue of Ganesha and the zeal of people to celebrate the bathing of Ganesha by dancing on a stage higher than the God. She does it to promote her cosmopolitan Bombay lady image, whose status is higher than the ludicrous Hindu God. "Also sky-high above the crowds and upon the precipitous ramparts gods, year after year – forty year – one years in all- fearless of our Malabar Hill bungalow, which in a spirit of ironic mischief or perversity she had insisted on naming *Elephanta*" (Rushdie 123). This reactionary approach among secular nationalist thus pave the way of a communal upsurge in India to recover their lost glory of religious tradition.

In fact this tendency is seemed to be rooted in popular and seemingly unobjectionable symbolic stance of post-colonial reclaiming of Indian cities and places from colonial hangover by re-naming of Indian places according to their regional languages for example British name of the cities like Calcutta, Bombay, Madras are re-named as Kolkata,

Mumbai and Chennai respectively. But this name change of India's commercial capital Bombay into Mumbai unfortunately set in the symbolical reclaiming of cosmopolitan city of Bombay into the fold of state (province) of Maharashtra to control the lucrative commerce in the name of regionalism. The regional political party like Rastriya Shiv Sena or RSS raises the slogan 'Mumbai for Marathi' and later on connected it with extremist *Hindutva* slogan as mainstream religion as mainstream culture relegating other communities into mere outsiders cocooned in their own diasporas. In the novel we find Mainduck the caricatured character corresponds to Late Bala Sahib Thackeray, the undisputed supremo (Chief) of Shiv Sena.

Mainduck came across to us and patted Lambajan on the shoulder. 'A true Mahratta warrior,' he said, breathing betel-fumes into my face. '*Beautiful Mumbai, Marathi Mumbai*, isn't Borkar?' he grinned, and Lambajan, standing as close to attention as he could with a crutch, assented. 'Sir skipper sir.' Fielding was amused by the incredulity on my face. 'Whose town do you this is?' he asked. 'On Malabar Hill you drink whisky-soda and talk democracy. But our people guard your gates. You think you know them but they have also their own lives and tell you nothing. Who cares about you godless hill types? *Sukha Lakad ola zelata* You don't speak Marathi. "When the dry stick burns, everything goes up in flames." One day the city – my beautiful goddess – named Mumbai, not this dirty Anglo-style Bombay - will be on fire with our notions. Then Malabar Hill burn and Ram Rajya will come.' (Rushdie 293)

Finally we may say that Rushdie through these diasporic elements in this engaging novel brings to us in a tragic-comic colour his apprehensions about the future of India's multi-cultural society and her secular democracy. He reveals his uprooted experiences as an Indian diasporic writer after the publication of his fourth novel *The Satanic Verses* in his essay "A dream of Glorious return" when the then Congress Government of India to earn political dividends not only banned the book, but also refused visa to him by showing secular reasons.

In 1988, I was planning to buy myself an Indian base with the advances I'd received for the new novel. But that novel was *The Satanic Verses*, and after it was published the world changed for me, and I was no longer able to set foot in the country which has been my primary source of artistic inspiration. Whenever I made enquires about getting a visa, the word invariably came back that I would not be granted one. Nothing about my plague years, the dark decade that followed

the Khomeini fatwa, has hurt more than this rift. I felt like a jilted lover left alone with his unrequited, unbearable love. You can measure love by the size of the hole it leaves behind.

It has been a deep rift let's admit that India was the first country to ban *The Satanic Verses* – which was proscribed without following India's own stipulated due process in such matters, banned before it entered the country by a weak Congress government led by Rajiv Gandhi, in a desperate, unsuccessful bid for Muslim votes. After that, it sometimes seemed as if the Indian authorities were determined to rub salt in the wound. (Step Across this Line 196,197).

Rushdie in that same essay further exposes the so called secularism of Congress government under the leadership of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, who according to him was the main cause behind the state furnished nationwide Sikh genocide in India. He did it not only to avenge his mother's former Prime Minister Smt. Indira Gandhi's assassination by her Sikh bodyguards on desecrating Golden Temple Gurudwara issue during Operation Blue star, but also to teach a very bitter lesson of secularity to a whole community's sentiments of Sikhs. Thus in India at that time Rajiv Gandhi's personal grudge compels Sikhs to embrace communal colours and therefore excommunicated from rest of secular or Congress party's India.

I remember another widow. In that 1987 documentary we included an interview with a Sikh woman, Ravel Kaul, who had seen her husband and sons murdered before her eyes by gangs known to be led and organized by Congress people. Indira Gandhi had recently been assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards and the whole Sikh community of Delhi was paying the price. The Rajiv Gandhi government prosecuted nobody for these murders, in spite of much hard evidence many of the killers.

For Vijay Shankardass, who had known Rajiv for years, those were disillusioning days. He and his wife hid their Sikh neighbours in their own home to keep them safe. He went to see Rajiv to demand that something be done to stop the killings, and was deeply shocked by Rajiv's seeming indifference. 'Salman, he was so *calm*.' One of Rajiv's close aides, Arjun Das, was less placid. '*Saloon ko phoonk do*,' he snarled. 'Blow the bastard away.' Later, he too was killed. (Step Across This Line 201 202)

Within a decade or so after the publication of the novel we have seen how relevant his predictions of encroachment of tolerance in our country are. For example we have seen state furnished communal riots in Godhra, Gujarat. This type of cultural blindness is now heading towards Colour blindness tendencies (distinctive racial features). The racial attacks on North Eastern students in Delhi, national capital tarnish the secular image of India. The casual approach of Government and carefree attitude of citizen of India of viewing these incidents as isolated one or acting as mute spectators encourages Son of the Soil activists. This goes a long way to force an inner Diaspora of North eastern people in plain lands of India.

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