



*Lapis Lazuli -An International Literary Journal (LLIJ)*

Vol.4 / NO.1 /Spring 2014

**Relocating Ahmad's 'cultural differentialism' in Salman Rushdie's '*Ocean of the Streams of Stories*'**

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***Abstract:***

*The paper aims to read Rushdie's novella Haroun and the Sea of Stories with respect to postcolonial concerns with history and Eurocentricism. For the colonized, history becomes precolonial, colonial or postcolonial, eroding away all other local specifications that might have been the defining motif of that particular community. Under such circumstances, arise the need to build up an alter-historiography celebrating a multicultural hybridity. One strategy is to use the community's oral past, which by virtue of its fluidity achieves a hybridized space containing historical past with displaced present. Such hybridity is seen in Rushdie's novella Haroun and*

Lapis Lazuli -An International Literary Journal (LLIJ) ISSN 2249-4529

Vol.4/ NO.1/Spring 2014

URL of the Journal- <http://pintersociety.com/>

URL of the Issue: <http://pintersociety.com/vol-4-no-1-spring-2014/>

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*the Sea of Stories to show how it helps in resisting the formation of an overarching national identity, which tends to universalize by implicitly assimilating within an identity that grew up in dialogue/response to its colonial past. Using the writings of the migrant and displaced storyteller can escape the entrapments of both essentialism and nativism, and find a synthesis between the two in the creation of an alter-historiography to define the emergent nation-states in postcolonial spaces. Salman Rushdie, one such 'cultural amphibian', seems to add to the discourse of postcoloniality a certain 'translaion' or a 'place of hybridity', an aspect which I would like to look at through his novella Haroun and the Sea of Stories.*

**KEYWORDS:** *History, Postcolonial, Salman Rushdie, Aijaz Ahmad, Hybridity, Multiculturalism*

In the finalist notions of cultural differentialism...historical time is simply denied as actually having happened. Instead, a mythic past is posited as the only true moment of cultural authenticity, hence the only measure of time, so that the vocation of history is to turn upon itself and recoup that mythic measure and rehabilitate that lost but ever present Authenticity...On the other hand...migrants residing in metropolitan cities and emanating from there to the rest of the globe, is, in a profound sense, simply the opposite of cultural differentialism, equally anti-historical, even though denying the actuality of historical depth in its own terms, as mere 'myth of origin', myths of 'deep nation' and the 'long past', etc.

(Ahmad)

In the last lines of Aijaz Ahmad's essay 'The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality', I find a suitable entry point into the central argument of my paper, through which I will try to look at this 'anti-history' strand utilized within postcolonial criticism and the need to create an alter-historiography in defining the emergent nation-states in the postcolonial spaces. That one requires, formulating an antithesis to history, I think, arises from the need to distance oneself from the Eurocentricism inherent in our understanding of history, especially when the domain of discursivity is postcolonial. Hence, there is a certain mythification of given facts in postcolonial writings (to take one example in say Salman Rushdie), that one begins to question what is truth and what is fiction, in the constructed history of postcolonial spaces.

In this regard, it might be really thought provoking to begin in Fredric Jameson's claim in reading all 'third-world texts' as 'national allegories' in his 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism' and its counter response in Aijaz Ahmad's 'Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory''. While 'Third-World' is a much used concept in postcolonial criticism, what Ahmad finds disagreeable, is the fact that instead of defining the Third-World in its relation of production, Jameson's sole description stems from its experience of colonialism and imperialism. This in turn finds valorization in demarcating Third-World ideology in nationalism alone, and thus their texts become 'necessarily...national allegories'. In arguing against such sweeping generalizations, Ahmad not only questions the legitimacy of universalization, but also problematizes the scope of history, through which the Third-World emerges in the Jamesonian vision of the Hegelian 'slave', as mere objects of history. Moreover, the concept of universalism becomes an overarching homogenizing of human nature leading to the marginalization and exclusion of distinctive characteristics of postcolonial societies.

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Identifying in it a primary strategy of imperial control, Ahmad tries to replace the 'nation' with his concept of 'collectivity' in an all encompassing cultural hybridity.

Moving from there into his 'The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality', one can trace a definite favouring of cultural hybridity over history, in postcolonial spaces. And where can one trace the richness of cultural hybridity of a community if not in its evergreen folklore? This is where I would like to bring in Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, where Rushdie not only brings in all the myths and legends of his mother culture, but also hybridizes it by mutating them with myths and legends from his displaced location. While the story begins in the nameless city of Alifbay (which gets its name from the combination of first two letters of the Arabic script based Urdu letter, *Alif* and *Beth*), it goes onto branching out in the places, now named after the English alphabet, namely the 'Valley of K' or the 'Tunnel of I'. Though thick with allusions, its richness of theme along with its language can be deciphered and appreciated at various levels. Originally written for his son Zafar, the reading of the book does not remain age-specific, and keeps unraveling newer surprises for both the young and the old.

However, before delving into the play of words, names, places and time that Rushdie takes us to, one must consider the location of the author himself. In Ahmad's words, he is the 'migrant intellectual' signifying 'a universal condition of hybridity' and is treated as having a superior understanding of both cultures than those living within those cultures. Being dislocated from their original locations and scattered, they are the sites of duality between a lost motherland on one hand and the relocated motherland on the other. Little Haroun becomes the symbol of this displaced individual, caught between the loss of his mother on one hand and being almost hurled

into a new space of that of the Gup land on the other. The displaced individual in search of his identity, becomes the mediator of creating, constructing and reconstructing identity, not by staying rooted to one ancestral place, 'but through traveling itself' (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 427).

While the diasporic subject travels, so does culture. A travelling culture means a culture that changes, develops and transforms itself according to various influences it encounters in different places. Thus, while diasporas change their countries of arrival, so are their cultures changed in turn. In this respect the most explicit binary, that apparently existing between 'indigenous' and 'diasporic', becomes disrupted, as James Clifford shows, by the 'articulation' of identity through movement and travel. (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 427)

Through his adventure in the city of Gup, Haroun not only brings together those 'various influences' in his father's restored never-ending tales of 'tall, short and winding' tales at the end, in the Valley of K (since the entire adventure begins in Haroun's attempt at restoring Rashid's lost Gift of Gab), but also manages to bring back to his own nameless city, a name that it had completely forgotten.

In the restoration of a lost history, or a lost name in the case of Haroun, one can go back to Ahmad's response to Jameson's position, where identifying the First and the Second Worlds in terms of their production systems, that is capitalism and socialism (that which has constituted human history), he accords them a position of those who make history. On the other hand, the Third-World being identified purely in terms of its colonialist 'experience' is but reduced to mere objects of history.

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The problem of history becomes particularly crucial for the post-colonial writer. For not only are the questions of truth and fiction, of narrativity and indeterminacy, time and space, of pressing importance because the material ground, the political dimension of post-colonial life impresses itself so urgently, but the historical narrativity is that which structures the forms of reality itself. In other words, the myth of historical objectivity is embedded in a particular view of the sequential nature of narrative, and its capacity to reflect, isomorphically, the pattern of events it records. The post-colonial task, therefore, is not simply to contest the message of history, which has so often relegated individual post-colonial societies to footnotes to the march of progress, but also to engage the medium of narrativity itself, to reinscribe the 'rhetoric', the heterogeneity of historical representation as White describes it. (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 318)

*Haroun and the Sea of Stories* emerges almost as an answer to such postcolonial angst, and also as a symbol of Ahmad's response to Jameson. Indeed it is an allegorical rendering of the postcolonial experience, but its 'national' identity is not as mere objects of history, but rather a 'collective' identity, arrived through a playful envisioning of the hybridity, that which is both lost and gained.

Juggling with this pull between truth and fiction within history in postcolonial spaces, the first crisis period crops up in the novella, when Soraya abandons Rashid, leaving him to ponder over the question 'What's the use of stories that aren't even true?' The loss of the 'mother' leads to the chain of dislocations in the novel, starting with the loss of the gift of gab of the Shah of

Blah and his 'ark'ed silencing in the Town of G and Haroun's eleven-minute-syndrome. There is a freezing of time, with the smashing of clocks to bits, as all the normalcy is sacrificed to a search of new beginning, to wipe away the after-effects of this crisis period which threateningly becomes to be lived as an 'infinite aftermath' ('The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality' 281). From there to the land of Gup on the moon Kahani, one arrives at the 'Ocean of the Streams of Story' brilliant in a riot of colours and exuding its warmth. It is almost like the fluid oral tradition of folklore that is colourful in its ethnic/indigenous cultural plurality. However, being fluid, it is in a constant state of flux, remixing with each other at various levels of combinations 'to become new versions of themselves, to join up with other stories and so become yet other stories... much more like a storeroom of yarns' (*Haroun and the Sea of Stories* 73). There arrives a migrant visitor, Haroun, through whose experience of getting into the tale of Rapunzel (*Haroun and the Sea of Stories* 73), one detects the first signs of pollution that will start plaguing the land of Gup eventually. The migrant visitor becomes almost akin to the migrant author who becomes the space for mixing of the historical past with the displaced present: the city of Gup and Chup on one hand, while the water genie Iff, the Unidentified Flying Objects and the mechanical bird Hoopoe on the other; the Khattam-Shuds and Mudra on one hand (which can etymologically be traced back to 'Hindustani' words), while places named after the English alphabet, pages named after adjectives like Blabbermouths and the Eggheads on the other hand. In this topsy-turvy world of Hobson-Jobson we are almost reminded of Rushdie's attempt at tracing an 'eloquent testimony to the unparalleled intermingling that took place between English and the languages of India' ('Hobson-Jobson' 81) in his *Imaginary Homelands*.

The world of Haroun appears that of an almost clear binary of black and white, of people who only speak against people who have vowed silence, and an autocratic figure vis-à-vis a king

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who is almost inconsequential. However, one cannot ignore the middle zone of the Twilight Strip which adorns the invisible Chattergy's Wall and the 'genius' Eggheads who have engineered the rotation of Kahani, bringing it under their control, as a result of which 'the Land of Chup is bathed in Endless Sunshine, while in Gup it's always the middle of night' (*Haroun and the Sea of Stories* 80). This seems an almost sinister Othering in an otherwise colourful world. The Eggheads emerge as more cruel (in the segregatory fashion in which they create the city of Chup as their visible other); over the Cultmaster Khattam-Shud himself, whose extent of evilness is mostly towards his own people, until he plans to pollute the Ocean of Streams of Stories.

What is also noteworthy, is the various references of names, like that of the 'Chattergy Wall' whose namesake has had nothing to do with the building up of the Wall, and also 'Kache-Mer' distorted into 'Kosh-Mar' in the Valley of K. It is almost as Ahmad points out 'the stripping of all cultures of their historicity and density' ('The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality' 290) being either represented through images of power or distorted through agencies of disruption. This act of naming becomes extremely crucial within the discourse of history of a particular community or space, as it is only through the act of naming that one aims at identifying the self, which will stamp one with the legitimacy of existence. Naturally enough the postcolonial critic is so wary of history and its carefully crafted narrative!

The 'other' of this written history is very convincingly found in the folklore of the colonized nation, and it is to that multicultural fluid past of the colonized, that critics like Ahmad return to, in an attempt to write a new history in the postcolonial space to avoid the Eurocentric universalization that one is most likely to fall into the traps of. Correlating his vision with



Rushdie's usage of borrowed myths from both cultures, one can understand the contribution that such a displaced author can do to the politics of postcolonialism, which in itself is an interiorized displacement of sorts. Ahmad recalls Bhabha's views on the same, who believes that these 'cultural amphibians' ('The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality' 286) having access to a global identity are free of gender, class or any identifiable political location. They add to the discourse of postcoloniality, a certain "translation": a place of hybridity' ('The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality' 287)

This is what Rushdie achieves in his character of Haroun, whose individuation occurs in a moment of loss and displacement, as he becomes almost a saviour figure, not only saving the Ocean of Stream of Stories from being totally corrupted, but also restoring normalcy in the Moon Kahani, by setting the rotational movement of Kahani back to its original pace, rather than a scientifically engineered demarcation into Light and Darkness. This scientific intervention of the Eggheads (appearing benign on its surface but densely segregatory) neatly tie up with the scientific visionary of history writing as a single narrative truth that is claimed to be the closest possible representation of events notwithstanding the subversive loopholes that such a narrative construction withholds.

However, Ahmad also deviates from Bhabha, to postulate his own understanding of the migrant figure as the 'Truth-Subjects'. Making a clear cut distinction at the very earliest, that postcoloniality had moved from the domain of political theory into that of literary theory, he also designates this postcoloniality as a 'matter of class' towards the end of his paper. He writes,

Among the migrants themselves, only the privileged can live a life of constant mobility and surplus pleasure...Most migrants tend to be poor and experience

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displacement not as a cultural plentitude but as torment; what they seek is not displacement but, precisely, a place from where they may begin anew, with some sense of stable future. ('The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality' 289)

In Rashid and Haroun we see that cravings of starting anew, and their search for a stable future ends with the return of Soraya, and the restoration of a forgotten history, by restoring the name 'Kahani' to the sad city with its forgotten name. This history, however, is an alter historiography, woven out of tales that are colourful and warm in their Stream of multiplying hybridity, which showers rains of happiness in an otherwise sad city.

What colonialism does to the colonized is a network of intertwined processes, starting with the effects of the first colonial contact, to the subtle forms of neo-colonial domination even after decolonization. As a result, the effects of colonialism become an eternal lived reality of the colonized, to the point that it becomes the chief mode of periodising history as precolonial, colonial and postcolonial, eroding away all other local specifications that might have been the defining motif of that particular community. Thus, Ahmad rightly points out, that in the postcolonial spaces, it is very difficult to get over the colonial hangover, and etch a national identity, without unconsciously falling into the traps of trying to prove oneself against an 'other'. Talking about the Third-World, specifically India, there is ample scope of slipping into this sort of a Eurocentrism, having known no other way of self determination for a very long time. This is what emerges as the main point of contention in postcolonial critics like Ahmad, that despite a shared experience of colonialism; the cultural realities of post-colonial societies may vastly differ. It is hence extremely inadequate to club together all once-colonized spaces as a single

mass, stripping away their individual historicities and densities. Critics like Jameson seem to have further aggravated these phenomena, by basing this colonial hangover of the Third-World as its self-defining moment, demarcating its self assertion to mere 'nationalism' alone. With both European imperialism and Third-World nationalism, all that the nation-state is reduced to is a universal space as the most desirable form of political community (Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin 341). This leaves very little space, for the Third-World to individuate its identity in its private domain of multiculturalism.

This builds up a call for a post-colonial history (as Dipesh Chakrabarty would suggest) that begins even before the effects of colonialism adulterated the colonized spaces. This would mean to go back to its early beginnings, periodised in its oral tradition of folklore. However, being oral, it is extremely fluid, and like the Ocean of Stream of Stories, has floating in its vastness, single coloured strand of infinite tales, making the entire Ocean seem like made up of 'thousand thousand thousand and one different currents, each one a different colour, weaving in and out of one another like a liquid tapestry of breathtaking complexity' (*Haroun and the Sea of Stories* 72). Beginning in that mythical past of authenticity and origin, by the time one reaches the postcolonial present, the tales are interspersed with legacies inherited from the colonial culture (just like the older stories mutate with other stories to form newer ones in the novella) since no postcolonial form can avoid the impact of the assimilating colonial tendencies, which results in conscious moments of cultural suppression with the coming of the colonizers. However, the older forms never die out, but continue existing, even though newer forms emerge out of a certain cross-fertilization between both the cultures. The attempt is to accept this multiculturalism and hybridity in resisting the formation of an overarching national identity, which tends to universalisation by implicitly assimilating within an identity that grew up in

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dialogue/response to its colonial past (that is in 'nationalism'). Hence there is the need to save the Wellspring: the Source of Stories in the South Pole of Kahani (the storehouse of the ancient tales), without which history will be but what only the colonizers make of it.

That the writer is writing from a displaced position makes the use of this mythical understanding even more essential, as well as interesting. In the words of Rushdie himself,

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must do so in the knowledge—which gives rise to profound uncertainties—that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind. (*Imaginary Homelands* 10)

It is just like that of the real world of Kahani, vis-à-vis the dreamworld of the moon Kahani, where each thing or person encountered has its counterpart in the real world. The homeland, thus, becomes a site of duality for the displaced storyteller, that of the real and the imagined. However, the real can be restored back its identity, only by first traversing the imaginary spaces of the moon Kahani. In travelling back to those imaginary spaces, one is also confronted with a living multiculturalism that needs to be rescued from erasure, so that it can be incorporated in the evolving history of the real world.

Coming back to where I started from, Ahmad's 'anti-history' call to evade universalisation under Eurocentricism, seem to be fulfilled in Rushdie: the migrant, displaced storyteller, whose only access to his past is through revisiting those spaces in imagination and build up fictions that can regenerate facts as opposed to the so-called official facts (that which Jameson would characterize as the Hegelian Master-Slave paradigm). The call for 'cultural differentialism' in the former, 'whereby no culture is or ought to be available for correction by another culture', seem to be validated in the latter, as he can escape the entrapments of either essentialism or nativism, but rather find a synthesis between the two, being 'at one and the same time insiders and outsiders in this society' (*Imaginary Homelands* 19). Though the novella (1990) precedes Ahmad's 'The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality' (1995), and though Ahmad points out his apprehensions of bestowing these migrant figures the power of being Bhabha's 'Truth-Subjects' without questioning their narrative tonality, there seems to evolve a continuity in the way both view history. One, with his Marxist consciousness of the relation between history and power; and the other coping with his historical loss by recreating history in myths, seem to uphold a call for the need of an alter-historiography, by advocating a narrative that 'deliberately makes visible, within the very structure of its narrative forms, its own repressive strategies and practices' (Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin 318).

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