

## GEOGRAPHICAL LINEAGE: SALMAN RUSHDIE'S MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN AND THE MOOR'S LAST SIGH

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### Abstract

*This paper deals with the geographical lineage presented in two novels of Salman Rushdie namely *Midnight's Children* and *The Moor's Last Sigh*. The importance of the city of Bombay in Salman Rushdie's life as portrayed in his works is given. The long association and influence of the city on him is worked upon. It is not only the feeling of 'Bombayness' that is dealt with in Rushdie, but also the details of the topographical Sunderbans in *Midnight's Children*. From Mumbai to the whole nation he presents before us pictures of places of historical interest with a cross section of the society. With the description of cities, Rushdie compares, contrasts and juxtaposes them vividly which reflects his own affinities or disgust for them. If India and its places are there in *Midnight's Children*, he crosses over the border in *The Moor's Last Sigh*. Bombay is again revisited in his novel *The Moor's Last Sigh* but not alone. It gives the beauty of Cochin, Malabar, hill stations around Bombay and we fly across the continent to the Spanish villages in the last part of the novel.*

**Key Words:** Geographical, Lineage, Association, Influence, Topographical, Cross section, Juxtapose, Vividly, Affinities, Disgust, Continent.

Salman Rushdie could be best described as having multiple loyalties, even multiple belongings - to India; to Britain, to the world rather than as having none at all. Pico Iyer, a dislocated, displaced, and deracinated man, rightly salutes his fellows when he describes Rushdie as 'a connoisseur of dislocation' (Iyer 1997: 148), and Michael Ondaatje as coming from a family of 'deracinated cosmopolitans' (136). The novels of Rushdie are replete with geographical tours and explorations. He vividly describes the magic of India in his novels.

The original motivation behind the novel even before Rushdie had thought of the plot or anything else is the vision of this wonderful city of Bombay of the fifties and sixties (now renamed and popular as Mumbai) which is frozen in his memory. Bombay, a hybrid and the cosmopolitan city with its composite and secular culture becomes, for Saleem, a metaphor for the multiplicity of India. Rushdie himself claims *Midnight's Children* to be his first attempt to capture and celebrate "freedom" of the secular, broad-minded Bombay (Step 2002: 195). *Midnight's Children* narrates the experiences of three generations of the Sinai family living in Srinagar, Amritsar and Agra and then in Bombay and finally in Karachi. Rushdie has the familial affection with the city of Mumbai, which participates in his autobiographical as well as political narration. In one of his interviews, he admits that every visit to Bombay for him is like 'homecoming'. Bombay has been focused due to its secularism.

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The topographical Bombay, merged with somatic nation as 'Bombayness' is not powerful enough to overwhelm the country's 'powers of dilution' (The Moor's Last Sigh 2006: 351). In *Midnight's Children* Rushdie coins the term 'Bombayness' to encapsulate the whole value system: its multiplicity, pluralist secularity, its ability to contain diverse and contradictory realities. He emotionally gives the topographical details with its locales, myths, legends, and also its historical facts. Rushdie devotes a part of the novel to Sunderbans, which he calls the descent into the inferno. The 'Hell' chapter is not about the jungle, but 'the hell' is what the jungle tells them about themselves. It is an internal hell that the jungle externalizes. Rushdie fixes this in his fiction as some fantasy or nightmare and the portrayal in the novel suggests the readers that there has to be some real place called Sunderbans located on the geographical map of India. Rushdie in one of his interviews explains that he has lent objectivity to the place by making it somewhat unreliable. It is an open version for the readers to believe or not, which saves it from sounding oracle.

Rushdie with his characteristic metaphysical wit violently yokes together heterogeneous elements. Saleem Sinai's face is represented as bearing a remarkable resemblance to the map of India. The demented schoolteacher draws a brilliant connection between the two:

'These stains,' he cries, 'are Pakistan! Thee's birthmark on the right ear is the East Wing; and thee's horrible stained left cheek, the West! Remember, stupid boys: Pakistan ees a stain on the face of India!' (Midnight's Children 321)

The teacher through the geographical connotations candidly points out the political implications, and the baldness on Saleem's head seems to suggest the problem of Kashmir. Rushdie, through his grandfather Aadam Aziz, laments on the image of Kashmir as place where there is violence, army caravans and innocent killings. It was not so before India's independence:

In those days the radio mast had not been built and the temple of Sankara Acharya, a little black blister on a khaki hill, still dominated the streets and lake of Srinagar. In those days there was no army camp at the lakeside, no endless snakes of camouflaged trucks and jeeps clogged the narrow mountain roads, no soldiers hid behind the crests of the mountains past Baramulla and Gulmarg. In those days travellers were not shot as spies if they took photographs of bridges. (MC 5)

Rushdie also describes how the Kashmir valley welcomes the summer:

The world was new again. After a winter's gestation in its eggshell of ice, the valley had beaked its way out into the open, moist and yellow. The new grass bided its time underground; the mountains were retreating to their hill-stations for the warm season. (MC 5)

Tai, the boatman, made his living as a simple ferryman, despite all the rumours of wealth:

The sight of Tai's shikara approaching, curtains flying, had always been for Doctor Aziz one of the defining images of the coming of spring. Soon the English sahibs would arrive and Tai would ferry them to the Shalimar Gardens and the King's Spring. (MC 11)

For the age of Tai, Doctor Aziz says:

Nobody could remember when Tai had been young. He had been plying this same boat, standing in the same hunched position, across the Dal and Nageen Lakes ... forever. (MC 10)

Whenever Rushdie deals with any place in his novels we can instantly and deeply feel his sense of belongingness to that place. In the chapter 'Methwold' of *Midnight's Children* the origin of the city Bombay, its adaptation of the new name, reasons behind it and the geographical details are

brought into focus. We are told that fishermen known as Kolis were the original inhabitants of the city; it was a dumbbell-shaped island tapering at the center. It was the finest and the largest natural harbour in Asia before the Reclamation. Initially the name was after the goddess Mumbadevi but under Portuguese the name that became popular was Bombay. The city that was and its growth at the breakneck speed are also elaborated to the readers. And Kolis that are now squashed into a tiny village in the thumb of the hand-like peninsula give it the name - Colaba. He also regretfully describes the successive invasion of the city that displaced its earliest inhabitants, the Koli fisherfolk.

In the due course of the novel Rushdie makes readers travel through many places. On the roads they come across many landmarks of Mumbai which guide characters/ readers to reach somewhere and these are the places that any native of that city can really associate him with and this helps in convincing the foreign readers also. The places and landmarks like Warden Road, Mahalaxmi Temple, Willingdon Club golf-course, Hornby Vellard, Vallabhbai Patel Stadium with the invincible Bano Devi and the mighty Dara Singh on the giant posters are as popular and familiar to foreigners as to natives; they too can associate themselves with these places while reading the novel. Not only the landmarks of the city Bombay, but even roadside shops that led to Methwold's Estate are mentioned. This is exactly a nostalgic invitation to the people who were once residents of the city. The exact location of the Estate is explained. It looked down on Breach Candy Swimming Club which was exclusive for the British. Many times we are given details, which make the story seem factual. Even the Methwold's Estate has been treated in detail.

At more than one place the history of Bombay is traced: somewhere Rushdie picks up the political rule and at others he deals with the geographical aspects. While looking at the tomb of the Haji Ali, Narlikar feels remorse at the eternal struggle of the land and sea and draws the somatic history of the city. We are told that 'once there were seven islands, Worli, Mahim, Salsette, Matunga, Colaba, Mazagaon, and Bombay. The British joined them up' (*Midnight's Children* 183).

On discussing the hot weather of 1956 with the language marchers we get to know about the vegetation that proliferates in such weather, that the crops that grow best are cane sugar, coconut palm and certain millets. Our knowledge is enriched by the information that our land is world's second producer of cotton. Whether these geographical details are the exhibition of Rushdie's knowledge or an attempt to make the foreigners feel like home is for the readers to decide. Rushdie visits and re-visits places that he wants to use in his novels and also some places, which he suspects that he might use like for instance, Benaras - whose hostel of bereaved women he uses in *Midnight's Children*.

Peeping into the family affairs through the washing chest Saleem, the narrator in *Midnight's Children*, switches over from private to public affairs of India, spying into the communal intimacy. To escape peer pressures he moves out of the closet of his family and practices his art of eavesdropping on the strangers. With this move he captures the whole of India giving geographical details, imbued with the historical, the social and the political ones. He gives us the glimpse of Taj Mahal in north and Meenakshi Temple in the south. Sometimes as a tourist, and sometimes as an auto-rickshaw driver he tours Connaught Place. He puts himself in everybody's shoes and gives us the view through the eyes of the locals. If a rickshaw-wallah complains about the low fares against the rising price of gasoline, he gives a thorough cross-section of the society. And again he mentions about people who sleep in a section of drainpipe.

He is a fisherwoman in Cape Comorin whose sari was as “tight as her morals were loose....” (Midnight's 240), from a writer he instantly becomes an avid traveler flirting with Dravidian beachcombers, being with a Goojar tribe, enjoying the glory of Kolakoi glacier. He is a handicraft woman of Jaisalmer and also an embarrassed youth in Khajuraho and the Tantric Carvings on the Chandela Temples. He gives all colours of India in his snapshots. He also presents the social picture of India with a huge economic gap - Uttar Pradesh with a big belly landlord to the people starving in Orissa. Saleem compares his secret traveling through the byways of his city to the legendary Caliph, Haroun-al-Rashid but unlike him he would not have enjoyed moving around much.

Rushdie in the circuitous journey moves his story in roundabouts where recurrences and crossing roads are not uncommon. He describes Rann of Kutch - a magical name for the chameleon area which is land for half the year and sea for the other half and this amphibian terrain has fabulous debris abandoned by the receding ocean. Saleem on his voyage to Pakistan in the commander's namesake ship SS Sabarmati comments that there is 'no escape from recurrence' (Midnight's 396). When Saleem hears about going back to Bombay after the stay in Rawalpindi for about four years he enjoys his 'rainbow'(413) city after the landing and is happy to leave the city which 'looks like a village' (412). We can very well judge the author's inclination towards the Indian city in comparison to its counterpart in Pakistan.

Very often his pertinent use of the rhetoric makes the account of the city very graphic, for example the riot of Amritsar is made very lucid and picturesque:

Amritsar dung was fresh and (worse) redundant. Nor was it all bovine. It issued from the rumps of the horses between the shafts of the city's many tongas, ikkas and gharries; and mules and men and dogs attended nature's calls, mingling in a brotherhood of shit. (Midnight's Children 36)

Similar descriptions are found in regard to the city of Karachi also. Through such juxtapositions where mules, men and dogs are merged into one brotherhood he ventilates his disgust with the cities in India as well as those in Pakistan. We are also made to judge the sensitivity of the place by the change in the trait of the character as we are told that Ahmed who was once a Delhi man, has now become a true Bombay Muslim at heart who places cash matters above most other things. In comparison to Bombay, Rushdie finds in Karachi no urban culture but instead a repression of culture.

In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Rushdie turns to Malabar, one of the earliest roots of colonial India that has come to deserve his attention. The story meanders, twists, turns and sometimes cascades in typical Rushdie style, as the scene cuts to Cochin, then to Bombay and finally to Andalusia. Rushdie's plot moves from the marginal Cabral Island to the metropolis Malabar Hill. Bombay and then steps out of the frame: goes abroad to, 'Little Alhambra' in Benengeli, Spain. The location transits from the east to the west. The structural movement alludes to the author's diasporic (or exilic) itinerary and his ambition to deal with more complicated, variegated human experiences. The geographical expanse seems to increase with each successive novel. If Bombay is vividly presented in *Midnight's Children*, *The Moor's Last Sigh* altogether travels across the continent, after describing the Indian cities of Bombay and Malabar, to reach Spain.

*The Moor's Last Sigh* is an attempt to capture changes that have taken place in the cosmopolitan city of Mumbai. This novel may well be seen as a complex elegy for the loss of the city's earlier identity, including its name. It is very interesting to note that catering to Rushdie's palimpsestual needs Bombay has been again renamed as Mumbai. “Bombay” is the corruption of

Portuguese word Bombahai meaning 'good bay' and this got culturally transformed to the original Mumbai named after Mumba-Devi. .

Aurora's paintings depict Bombay landscape blending into an Arabian seascape, with 'strange composite creatures slithered to and fro across the frontier of the elements' (The Moor's Last Sigh 226). The dividing line of the water was the focus as it presents life both in sea and water – 'figures from history or fantasy or current affairs or nowhere, crowded towards the water like the real-life Bombayites on the beach, taking their evening strolls' (226). Aurora suggests calling it 'Mooristan' or 'Palimpstine' (226). The intermingling of the land and the water was something of the Cochin of her youth which pretended to be a part of England, but was washed by an Indian sea. In her easel, 'Mughal forts of India blended Mughal splendours with Spanish building's Moorish grace' (226). She would go anywhere anytime to paint for which Abraham Zogoiby marvelled at her as 'crazy woman' (MC 130). When during the great naval and landlubber strikes in February 1946, Bombay was transformed overnight into a motionless tableau:

Aurora began to zoom around the paralysed town in her famous curtained Buick, ... being set down outside factory gates and dockyards, venturing alone into the slum-city of Dharavi, the rum-dens of Dhobi Talao and the neon fleshpots of Falkland Road, armed only with a folding wooden stool and a sketchbook. Opening them both up, she set about capturing history in charcoal. (MLS 129)

It is Bombay itself, the city of Rushdie's youth that provides the "metropolitan" component an endlessly fascinating, diverse fusion of disparate elements that he knows as 'Bombay of my joys and sorrows' in the novel. Rushdie recalls in rapture:

Bombay was central, had been so from the moment of its creation. The bastard child of a Portuguese-English wedding, and yet the most Indian of Indian cities. In Bombay, all India met and merged. In Bombay, all-India met what-was-not-India ... Bombay was central; all rivers flowed into its human sea. It was an ocean of stories; we were all its narrators, and everybody talked at once. (MLS 350).

Rushdie also appreciates Bombay for its tolerance towards plurality:

In Punjab, Assam, Kashmir, Meerut – in Delhi, in Calcutta – from time to time they slit their neighbours' throats and took warm showers, or red bubble-baths in all that spuming blood. They killed you for being circumcised and they kill you because your foreskins had been left on. Long hair got you murdered and haircuts too; light skin flayed dark skin and if you spoke the wrong language you could lose your twisted tongue. In Bombay, such things never happened. (MLS 350)

There is also the mention of this city's natural beauty and serenity:

Mahabaleshwar, Lonavla, Khandala, Matheran ... O cool beloved hill-stations ..., whose names echo for Bombay folk with the memory of childhood laughter, sweet love-songs, and days and nights in cool green forests, spent in walking and repose! (MLS 142)

Like the protagonists in Rushdie, Bombay too is known to be 'the bastard child of a Portuguese-English wedding' (350). Rushdie's affair with Bombay is so deep and intense that it has perplexed enough critics to call it an Oedipus complex. The history of the family is traced geographically too limiting the ideographical division to the familial house in first three sections of the novel. The Moor's Last Sigh begins promisingly set in the rich cultural melting pot that was Portuguese

India. At the very onset of the novel Rushdie takes his readers far off to Spain's Andalusian mountain-village of Benengeli where lays the fortress of Vasco Miranda. There is a mention of Benengeli village in Spain where Vasco Miranda has fled to with Aurora's 'Moor' paintings. Aurora's masterpieces of the period portray their affluent Malabar Hill home as the Moor's fantastical palace, a cousin to the Red Fort in Delhi and the Alhambra in Granada. The fantastical worlds of 'Palimpstine' and 'Mooristan' that Aurora creates in her paintings encapsulate the romantic myth of India and its pluralism, and throughout her life she urges her son to search for them.

Moor's story is sequestered, serpented to four Edenic-infernal private universes- Cabral Island, Malabar Mill Salon, Abraham's sky-garden and Vasco Miranda's Little Alhambra in Spain. If Bombay is viewed in *Midnight's Children*, we get the whole panoramic view of Kerala here in *The Moor's Last Sigh*: Kerala with its cashew town Quilon, verdant landscape Mattancherry, Jewish Community, Dutch Island, Bolghatty Island and St. Francis Church where Vasco de Gama was buried for years is being elaborated in the novel. We also read about the 400 year old Jews synagogue which contains painted Chinese tiles, scrolls of Old Testament and copper plates. We get to know the commercial value of various places: if Allepey is famous for choir, Khozikode/Calicut is the timber trading centre, Willingden Island was made under Lord Willingden and it looks like an English Village by the Kochi harbour. Gundu Island is the smallest island around. Ernakulum is the urban centre that harbours Lord Shiva Temple. The cargo ship Marco Polo is named after the Venetian traveler of the same name who discovered the coast of the Malabar. Kerala's famous Chinese fishing nets are gifts from Kublai Khan. Cranganore is a place where Romans built the temple dedicated to Augustus in the 1st century. Along with the fiction, the reader gets the historical significance of the locale. The scene where fishermen using cantilevered Chinese-fishing nets haul up for the night is vivid. These fishermen in conical Chinese hats move stolidly between islands and they use dredgers for cleaning the river. An evening at the lagoon with all types of sails at the harbour is beautifully landscaped. Ferryboats dredger, yachts, little boats, rowboats and motor boats, tugs, Chinese fishing nets, twin-stacked steamers, cargo ships, gunboat - different types of boats used by Cochin fishermen, listed by Rushdie are preparing to have night's rest. An evening of Cochin, the city of nets, is intricately documented though it is succinctly zipped into less than a paragraph. So if Bombay Kolis find their portrayal in *Midnight's Children*, these Cochin fishermen are sketched here.

Rushdie discusses and re-discusses the creation of Bombay, it is the bastard child of a Portuguese-English wedding, and yet it is the most Indian of Indian cities. It is at the central point where all Indians not only meet each other but also merge beautifully. It is a place that proves to be a demarcating line which separates the north from the south and the east from the west of India. It is a multi-cultural city where cultures from all over India get harmonized. While the communal riots were taking place in states like Punjab, Assam, Kashmir, Meerut, Delhi and Calcutta on the basis of religion and language, the city of Bombay was comparatively peaceful. It was also India's Achilles heel: that if any invader planned to ruin India he had to ruin Bombay first. Therefore, on one hand where Rushdie rejoices in the celebration of the city of Bombay, he also laments its de-cosmopolitanisation. In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, no longer is Bombay portrayed as a bustling metropolis as seen by the eyes of young Saleem. It now becomes the city of Raman Fielding, a caricature of the Shiv Sena chief Bal Thackeray and Muslim mafiosi- Dawood, Haji

Mastan. Thus, in one of the interviews he admits that the city in *The Moor's Last Sigh* completes the cycle he started in *Midnight's Children*. Bombay in the later novel is the world of grown-up knowledge that he has of India and of this world, unlike the child's view of Bombay, of India (Reder 2000: 200). When we are told about the dwelling of the character Sammy Hazare who lived in the suburb of Andheri we get to know about the suburb being surrounded by 'a random tangle of light industries' like Nazareth Leathercloths, Vajjo's Ayurvedic Laboratory, Thums Up Cola Bottle Caps, Clenola Brand Cooking Oil and a small film studio (355). The centrality of Bombay is again talked about but this time its helplessness is compared to that of Granada. Like Granada. Bombay too was the glory of its time but very much like it, Bombay could not be defended by its occupants. Boabdil proved his weakness as he could not defend his state, similarly, Bombayites proved to be 'wooden horses' of the famous Trojan War when bomb explosions took place. Aurora's art vanishes in one of these explosions. Her paintings die too, as if it is some stage performance of Shakespearean tragedy that ends in the littered bodies and splashed blood.

Though introduced at the very outset of the novel, we get to know about the location of the village of Benengeli only when the Moor visits it in the last part of the novel with Jawaharlal, the dog under his arm:

The village of Benengeli lies in the Alpujarras, a spur of the Sierra Morena which separates Andalusia from La Mancha... foreigners would settle here for a while, with their families and pets, and then, in their fickle, rootless fashion, depart, abandoning their dogs to their fates. The region was full of starving, disappointed Andalusian dogs. (The Moor's Last Sigh 385)

Then came on his way the small town of Avellaneda, famous for its 'three-hundred-year-old bull-ring' (385) and also known as 'Town of Thieves'(386). The next settlement is Erasmo which is even smaller. So now readers are made to travel up mountains of Spain after wading through streets of Bombay or the harbour of Cochin and backwaters of Kerala. We are also told about the political history of Benengeli and Erasmo and about Vialactada- a Mexican tennis player who played with Hoad, Rosewell and Gonzalez and was therefore, barred from Grand Slam events - and he died of stomach cancer several years ago.

Thus it is not that Rushdie's work is brimful of state-affairs, politics, autobiographical intrusions and public affairs, customs and myths only; the readers also travels through the places the writer has found interesting. Details of the geographical locations include famous landmarks as well as the unseen places, historical explorations, the flora and fauna. The experience of realistic ride through different geographical locations is embellished wonderfully when interspersed profusely with the world of imagination.

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