Fusion of Orientalism and Magic Realism: An analysis of Salman Rushdie’s The Enchantress of Florence

Nikitha Rita E. A
Semester X, Integrated M. A. English Language and Literature
Dept. of English and Languages
Amrita School of Arts and Sciences, Kochi.
Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham
India
Jayalakshmi Menon
Semester X, Integrated M. A. English Language and Literature
Dept. of English and Languages
Amrita School of Arts and Sciences, Kochi.
Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham
India
Dr. R. Madhumathy
Professor
Department of English and languages
Amrita School of Arts and Sciences, Kochi.
Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham
India

ABSTRACT

Salman Rushdie as a postcolonial diasporic writer has attracted much academic attention. The paper entitled Fusion of Orientalism and Magic Realism; an analysis of Rushdie’s The Enchantress of Florence discusses how Rushdie projects an Oriental view of women along with the tropes of Magic Realism. Citing evidences from the primary material the paper gives much scope for further research concerning the western perspective of the Orient.

Key words- Magic realism-Orientalism-dream life-waking life-surrealism

PAPER

Historical contexts influence the production of meaning within a literary text. Reading literature in the context of colonial discourse, it is possible to detect how a literary text like Rushdie’s The Enchantress of Florence exists above and beyond historical state of affairs. For the purpose of analysis it is appropriate to deem Rushdie as a post-colonial Diaspora writer, writing from the vantage point of the western perspective. Moreover, Niccolo Vespucci through whom the story unfolds is also spoken of as the “yellow haired foreigner”. Hence the relevance of western notions about the Orient in the novel.

Rushdie, the towering magus of contemporary fiction has researched into history to make a reinvention of fact and fiction. In the novel through the convergence of
magic realism as well as Orientalism; Rushdie has woven a magical fabula from the multi-
faceted tale of kinship and ancestry with rich metaphors to establish his syncretic vision, a
fairy tale like Scheherdazian tale of kinship and ancestry. By mingling the tale of the teller
and the listener, the writer has churned out a complex, intertwining of history and
imagination, a cocktail of history and fiction. Juxtaposing the stereotypical assumptions
about the orient with the tropes of magic realism in the novel, the paper attempts to analyze
the extent to which the female characters of the novel adhere to the notions envisaged by
Orientalism, in addition to expounding the scope of magic realism. The Enchantress of
Florence, the ninth novel by Rushdie published in 2008 narrates the tale of two cities, of
ancient Mughal Indian Empire and of the Florentine society. The novel holds a remote
kinship with Orham Pamuk’s White Castle and My Name is Red, where experiments in
realism of Akbar’s painters are cited. The novel resonates echoes of Indo Persian story
telling tradition with its “lush images, forked progression and digressions, and its
obliteration of boundaries between magic and reality”(21). True to the conventions of
magic realism the plot of the novel with its cyclic digressions transports the reader to the
fanciful realms of eastern and western culture. The novel’s investment in Orientalism adds
to its value as a magic realistic text, mixing desire, magic and reality into a heady concoction producing delectable aesthetic pleasure.

Rushdie in the novel has interfused his notion of the Orient as recorded in the
Indian history with magic realism to create a unique blend that is capable of evoking a
detached view of reality. The concept of the Orient, dominant in the novel suggests the
writer’s disapproval of the occidental suppressive power and colonization. Orientalism as a
term propagates certain false notions about the Orient. Edward Said perceived Orientalism
as a series of false assumptions underlying western attitude towards the East. In Orientalism, Said described the subtle and persistent Eurocentric prejudice against Arab-
Islamic peoples and their culture. He contended that from a perspective that takes Europe
as the norm; the orient becomes deviant, exotic and inscrutable. Through the publication
of his book Orientalism, Said argued that these attitudes prevailed among the western media
and academia too.

The fundamental binary division of the world into the Orient and the Occident
as asserted by Orientalism implicate the opposition of each other. The East, represent what
West is ‘not’ and symbolizes the ‘alter ego’ of the dominant. In the novel, the plot shifts
rapidly between the Florentine society and Mughal India making them polar opposites. The
border line blurs as it also mirrors the West and the East with pronounced differences. This
casts the image of difference not just in its physical structure but also in the political,
cultural and administrative realms. The morals and cultures of the East are depicted from
western point of view. The arrival of the foreign traveler Niccolo Vespucci in the Mughal
Hindustan depicts the intrusion of the west upon the east. His long journey has a twin
motive to restore his lost lineage and a deep rooted desire to re-establish his power.
Orientalism as a fabricated construct promotes a series of images about the Orient reality.
In many places in the novel, the oriental reality is twisted to suit the western fantasy to the
extent of making the Mughal culture look dissolute and beyond redemption.

Through the stereotypical assumption about the Orient, Rushdie makes his
characters run backward in time and space and locate them in an exotic realm of pomp and
splendor. In a way Qara Koz and Vespucci –the traveler who roam around in different
names - are all subjects of the oriental fantasy. The unchanging permanency of a timeless space is remarkably portrayed as the yellow-haired foreign traveler decides to travel back to oriental territory. This journey takes him to the Arabian court, giving scope for an Indo-Persian story to unfold. The haunting sandstone palaces of the victory city of Akbar and the inmates of the palace are shown in a magic realistic light:

Queens floated within his palaces like ghosts, Rajput and Turkish sultanas playing catch-me-if-you-can, one of these royal personages did not really exist. She was an imaginary wife, dreamed up by Akbar in the way lonely children dream up imaginary friends, in spite of the presence of many living, in floating consorts, the emperor was of opinion that it was the real queens who were the phantoms and the nonexistent beloved who was real. He gave her a name Jodha and no man dared gain say him. (33)

The exuberant fable like narration spins a multi-faceted tale of kinship, ancestry, war and passion. The fictionalized version of Akbar the great and his phantom wives take the readers on a fantasy ride crossing the borders of life and art.

In Orientalism the Orient exists as a face. Another concept crucial to Orientalism in the book *Beginning Postcolonialism* is the “strangeness” or the exotic characterization of the orient. It’s “not just different; it is oddly different – unusual, fantastic and bizarre” (McLeod John 44). Sikri was one such magical city which weakened “the border between sanity and delirium, between what was fanciful and what was real” (27). Akbar is pictured as a dreamer given to bouts of loneliness and soul searching. As he proudly says “we, by contrast, are a poet with a barbarian’s history and a barbarian’s prowess in war. . .history does not repeat itself, but moves forward, and that Man is capable of change” (35). Akbar’s essential temperament and optimistic nature are reflected here. Rushdie, also portrays Akbar as “a Muslim vegetarian, a warrior who wanted only peace, a philosopher-king: a contradiction in all terms”(33). A pseudo Pygmalion, his first obsession is a fantasy figure. Through his obsessive devotion, he brings Jodha Bai to life from the world of imagination and shuttles along with her in a reverie which for him is reality as plain as broad daylight. The Pygmalion trope floats a magic realist touch: “She had heard from the emperor a traveler’s tale of an ancient sculptor of the Greeks who brought a woman to life and fell in love with her” (59).

The irrationality and extraordinariness of the Orient is yet another stereotypical assumption. Orientalism also makes assumptions about gender. One such myth is the sexuality and promiscuous nature of the exotic oriental female. The exotic oriental female is often depicted in a sensuous manner. Either nude or partially clothed; she is always the object of desire. Simonetta, the first enchantress of Florence possesses magical powers. Alessandro Filipepi, “painted her many times, before and after she died, painted her clothed and naked, as the spring and the goddess Venus, and even as herself”(133). Akbar’s own queens were “sexpots . . . who had memorized all the dirty books”(133). Another prominent deviant female is Alessadra, who ran a brothel in Florence. People believed her to be the reincarnation of Simonetta and she had “perfected the art of seeing only what she wanted to see” (150). Moving from these examples, we plunge into the depth of degeneracy when the novel makes elaborate descriptions about Mohini- the Skeleton and Mattress, the obese prostitute at the House of Skanda, a notorious brothel.
The gender identity of men and women in Orientalism is transgressive. Adding to the general sense of oddity and abnormality, they serve to buttress the discourse of the heroic. When Rana of Cooch Naheen tells Akbar that his grandfather was killed by Akbar’s grandfather seventy years ago, Akbar says that he was “a poet with a barbarian’s history and a barbarian’s prowess in war” (43). Vespucci is a conman, a magician and a compulsive story teller. Even though Akbar is suspicious of his motives, he invariably finds himself falling under his spell. Umar the Ayyar, the spy of Akbar is a man who dresses like woman which again endorses oriental assumptions about the effeminate nature of the oriental male. Though his influence was unknown to others, Akbar worked with him to create an ideal empire. When Shah Ismail was defeated by Argalia there were only two women left on the battle field, the princess Qara Koz and her slave Mirror, who was exactly a mirror image of her mistress. Through the introspection of Qara Koz once again the oriental assumptions about orient male is reinforced: Argalia “looked like a woman, she thought, like a tall, pale, black haired woman who had glutted herself on death” (221).

Rushdie, a pioneer of Magic Realism in fiction, contributed much to the development of this narrative mode. Magic realism is a natural outcome of post-colonial literary writing, making sense of two realities- the reality of the conjurers as well as of the conquered. The treatment of magic realism gained a new dimension in his works like *Satanic Verses* and *Midnight’s Children*. The basic premise of magical realism lies in its unique matter-of-fact, realistic tone in depicting magical happenings. This incorporation of the fantastic into reality is carried out seamlessly in the novel. Hybrid mixing of the ordinary with extra-ordinary, dream life with waking life, reality with unreality is all there in the novel. With the arrival of the yellow haired foreigner, the integration of the surreal and real in Akbar’s empire begins, dramatizing the cultural conflict that would follow.

By transforming gold coins into smoke and vice versa, Vespucci makes his entry in the Mughal Empire. There begins his journey to accomplish the marvelous, to establish kinship. The magic realistic touch in *Enchantress of Florence* lies in its unquestioned position of tangible material reality. The association of myth or magic to a particular geographic area with its remarkable culture and tradition creates a phantasmagoric effect upon its reader. Maggie Ann Bowers in her book *Magic (al) Realism* verifies the view of Carpentier thus:

> Because of the virginity of the land, our upbringing, our ontology, the Faustian presence of the Indian and the black man, the revelation constituted by its recent discovery, its fecund racial mixing, America is far from using up its wealth of mythologies. After all, what is the entire history of America if not a chronicle of the marvelous real? (35)

Mostly associated with the geographical region of Latin America, magical realism has now influenced the literature of non-western countries with leading award winning magical realist writers like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh and Arundathi Roy in India, and Toni Morrison and Andre Brink from south Africa. The Rushdie’s claim for Magical realism as described by Bowers is the ‘commingling of the improbable and the mundane’ further reveals his mixing up of the Indian history with the extra ordinary.
The incomprehensible coherence of binary oppositions like superstition and rationalism is a unique way to tackle the reality. This self-contradictory notion of Rushdie is his way of exploring the myths; of history and human life in general. It bridges up the rational and the mysterious, to make believe the seen and unseen. In chapter fourteen, Rushdie with his characteristic magic realistic touch talks about the power of music. The power of Tansen’s music could “break open the seals of the universe and let divinity through into the everyday world” (53). . . “set ablaze the lamps at Skanda House (245)”. Later meghamalhar rag sung by Tana and Riri caused a gentle rain to fall on MianTanzen. As it was no ordinary rain the “rain washed his skin it became whole again” (245).

The novel though, captures facts to some extent; it deals with a varied dimension of history by indulging in fictitious elements. With Akbar in his kingdom and Jodha as an imaginary wife crafted to perfection on his command, the plot intensifies with the arrival of Vespucci to introduce Qara Koz as the long lost Queen of Mughal. She in the story is revealed as the great grand aunt of Akbar, and sister to his grandfather Babar. Being captured by Shaibani Khan, she along with her sister was taken as booty by Shah Ismail. Though he was willing to let the women Khanzada and her sister Qara Koz go back, Qara Koz refused to accompany her sister and told the young king that she would like to stay back. Later when the tables of power were turned, she falls in love with Argalia. The magic is so much an inherent part of the people of the kingdom that they cannot separate reality from magic. As the text verifies, “Magic invariably flowed from the more magical person (the emperor, necromancer, the witch) to the lesser: questions from the world of magic which everyone lived in as passionately as they inhabited the world of tangible materials”(402). As Akbar takes a decision regarding Qara Koz, gradually the vision of Jodha Bai gets superseded:

Things had reached the point at which Jodha had become invisible to many people. The household staff allocated to her service could see her, naturally because their livelihoods depended upon it, but the other queens, who had always resented her presence, could no longer make her out. She knew something bad was happening to her and was filled with fear. She felt fainter. . . as if the candle of her being were being snuffed out, re-lit, then snuffed out and re-lit again. . . the emperor visited her much less these days. . . when he made love to her she had the impression that he was thinking about somebody else. (404)

Rushdie thus traverses the blurring lines of fantasy and fiction. Jodha travelled from the imaginary to the world real, to accomplish a far more promising future as the beloved queen of Akbar until the arrival of a long lost princess. Jodha vanishes into thin air for Akbar to welcome his new beloved, the lady with black eyes –Qara Koz

The Ambiguous attitude of Akbar reflects his conflict within. By defeating Hindu kings and destroying its traditions, Akbar creates Mughal Hindustan by colonizing its territories. He persuades people to enjoy art and music. Though his capital city was built as a result of strenuous effort, he made them believe that it was built within a day. A pleasure seeking warrior he was; who believed ‘it was better to dream in this dreamless world than to stay awake’ (17). And thus he dreamt up an imaginary beauty, which was brought to life through the work of Abdus Samad. Jodha was the fulfillment of Akbar’s
musings and she lived on, sustaining the power of his belief upon her. Unlike Qara koz who wanted to establish herself as the queen of a vast dynasty, Jodha aimed at conquering a small territory as her own in the mind of Akbar.

Akbar who lived in his illusory world with his illusionary wife was not bothered about the impact of the magic upon his empire. Jodha was extraordinary and was remarkable in handling different subjects that varied from satisfying the sexual urge of the king to suggesting strategies that would make him acceptable in the society. She made him aware of the annoyance he created among the common people when he was back in city after fighting wars. Akbar regained the confidence of the public by not suppressing their basic rights to speak and express their emotions.

Jodha is a visitor from the world of illusion. Her place among the Mughals is absurd as nobody other than the king recognized her presence. He even considered Jodha as the mother of his first son Prince Salim. The willing suspension of disbelief was the only realm in which she survived. This complicated relation between the two is a materialization of Akbar’s concept of perfect wife. The unreal Jodha makes the king aware of his misconceptions, advises him about the worldly duties, and that keeps him connected with reality in a sane manner.

The traveler’s tale weakens the relation between Jodha and Akbar. However, Vespucci was brought before the Mughal court for execution on trial of treason, on the basis of the complaint by the crew of Scathach. The traveler, who roamed around in Sikri in different pseudo names, was caught when the translator misinterpreted that Mogor dell Amore, which he claimed to be his names meant “a Mughal born out of wedlock”. The traveler with the three names was put to trial in the garden of Hiran. The hypocritical attitude of Akbar is reflected here as he had named his own pet blind elephant as Hiran, meaning deer. To Akbar ‘names were things of power, and when they did not fit thing named they acquire a malign force’ (94). The trial was such that if the elephant failed to attack him he would be spared from death. With the help of the magical fragrances or perfumes given to him by the skeleton, the traveler calmed the elephant. The perfume contained the odour of the emperor and thus the blind elephant was fooled into believing Vespucci to be his master. Surprised by the miracle, everyone declared Vespucci innocent and they readily believed his story of the enchanted princess.

As the traveler’s golden tale unraveled, it explored the family tree of the Mughals from its very beginning. As the traveler began to narrate the story of his mother Angelica, a new mesmerizing figure from ancient history began to cast a spell on Akbar’s kingdom. He regarded Angelica as the direct descendant of Genghis Khan, of the house of Timur, sister of the first Mughal emperor of India and as the most beautiful enchantress. The narration aroused a big hubbub within the country because the character named Angelica was never heard of before in the Mughal family. The male society enforced patriarchal control over women is evident here as the lost princess was forcefully removed from history, for disobeying her brother Babur. The fictional representation of events and characters with supernatural powers create an aura of enchantment giving an exotic surrealistic touch to Mughal Hindustan. Akbar the master craftsman who conjured up his illusions had no powers left in him to create another creation, as he had become exhausted after creating and sustaining Jodha. To undo the mistakes of his summoned the court artist Dashwanth to paint her into reality, as he believed he was capable of the impossible.
The work of art was painted as a series of folios, beginning with a four year old
girl child wandering with a basket in Ferghana, the land of Akbar’s fore-fathers. The
precise pictorial representation of the land also featured mandrake roots; the mythical plant
believed to have roots in the shape of a human figure which when pulled out, make noises
that are intolerable to human ears. As Dashwanth painted, he breathed life into his
characters. The treatment of the imaginary, thus rework the theme of magical realism and
offers a multi-dimensional aspect of reality to explore the fantastical.

As Gulbadan revealed the hidden pages of history, Qara Koz was born again
surpassing time and generations to captivate the king and his followers under her spell.
Gulbadan suddenly remembered the princess’s name, as well as her mother’s -Makhdum
Sultan Begum, the last true love of Umar Sheikh Mirza, and the enmity of her cruel sister
Khanzada Begum. The latter who was the half-sister born to the dragon queen, envied Qara
Koz for her beauty which motivated her to commit a series of murder attempts on her
sister. Qara Koz was given milk mixed with poison which she drank. She was unharmed
though her lap dog to which she gave a final few drops died instantly suffering in pain.
Another attempt was identified when the royal maid found stones twinkling in the princess
feces while cleaning her toilet. This was the most dreadful way for murder which was
known as ‘drinking fire’, and death was sure on those who drank it. By surviving all these
murder attempts, she as a child marked her own indelible space among the Mughals.

People of the court of Sheikh Mirza believed her to be the reincarnation of the
Alanquwa, the Mongol sun-goddess, and the ancestor of Genghis Khan who controlled
light by making the dark spirits subservient to her. Qara Koz was thus the considered the
“mistress of life and death” (120).A cult of the sun goddess sprung around those who
worshipped her. But amidst succession of failures and defeats her story was soon forgotten.

Dashwanth, who painted Qara Koz to reality, sacrificed his life for her return as
he found a way into his own painting, hiding beneath the corners of his portrait. As her
power and influence grew within the Akbar’s territory, Jodha lost all her control over the
King and she disappeared into the empty vacuum to provide room for the new lover.

Chapter five abounds in lewd descriptions about the brothel houses and
characters like Mohini, Man Bai and Khanzada perpetuate the oriental notions of the
lustful, promiscuous, deviant female. The two main female characters in the novel, Qara
Koz and Jodha Bai are just a figment of Akbar’s imagination. With the help of the great
artists in his court he gets them painted and breathes life into them. The wide popularity of
prostitution in Akbar’s kingdom was considered as a great threat to society and religious
men in the court believed it to be the precursor of an impending doom. The women often
depicted as a site of perverse desire, the writer tries to portray the supposed moral
degeneracy of the female in an oriental myth. This degenerate representation of the female
oriental stereotype evincing typical weaknesses, fickleness, violence and lust propounds the
willfulness of the west to fabricate reality about the orient to propagate western fantasy.
The licentious nature of the court, lewd descriptions of promiscuity and many salacious
details in the novel pertaining to oriental culture mark The Enchantress of Florence as a
novel complicit with the false assumptions about the Orient which in no way is flattering to
Indian culture. Gyrating round and round in circles, the narrative technique of magic
realism elevates the plot with its progressions and digressions to an exotic realm
obliterating the tenuous border between magic and realism.
The lustful, erotic representation of females possessing magical powers of beauty and captivation are Rushdie’s way of eroticizing feminity. The gendering of the binary oppositions of the east and the west based on the stereotypical notions of Orientalsim attributes feminine qualities to the east. As given in *Beginning Postcolonialism* West is considered ‘masculine’, “that is active, dominant, heroic, rational, self controlled and ascetic” while the east is ‘feminine’, “passive, submissive, exotic, luxurious, sexually mysterious and tempting” (McLeod 45). Disregarding this gendering the writer makes all men and women equal as all female characters are represented alike and ironical twist in the novel arises when despite Vespucci’s attempt to gain power, he remains powerless, and subservient to the king and finally flees for his life.

The lake receded and the destruction of Fatehpur Sikri began. City’s leading engineers were at a loss to find a solution. Without the lake the city parched and the emperor gave orders to evacuate the city. The death of the lake was the death of Sikri as well. “Even an emperor, denied water, would swiftly turn to dust. Water is the real monarch and we are all its slaves” (436). As Akbar rode past the destruction he realized that it was the future “that had been cursed not the present. In future it was harshness, not civilization that would rule” (440). Qara Koz at last visits the emperor and reveals the secret that Niccolo Vespucci was actually the son of Mirror. She was reinstated in his fancy once again, “as if life was a river and men its stepping stones, she had crossed the liquid years to usurp his omnipotent fancy”(442). The novel, in short is an exuberant fusion of Magic realism, history and Orientalism, which again establishes undoubtedly Rushdie’s stature as a master of Magic Realism.

**WORKS CITED**


