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ROLE OF 'CHOICE' AS EXISTENTIAL PREDICAMENT IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S
MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN AND *THE ENCHANTRESS OF FLORENCE*: AN ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Views of Jean Paul Sartre and Soren Kierkegaard on how choices design one's destiny are brought in this paper to discuss the quality of life the main characters of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and *The Enchantress of Florence* lead. The choices made by Akbar, Aadam Aziz, Saleem and Amina are elaborately discussed to show how their choices, being 'aesthetic' (concentrating on the 'immediate') lead them to despair and their inner-degradations. The other options, these characters could have chosen to make their choices 'ethical' (a choice with absolute will and with acceptance of the power of being, even in the grip of non-being) (Choice 830), are also explored elaborately to show how the characters themselves weave their own destinies. The state of these characters before they make their aesthetic choices is contrasted to the aftermaths of their choices. An attempt is also made to analyze how these characters after their downfalls, brought about because of their aesthetic choices, gather themselves with hope - 'the inward certainty which anticipates infinity' (Dread as Education toward Faith 840). With this kind of hope towering within them, they exit conforming to Camus's existential views: "If the decent is thus sometimes performed in sorrow, it can also take place in joy." (851)

Keywords: 'being'; 'non-being'; 'meaningfulness'; 'meaninglessness'; 'baptism of will'; 'eternal validity'; 'ethical choice'; and 'aesthetic choice'.

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To choose, to choose freely, to choose willingly, to choose with absolute will, to choose with deliberation, to choose for immediate gratification, to choose for 'eternal validity'(Choice 831) , to choose for one's own self, to choose for other than one's own self, to simultaneously choose for one's own self and others, to choose from choices made by others than one's own self and to choose not to choose at all are the choices offered to man since he is constantly confronted with the dilemma of being and non-being, and meaninglessness and meaningfulness. Man's paradoxical position compels to seriously view Kierkegaard's concept that the content of personality is decided by choices one makes. Sartre takes it a step further saying, "In fashioning myself I fashion man." (835) Kierkegaard views that through the choice the personality

immerses itself in the thing chosen. Sartre attaches sense of responsibility and concern for the whole mankind with the act of choice of an individual: "When we say that man chooses himself, we do mean that every one of us must choose himself; but by that we also mean that in choosing for himself he chooses for all men." (835) The most tremendous thing, says Kierkegaard, granted to man is the freedom to choose which can be preserved in the unconditional and complete resignation to give it back to God and man himself (Choice 834), whereas for Sartre as that for Ponge, "Man is the future of man", which if taken to mean that the future is laid up in Heaven, known to God, would be false, for then it would no longer even be a future: "... whatever man may now appear to be, there is a future to be fashioned, a virgin future that awaits him – then it is a true saying. But in the present one is forsaken." (838) This concept of Sartre is often echoed in Rushdie's works as is seen, for example, in the words, 'tumbled forth into the world' (MC 3) he uses to announce the birth of Saleem. An amalgamation of Sartre's and Kierkegaard's concepts about 'Choice' can be seen in the description of Saleem's birth. When Saleem of *Midnight's Children*, the narrator, states at the time of his birth – "I was left entirely without a say in the matter ... And I couldn't even wipe my own nose at the time." (MC 3) – it echoes Sartre's concept that 'a virgin future' (Sartre 838) awaits Saleem and that in the present he is forsaken completely. Saleem's statement at the time of his birth – "I, Saleem Sinai, later variously called Snatnose, Stainface. Baldy, Sniffer, Buddha and even Piece-of-the-Moon, had become heavily embroiled in Fate – at the best of times a dangerous sort of involvement." (MC 3) – echoes Kierkegaard's concept about freedom of choice, preservation of which lies in the unconditional and complete resignation to give it back to God and man himself. In other words, Rushdie associates Saleem's birth with Fate and at the same time, with a virgin future to be fashioned by his choices as he has been forsaken in the present. On the other hand, Akbar's life as an emperor, in *The Enchantress of Florence*, is shown to comprise of his childhood defeats. All his childhood defeats had gone into the process of his present existence as a victorious ruler of the universe. All his victories in the battle remind Akbar about his defeats in his fatherless childhood days. His thoughts about his father fill him with nostalgia and shame. His father was taken to too much of smoking opium. He lost his empire, but, got it back when he pretended to become a Shiite and gave away the Koh-i-noor diamond. He, then, died by falling down a flight of library stairs almost immediately after he regained his throne.

Akbar had not seen his father at all. He was born in Sind, after his father's defeat at Chausa. Sher Shah Suri became the king usurping Humayun's throne. The deposed Humayun scurried to Persia, abandoning his son, Akbar, who was just fourteen-month-old baby. Akbar was raised by his father's brother and enemy, Uncle Askari of Kandahar. Akbar's uncle would have killed the baby Akbar but for his wife's intrusions. In his uncle's custody, Akbar learns the lessons of survival – fighting, killing and hunting. He also learns to look out for himself, hold his tongue and not to say the wrong thing. In other words, he learns to be diplomatic and careful:

... he was taught ... the dignity of the lost, about losing, and how it cleansed the soul to accept defeat, and about letting go, avoiding the trap of holding on too tightly to what you wanted, and about abandonment in general, and in particular fatherlessness, the lessness of fathers, the lessness of the fatherless, and the best defences of those who are less against those who are more: inwardness, forethought, cunning, humility, and good peripheral vision. The many lessons of lessness. The lessening from which growing could begin. (EOF 46-47)

Thus, Akbar's childhood is completely embroiled in Fate as that of Saleem. The rest of their lives have their foundations laid on their choices. The nature of their choices can be categorized and analyzed based on the perspectives of the existential philosophers such as Sartre, Kierkegaard and Tillich.

The concept of 'choice' has gained profound significance from the perspective of existential philosophers. To Sartre, "Man will only attain existence when he is what he purposes to be. Not, however, what he may wish to be. For what we usually understand by wishing or willing is a conscious decision taken - much more often than not - after we have made ourselves what we are." (Choice in a World without God 835) This paper is an attempt to study the nature and functions of 'choice' and their impact on the future course of actions in characters' lives in the select novels of Rushdie. The term 'choice', as per the above definition of an existentialist, lends itself to profound inquiry into the choice factor in life. It is not just the act of choice, but the characters' state of being and the consequences of the so-called act of choice are the

subjects of discussion in the paper. This paper examines how the role of 'choice' decides the existential predicament of Rushdie's characters like Adam Aziz, Amina and Saleem in *Midnight's Children* and Akbar in *The Enchantress of Florence*. The existence that these characters attain is not what they purpose to be. They are often not conscious of the state, when they make their choices and do not know where their choices would lead them to, but, when they become conscious of it, they realize their predicament.

An 'aesthetic choice', according to Kierkegaard, is 'no choice' and is either 'entirely immediate' or it loses itself in the multifarious. (Choice 830) He discards the 'choice of the heart' and that which focuses entirely on the immediate: "... when one does not choose absolutely one chooses only for the moment, and therefore can choose something different the next moment." (Choice 830) The aesthetic choice does not constitute the evil, but neutrality and that is why, affirms Kierkegaard, it is the ethical which constitutes the choice as it encompasses within its visage the absolute will of the chooser. The question of choosing between willing the good or the evil does not render a choice to be aesthetic or ethical as does the act of 'choosing to will' (Choice 831) The acts of choosing 'absolutely' and choosing oneself in one's 'eternal validity' makes a choice ethical. One can choose absolutely only when he/she chooses the 'good'. The crucial thing is not the deliberation in choosing the 'good', but 'the baptism of the will' which lifts up the choice to be ethical. Tillich's theology constitutes the ambiguous structure that encompasses the meaninglessness which drives to despair, a passionate denunciation of this situation, and the successful or unsuccessful attempts to embrace the anxiety of meaninglessness to transform the despair into courage to be as oneself. The faith, says Tillich, which brings the courage of despair into existence is the acceptance of the power of being, even in the grip of non-being. It is an act of faith and therefore, a meaningful act to accept the meaninglessness of one's existence. Therefore, making a choice with absolute will and with acceptance of the power of being, even in the grip of non-being, lifts it to the level of being ethical.

Aziz's attempt to pray, in *Midnight's Children*, soon after his return from Germany, ends with his decision not to pray throughout his life. This episode begins with the usual preparations by Aziz, such as washing himself in the prescribed fashion, putting on his father's astrakhan cap, etc. Fragrance of hope is evoked whenever the holy message is recited from The Holy Quran in the background and each and every step taken by Aziz to pray and believe in response to them brings despair: 'In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful ...' (MC 6) is followed by a feeling of comfort in him and a kind of uneasiness, too; the hope evoked by '...Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Creation ...' (MC 6) is replaced by his recollection of memories of Heidelberg and he has a vision of his friends, Oskar and Ilse Lubin mocking at him with their anti-ideologies; the absolute faith originating from '... The Compassionate, the Merciful, King of the Last Judgment! ...' (MC 6) is evacuated by a kind of inferiority complex in Aziz due to the colonial oppression of the Europeans over India; the certitude in '... You alone we worship, and to You alone we pray for help ...' (MC 6) is juxtaposed to his hopeless attempts to re-unite himself with an earlier self; the optimism in '...Guide us to the straight path, The path of those whom You have favoured ...' (MC 7) is engulfed by his inescapable imprisonment in ambiguity, a trap between belief and disbelief; the infinite insurance in '... Not of those who have incurred Your wrath, Nor of those who have gone astray.' (MC 7) is put off by a punch on his nose from the tussock as he bends down to pray which results in bleeding and staining of the prayer mat. This punch is symbolically described as a rebuke from 'Ilse-Oskar-Ingrid-Heidelberg as well as valley-and-God' (MC 7), resulting in utter hopelessness, faithlessness and ambiguity. His 'altered vision' through 'travelled eyes'(MC 5), on the whole, locates him in a 'middle place' (MC 7) with a feeling of alienation, unable to worship God and at the same time, disbelieve Him, wholly. As a result, Aziz chooses not to pray throughout his life which leaves a vacuum / a hollow space in him: "Permanent alteration: a hole." (MC 7) His choice not to pray is no doubt an aesthetic one, focusing purely on the 'immediate' gratification of his longing to be normal amidst the feelings of unhomeliness and alienation. He chooses not to pray just because he faces some initial hiccups in praying, as usual, after his return from Germany. Instead of taking a hasty decision, he could have allowed his body and mind to get accustomed to the environment for a while. It is more so, because Saleem records many positive connotations amidst Aziz's feelings of alienation. In spite of his feelings of alienation, Aziz's clear blue eyes, possessing the 'astonishing blue of mountain sky' (MC 8), a characteristic features of Kashmiri men, do not allow the grip of hope slip away

altogether: "His German years, which have blurred so much else, haven't deprived him of the gift of seeing. Tai's gift." (MC 8) Had he waited for his feelings to settle down for a while before taking a hasty decision not to pray, he could have perhaps not ended up in bewilderment, disillusionment, a sense of guilt and fragmentation of which he is encountered with when his son commits suicide. His decision not to pray taken in haste to put off his uneasiness he encounters after his return from Germany, leads him to perish under the blue sky of Kashmir, all alone, with grief and guilt. He dies with guilt that his son's (Hanif's) death is the result of his decision not to pray. Therefore, his choice not to pray is purely 'aesthetic', since it does not involve his absolute will. Neither does it bring him any long-term benefits - 'eternal validity' (Choice 831) Had he made his choice with absolute will, he would not have died of guilt or experienced a 'hole'/ vacuum / a feeling of incompleteness. His choice lacks the transfiguration and higher consecration of an ethical choice as advocated by Kierkegaard:

... in making a choice it is not so much a question of choosing the right as of the energy, the earnestness, the pathos with which one chooses... Therefore, even if a man were to choose the wrong, he will nevertheless discover, precisely by reason of the energy with which he chose, that he had chosen the wrong. For the choice being made with the whole inwardness of his personality, his nature is purified and he himself brought into immediate relation to the eternal Power whose omnipresence interpenetrates the whole of existence. (Choice 830)

Amina, protagonist's mother, in *Midnight's Children*, who is brought up by her conservative Muslim Reverend Mother and German-returned father with western thoughts, wakes up from her conservative womanly slumber to set things right. When her husband's assets are frozen by order of law, she stands up like a titanic light house tower with her dedication rising to new heights after feeding herself with 'the fish salans of stubbornness and birianis of determination' (MC 190) prepared by her Reverend Mother. 'The diet provided by Reverend Mother filled Amina with a kind of rage, and even produced slight signs of improvement in her defeated husband.' (MC 191) She rediscovers within herself the adventurous streak which was her inheritance from her fading father. Braving early-morning sickness and varicose veins, she decides to set things right for her family by taking up to gambling at Mahalaxmi Racecourse.

Amina takes up to gambling to run her family when her husband collapses after his property is frozen. She wins and wins and wins. She discovers the ladder to victory represented by her racecourse luck, but, her victories never give her happiness – "... she had become convinced that gambling was the next worst thing on earth, next to alcohol; so, although she was not a criminal, she felt consumed by sin." (MC 192) Her victories at the racecourse bring materialistic success and at the same time, lead her to inner-degradation: "... no sooner had my mother discovered the ladder to victory represented by her racecourse luck than she was reminded that the gutters of the country were teeming with snakes." (MC 194)

In spite of her guilty feelings, she continues to fight her husband's fight till they get back their property by order of the High Court. Though she finds herself succeeding, she is well aware of her degradation, but, she convinces herself by saying, "...What can't be cured must be endured. I am doing what must be done." (MC 192) Her choice to take up gambling for the survival of her family is purely aesthetic since it focuses only on improving her immediate materialistic aspects, ignoring her inner well-being. She loses her self-image and self-respect for she is overcome by a feeling of guilt of having sinned. Her logic - "What can't be cured must be endured." (MC 192) - would have crowned her with a better sense of achievement, had she chosen other fair means instead of gambling at the racecourse to save her family. Her adventurous streak would have gained her a positive momentum instead of inner-degradation, had she opted for some dignified methods to achieve her goals, making her choice an ethical one inculcating 'baptism of the will' and 'eternal validity' (Choice 831). She is unable to accept gambling absolutely to make her choice as an ethical choice since her inner voice does not accept it as 'good'. Since, her choice, too, is based on the 'immediate' need to save her family from the financial crisis, ignoring altogether the long-term consequences, she, too, leads an aesthetic life instead of an ethical one. Her choice distracts her from her 'eternal validity' and exempts her from receiving the indescribable bliss and a sense of absolute security. Instead, she feels consumed by sin in spite of her materialistic victories.

Though Saleem of *Midnight's Children* is blessed with a special gift of reading others' minds, he laments his pathetic fate which he could have transformed into a heroic one:

No choice? - None; when was there ever? There are imperatives, and logical-consequences, and inevitabilities, and recurrences; there are things-done-to, and accidents, and bludgeonings-of-fate; when was there ever a choice? When options? When a decision freely-made, to be this or that or the other? No choice; ... (MC 589 -90)

His laments look meaningless for he could have prevented his and nation's tragic fragmentation through his special telepathic powers. He could have conversed individually with the midnight's children using his telepathic powers and united them, instead of bringing all of them at Midnight's Children Conference and letting them collapse under the pretence of democratic group discussions. R.S. Pathak's comments, in this regard, add meaningful retrospection:

Saleem betrays at times characteristics of an 'anti-hero'. He had 'acquired a miraculous gift', but chooses to 'conceal his talents'. This is so not because of any humility but because of an abysmal self-estrangement. He fritters away his remarkable talents 'on inconsequential voyeurism and petty cheating'. (Pathak 160)

He chooses to be clouded with doubts about his place in the scheme of things He chooses to remain all along an unfortunate fellow, fatally gripped by some deep malaise. Even in his adulthood existence, he chooses to cling on to others namely, Picture Singh, Parvati, Padma and Mary for solace and shelter. His choice to cling on to the father and mother figures throughout his life, focusing on the 'immediate' gratification of getting into a comfort-zone, makes him pathetically confide that he had more mothers than most mothers have children.

Saleem's failure to make an 'ethical choice' of functioning independently and making the best use of his special talents in befriending / subduing Shiva, his rival, renders him helpless totally:

I'm tearing-myself apart, can't even agree with myself, talking arguing like a wild fellow, cracking up, memory going, yes, memory plunging into chasms and being swallowed by the dark, only fragments remain, none of it makes sense anymore! ... sense-and-nonsense is no longer (perhaps never was) for me to evaluate. But the horror of it, I can't won't mustn't won't can't no! - Stop this; begin. - No! -Yes. (MC 589)

Amidst this chaos, even the birth of baby Aadam does not seem to bring him hope. He finds himself trapped in the web of wonder, unable to assess what was beginning, what was ending, and whether another secret countdown was in progress. He finds 'destiny, inevitability, the antithesis of choice' (MC 580) ruling his life. This can be contrasted to his earlier remarks about his present and future when he encounters an opportunity to choose, once again, after his second birth as he tumbles out of Parvati's basket of invisibility. When he is transported from Bangladesh into India in an invisible state, he is filled with a sense of unfairness, anger, rage and an overwhelming agonizing feeling of sympathy for his country. He resolves to choose a better future for himself and his country: "... and now that I had given myself the right to choose a better future, I was resolved that the nation should share it, too. I think that when I tumbled out into dust, shadow and amused cheers, I had already decided to save the country." (MC 538)

When Saleem is released from the 'vanishment' of the basket of Parvati in the shadow of a Mosque on a Friday, he resolves with his 'invisible rage completed' to commence from that moment to choose his own 'undestined future' (MC 534). As a sign of hope, he hears the voice of Mary Pereira, singing: "Anything you want to be, you kin be, / You kin be just what all you want." (MC 534) His newly acquired determination to choose his future, once again, and start afresh is an echo of Existential philosophy about 'Choice': "...the errors one has taken into oneself one must eradicate in this way, and every time one makes a mistake one must begin all over. Therefore, it is important to choose and to choose in time." (Choice 830), but, Saleem's confrontation of the second chance to start afresh, too, results in his tragedy of disintegration and cracking. His chain of 'aesthetic choices' to cling on to mother and father figures for refuge brings about his helpless downfall and loss of identity: "... yes, I should revise and revise, improve and improve; but there is neither the time nor the energy. I am obliged to offer no more than this stubborn sentence: It happened that way because that's how it happened." (MC 644)

In *The Enchantress of Florence*, Akbar's victorious return to Sikri after slapping down the upstart in Surat is marked by interplay of hope and despair which is more internalized within Akbar's psyche due the aesthetic choices he makes for his survival as an emperor. This interplay strikes a contrast to the external peace that prevails in the country after the war: "The country was at peace at last, but the king's spirit was never calm." (EOC 37) Though Akbar had successfully put off the rebels in Surat, he finds despair taking over him. The long days of marching and war made his mind wrestle with 'philosophical and linguistic conundrums as much as military ones' (EOC 37).

Through his choice of violence, Akbar quells his foes, but, his choice lacks the absolute will, a prerequisite of an ethical choice. As such, he sinks in the ocean of inner- degradation. In spite of all his majestic and awe inspiring qualities, he begins to meditate about the disturbing possibilities of the first person singular – the 'I'. He had always referred to himself in the first person plural – 'We', but, his tedious journey towards home, accompanied by the heads of his defeated enemies bobbing in sealed earthen pickle-jars make him slither down into despaired moods. His oscillations from extreme hope towards its counterpart, despair, and from the first person plural ('We') towards the first person singular ('I') seem to be indicative of his inner-degradation, degradation of his self-esteem, loss of confidence and loss of hope. His shift from 'We' to 'I' is also indicative of his egoism and self-centeredness:

The emperor ... king of kings, ... Akbar the Great, the great great one, great in his greatness, doubly great, so great that the repetition in his title was not only appropriate but necessary in order to express the gloriousness of his glory – the Grand Mughal, the dusty, battle-weary, victorious, pensive, incipiently over-weight, disenchanted, mustachioed, poetic, over-sexed, and absolute emperor, who seemed altogether too magnificent, too world-encompassing, and, in sum, too *much* to be a single human personage – this all-engulfing flood of a ruler, this swallower of worlds, this many-headed monster who referred to himself in the first person plural – had begun to meditate, during his long, tedious journey home, ... about the disturbing possibilities of the first person singular – the 'I'. (EOF 37-38)

The grammatical question of the self and its Three Persons – the first, the second and the third, and the singulars and the plurals of the soul – frightens him as he rides back home victorious, 'fearless' and 'unvanquished' (EOC 40). He had never referred to himself as 'I', not even in private, anger or dreams. His reference to himself as 'We' had meant himself as an incarnation of everything – his subjects, cities, lands, rivers, mountains, lakes, animals, plants, trees, birds, etc. within his frontiers. He had considered himself as the sum total of all his victories in addressing himself as 'We'. In addition, he had considered himself as encompassing the characters, the abilities, the histories and the souls of his defeated and pacified opponents. Apart from this, he had seen himself as the *apogee* of his people's past and present and the engine of their future: "He was the definition, the incarnation of the we. He had been born into plurality." (EOC 38)

In the interest of fairness and the purposes of debate, Akbar feels that it is not erroneous on the part of his subjects to refer themselves as plural 'We': "Perhaps this idea of self-as-community was what it meant to be a being in the world, any being; such a being being, after all, inevitably a being among other beings, a part of beingness of all things. Perhaps plurality was not exclusively a king's prerogative, perhaps it was not, after all, his divine right." (EOC 39) He concludes, in a rather democratic tone, that his subjects were 'all bags of selves, bursting with plurality, just as he was' (EOC 39). This optimistic conclusion boomerangs with a reverse effect soon:

Was there then no essential difference between the ruler and the ruled? And now his original question reasserted itself in a new and startling form; if his many-selved subjects managed to think of themselves in the singular rather than plural, could he, too, be an 'I'? Could there be an 'I' that was simply oneself? Were there such naked, solitary 'I's buried beneath the overcrowded 'we's of the earth? (EOC 39-40)

All his optimism, along with his fearless and unvanquished anticipations are put off when this debate between 'I' and 'We' pops into his head. He is sleepless that night and he wonders what would Jodha, his imaginary queen, feel if he addressed himself in first person singular 'I' and whether she would be able to call him in

return by the second person singular 'tu' which was reserved for children, lovers and gods. Thus, his choice of violence and wars against his true self, make him oscillate between hope and despair over this question of 'We' and 'I', putting him in an ambiguous state of mind:

And what would that mean? That he was like her child, or godlike, or simply the lover of whom she too had dreamed, whom she had dreamed into being just as eagerly as he had dreamed her? Might that little word, that *tu*, turn out to be the most arousing word in the language? 'I', he practised under his breath. *Here 'I' am. 'I' love you. Come to 'me'.* (EOF 40)

He feels disturbed and despaired over the obstinate feudal ruler of Kathiawar peninsula, Rana of Cooch Naheen, who was absurdly fond of talking about freedom. His despair turns into anger and philosophical contemplation: "Freedom for whom, and from what, the emperor harrumphed inwardly. Freedom was a children's fantasy, a game for women to play. No man was ever free." (EOF 40) His sudden shift from 'We' to 'I' allows him to discard easily the flag of surrender from the pathetic little fortress of Cooch Naheen. He had once considered himself as an incarnation of all his subjects, opponent and everything that fell within his frontiers. His shift from this optimism disables him from granting mercy to the Rana of Cooch Naheen. He moves away from his usual practice of marrying one of the daughters of his opponents and embracing his opponent's family as his own. He oscillates completely from his motto – 'Better a new family than a rotting corpse.' – towards violence and despair – "This time, however, he had irritably torn the insolent Rana's moustache off his handsome face, and had chopped the weakling dreamer into garish pieces – had done it personally, with his sword, just as his grandfather would have, and had then retreated to his quarters to tremble and mourn." (EOF 41)

This 'aesthetic choice' of violence to safeguard his position, as the Universal Ruler, gives him momentary gratification. Soon, he sinks into the ocean of melancholy after chopping Rana of Cooch Naheen into pieces. His eyes become slanted and large. He gazes upon infinity like a young lady or a sailor in search of land. He appears with his lips pushed forward in womanly pout. This disintegration, degradation and weakened self of Akbar strike a contrast to his erstwhile grandeur and optimism: "But in spite of these girlish accents he was a mighty specimen of a man, huge and strong." (EOF 41) As a boy he had killed a tigress with his bare hands and had forever forsworn to be a pure vegetarian: "A Muslim vegetarian, a warrior who wanted only peace, a philosopher- king: a contradiction in terms. Such was the greatest ruler the land had ever known." (EOF 41)

After chopping the weakling dreamer, Rana of Cooch Naheen, Akbar instead of rejoicing his victory, becomes more melancholic. In the evening after the battle, Akbar laments over his gory genealogy, sipping wine. Instead of rejoicing over his ancestors' victories, he feels burdened by their names and their marauder past. Though he is aware of the very fact that his ancestors were the greatest men in history and that his name descended in cascades of human blood from his ancestors, he does not wish to be blood thirsty like his ancestors. He feels gratitude flowing from him towards his grandfather, Babar ('the warlord of Ferghana' and 'the battle machine') (EOF 42), the murderous princes of Transoxiana and Mongolia, and the mighty Temujin, Genghis / Changez / Jenghis / Chinggis Qan, for enabling him to be a *mughal* king. Though he acknowledges their kingly achievements and takes pride in them, he feels despaired over the hoary bloodshed they have caused. He feels that he is not the *Mongol*, though he has inherited the *Mongol* blood: "...thanks to whom he, Akbar, had to accept the name of *mughal*, had to be the *Mongol* he was not, or did not feel himself to be. He felt ... *Hindustani*. His horde was neither Golden, Blue nor White. The very word 'horde' struck his subtle ears as ugly, swinish, coarse. He did not want hordes." (EOF 42) He regrets in despaired tones for using cruel methods to defeat his opponents: "He did not want to pour molten silver into the eyes of his vanquished foes or crush them to death beneath the platform upon which he was eating his dinner. He was tired of war." (EOF 42)

At last, hope descends over the despaired atmosphere when he remembers his childhood tutor's dictum of '*Sulh-i-kul*' - 'complete peace' (EOF 42). In accordance to his tutor's preaching, he hopes to be at peace with himself by being at peace with all others: "No Khan could understand such an idea. He did not want

a Khanate. He wanted a country.” (EOF 42) The recollection of devastations caused by his ancestors Temujin and Timur fills him with despair and shame, once again:

Timur, who destroyed Damascus and Bhagdad, who left Delhi in ruins, haunted by fifty thousand ghosts. Akbar would have preferred not to have had Timur for a forebear. He had stopped speaking Timur’s language ... and adopted, instead, at first Persian and later also the bastard mongrel speech of the army on the move, *urdu*, camp-language, in which half a dozen half-understood tongues jabbered and whistled and produced, to everyone’s surprise, a beautiful new sound: a poet’s language born out of soldier’s mouths. (EOF 42-43)

Here, the birth of ‘a beautiful new sound’ which is compared to a poet’s language ushers hope, trumpeting a new beginning. Akbar asserts, before chopping off Rana’s head, that he is a poet with a barbarian’s history whereas his grandfather was a barbarian with a poet’s tongue. This split personality of Akbar makes him oscillate between hope and despair continuously after making his choices. The poet in him prompts him to be philosophic and embrace everyone and everything within his frontiers. The barbarous quality in him prompts him to quell his opponents and foes to establish himself as an ‘unvanquished’ emperor. The poet in him does not allow him to rejoice over his victories attained through violence and mass killings. Therefore, his victories push him into melancholic retrospections.

The confidence and optimism he shows before executing Rana of Cooch Naheen disappear soon within few hours after Rana’s death. His optimistic views about history and man’s capacity to change– “Thus it is demonstrated that history does not repeat itself, but moves forward, and that Man is capable of change.” (EOF 43) – are vanquished by his ‘familiar demon of loneliness’ after Rana’s death at his hands. He is overcome with despair and inner-degradation. He acknowledges his faults in this despaired mood:

Whenever a man spoke to him as an equal it drove him crazy, and this was a fault, he understood that, a king’s anger was always a fault, an angry king was like a god who made mistakes. And here was another contradiction in him. He was not only a barbarian philosopher and a crybaby killer, but also an egoist addicted to obsequiousness and sycophancy... (EOF 44)

Even in this despaired mood, his hopes do not get vanquished. He hopes for a different world where he could find a man who was exactly his equal, whom he could consider as his brother and with whom he could speak freely and exchange knowledge as well as joy. He looks forward for a world where he could forsake the gloating satisfactions of conquests for gentler and joyous discourses, but, his choice of violence results in oscillations from hope to despair and vice versa. This puts him in a state of doubt: “Did such a world exist? By what road could it be reached? Was there such a man anywhere in the world, or had he just executed him? What if the Rana of the moustache had been the only one? Had he just slain the only man on earth he might have loved?” (EOF 44) His doubts make his thoughts grow vinous and sentimental. He sulks in the vacuum of doubts and uncertainty. His vision becomes blurred with ‘drunken tears’ (EOC 44). He sinks in the darkness of ambiguity not knowing how to act, and how to find a solution: “How could he become the man he wanted to be? The *akbar*, the great one? How?” (EOF 45)

He finds no one to discuss and come out with a solution. Thus, Akbar, ‘a giant of a man and a puissant warrior’, ‘a hero out of the ancient tales’ and ‘the king of kings’ (EOF 45) sulks in loneliness and despair to be called as mad by everyone. He sends his deaf servant Bhakti-Ram away so that he could drink in peace. His despair, too, at this juncture, is given a touch of optimism: “The king, however, was not mad. The king was not content with being. He was striving to become.” (EOF 45)

Thus, the victories at the battle field, instead of pushing Akbar into a mood of celebrations, make him swing between hope and despair. His victories remind him about his horrifying childhood experiences and thus, rekindle his humility. He always finds himself caught between the identities of first person singular ‘I’ and first person plural ‘We’, a philosopher / poet and a Universal ruler, a peace lover and crybaby killer, a democrat and an anarchic ruler.

The choices made by Aziz, Amina, Saleem and Akbar acquire new dimensions when further viewed under the microscopic scrutiny of the Existential Philosophy advocated by Soren Kierkegaard and Jean Paul Sartre. The most tremendous thing which has been granted to man is the freedom to choose. If one desires to

save it or preserve it, says Soren Kierkegaard, it can be done through unconditional and complete resignation to give it back to God, and oneself with it. If one gives way to temptation and looks at freedom of choice with egoistic desire, then the freedom is lost. The idea of freedom then becomes '*idee fixe*' (Choice 834) and one has to live like a rich man who imagines himself to be poor and die of want. Aadam Aziz's choice not to pray, Amina's choice to gamble, Saleem's choice of passivity and Akbar's choice of violence and wars to quell his opponents go parallel with this concept of Soren Kierkegaard. Their choices become their snakes of inner degradation. "In fashioning myself, I fashion man," says Jean Paul Sartre (Choice in a World without God 835), taking the concept of 'choice' as enumerated by Soren Kierkegaard a step ahead. Existentialism puts every man in possession of himself as he is and his existence is a kind of responsibility to be entirely shouldered by him. When a man chooses for himself, he chooses for all: "What we choose is always the better; and nothing can be better for us unless it is better for all." (Choice in a World without God 835) This analysis of choices made by different characters in the select novels of Salman Rushdie, converges on Kierkegaard's views about choice:

The choice itself is decisive for the content of the personality, through the choice the personality immerses itself in the thing chosen, and when it does not choose it withers away in consumption ... So it is with a man. If he forgets to take account of the headway, there comes at last an instant when there no longer is any question of an either / or, not because he has chosen but because he has neglected to choose, which is equivalent to saying, because others have chosen for him, because he has lost his self. (Choice 829)

All these characters make choices who lack 'the inward certainty which anticipates infinity' (Dread as Education toward Faith 840) while making their choices. As Saleem Sinai allows others to make his choices, he mounts his ladders of faith and hope only towards the end of his life. Saleem Sinai expresses his hope for the future generations of India which is similar to that as expressed by Soren Kierkegaard and Hegel, but, that hope has to wait at the threshold, according to Saleem, until the 'thousand and first generation, until a thousand and one midnights have bestowed their terrible gifts and a thousand and one children have died' (MC 647). Similarly, Akbar, in *The Enchantress of Florence*, mounts this ladder of hope and faith in keeping up his promise to the dead Rana of Cooch Naheen. In the heart of his 'victory city', he dreams of building a 'house of adoration' and 'a place of disputation' where everyone can enjoy full freedom to discuss on any subject. Under this spell of his optimism, he decides to rekindle the humility hidden deep within him:

He would teach himself humility in that house ... Not 'teach'. Rather, he would remind himself of, and recover, the humility that was already lodged deep in his heart. This humble Akbar was perhaps his best self, created by the circumstances of his childhood in exile, clothed now in adult grandeur but still present nonetheless; a self born not in victory but in defeat. (EOF 45)

Towards the end of the novel, Akbar climbs a similar ladder of hope in which his inward certainty anticipates infinity and meets his ideal soul mate Qara Koz in an almost fantastical state:

He had raised her from the dead and granted her the freedom of the living, had freed her to choose and be chosen, and she had chosen him. As if life was a river and men its stepping stones, she had crossed the liquid years and returned to command his dreams... stay or go?

'I have come home after all,' she told him. 'You have allowed me to return, and so here I am, at my journey's end. And now, Shelter of the World, I am yours.' *Until you're not*, the Universal Ruler thought. *My love, until you're not*. (EOF 442-443)

Amina lives aesthetically by choosing gambling to meet the financial crisis her family mounts on. Her guilt, inner-degradation, her feeling of having sinned and her acceptance of her guilt along with her sinned deed, make her mount the victory-stand amidst her inner-degradation. Aziz's choice not to pray makes him lead an aesthetic life and live with a permanent hole, but, Hanif's death puts an end to it and triggers his drift towards his native land in search of God with 'inward certainty which anticipates infinity'. Saleem finds his final refuge and solace in the intensive care of Padma after allowing himself to cling on to numerous mothers and fathers. He puts an end to his aesthetic life of clinging on to others when he allows his body to crack and finally, explode with an inward certainty that the dawn of better times, involving turmoil and sacrifices, is in no way

impossible. On the whole, these characters while dwindling into the dust of their aesthetic choices emerge superior with their inward certainty as does Sisyphus whose face that toils so close to his stone becomes the stone itself. Like Sisyphus, all these characters gain the kinetic energy through their anticipation turned towards eternity and are seen as much through their passions as through their tortures. They emerge victorious adding sparkles to Camus's compliments about Sisyphus and in doing so, they direct the flow of these compliments towards themselves: "... he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock... Where would his torture be, indeed, if at every step the hope of succeeding upheld him? ... The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory." (Camus 851) As such, Amina, Aziz, Saleem and Akbar parade with the slogan of Camus: "If the decent is thus sometimes performed in sorrow, it can also take place in joy." (851) To sum up, Amina, Aziz, Saleem and Akbar live aesthetically, but, when they drift towards their exits, they become embodiments of hope – 'inward certainty which anticipates infinity' – and emerge victorious amidst their downfall with this hope.

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