



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 4. Issue.1., 2017 (Jan-Mar.)



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

THE POLYPHONIC RECURRENCE OF HISTORY AND FANTASY IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S
THE ENCHANTRESS OF FLORENCE

LIJI AUGUSTINE

Assistant professor, Department of English, T M Jacob Memorial Government College,
Manimalakunnu, Kerala, India & PhD Research Scholar



LIJI AUGUSTINE

ABSTRACT

This article analyses the recurrence of the polyphonic elements in *The Enchantress of Florence*, a fictional work by Salman Rushdie. The novel portrays makes a fantastic rendering of the history of two entirely different communities. The intended study is focussing on the occurrence of the various voices, both orient and occident, throughout the work. The magical world of alter-realities and fantasies justifies the coexistence of contradictions and ambiguities in these voices. The study pertains to the existence of particular voices and their relevance in the narration. The historical factors mentioned in the novel are taken for analysis in the first part. This includes the annals of the Mughal Empire as well as the Papal rule in Florence. The second section deals with the fantasy and supernatural elements. Actually, the clever linking between these two elements answers for the magnificence of the work.

The term Polyphony, originally belongs to the field of music and it has been adopted by Mikhail Bakhtin, the theorist as well as thinker, into the field of literary studies. This study pertains to the search of polyphonic features in the fiction and the relevance it holds to the themes of magic, romance and history. The various voices, which occur simultaneously in the novel, are very relevant to the successful conveyance of the theme. The omniscient narrator too appears at times with his sarcastic comments and scathing remarks. All these peculiarities distinguish this novel as a truly experimental, polyphonic fiction through and through.

Key Words: Polyphony, orient, occident, fantasy, magic, history

©KY PUBLICATIONS

INTRODUCTION

This study is posing a re-reading of *The Enchantress of Florence*, the fictional fantasy created by the most controversial and talked-about novelist of the present, Salman Rushdie. This work makes a clear suggestion that its author worked really hard to assume an in-depth knowledge about the past politics of both the hemispheres. The unusual inclusion of a bibliography at the end of the novel points towards this direction. Such a great span of effort necessitates the adoption of a different style too. Various themes and seemingly incomprehensible logics have to be made acceptable to the reader. So, the magical worlds of the fables as well

as the luxurious settings of the ancient Mughal Empire are manipulated simultaneously to create an impression in the readers' minds.

The usual monologic narrative techniques are inadequate to represent the fluctuating realities in this work. So, Rushdie turns to the experimental method of polyphony and this proves to be a great success. Polyphony, the term received originally from music, denotes a particular "type of musical texture, where a texture is, generally speaking, the way that melodic, rhythmic and harmonic aspects of a musical composition are combined to shape the overall sound and quality of the work" (wikipedia.org). Mikhail Bakhtin, the author of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* argues that the polyphony may occur in literature too. There it appears in the form of multiple voices. He illustrates this using the works of Dostoevsky. He says, "...different voices, unmerged into a single perspective, and not subordinated to the voice of the author. Each of these voices has its own perspective, its own validity, and its own narrative weight within the novel." (ceasefiremagazine.co.uk)

Rushdie makes use of this technique in *The Enchantress of Florence*. Here, the use of polyphony extends to almost all the aspects of the work, including its plot, characterisation, setting and theme. The historical facts are represented with accuracy in this novel, but the occasional glimpses of fantasy add a magical touch to them. Thus, the novelist successfully transforms the usually indifferent themes like the ascension and fall of dynasties and local rebellions into the highlights of this work, using the magic wand of polyphony. The study of the voices in this work begins with the voice of history, oriental as well as occidental. Then, it will proceed to the analysis of the other voices like that of the narrator and the supernatural beings.

The Factual Voices

Rushdie relies on the ancient Indian history from the beginning of the novel itself. The introduction of the Mughal dynasty furnishes the setting of the oriental part while the rule of the Pope and the life in Florence forms the occidental part. Both these aspects are treated simultaneously so as to make the reader wonder about its shocking similarities in the manner of luxurious life and debauchery.

The oriental tale introduces the rule of the Mughal emperor, Akbar, who is famous for his great religious tolerance. Unlike his predecessors, he was very lenient to all his countrymen and this made him very popular. His father Humayun and grandfather Babar were great warriors and it was through Babar that the great Mughal dynasty extended into India. The plot of *The Enchantress of Florence* owes much to the exploits of this warlord. The heroine, Qara Koz, is a sister of this Emperor. This legendary princess is a missing link in the written history of the dynasty. She was supposed to be taken as a captive, along with her elder sister Begum Khanzada, by Shah Ismail, one of the enemies of her brother. Later, Khanzada returned to the Mughal palace, but her sister preferred to stay with the abductor, as the story says.

The story of the lost princess proves to be a fertile ground for the plot to develop. Emperor Akbar, his mother Hamida Bano and his aunt Gulbadan are real beings whereas, the Mirror, the maid of Qara Koz, remains fictitious. The palace of the Emperor, as well as the courtiers who were known as Navaratnas, are taken directly from the historical documents. Tansen, the great singer, and Birbal, the legendary wit are some among these eminent men. The city of Fatepur Sikri, an evidence of the ancient artificial achievements, stands as the proud setting of the orient grandeur.

The other side of this pomp and glory too is given in the work. The flourishing brothels and the unclean relations they held even with the royal family are dealt with in detail. The city itself seems to be lavishing in debauchery. Parricide and treachery echo throughout the fiction. Seduction and lasciviousness are the rules of the day. The suicides of Tana and Riri, the two sisters of Tansen, reminds about the prevailing caste system in the society. Rushdie's sarcastic voice proves to be the most excellent choice in narrating these events. The tone of indifference he adopts increases the quality of presentation much.

The city gets deserted in the end. The canal system designed for Fatepur Sikri proves to be a faulty one and the lack of water forces people to leave the dream city of Akbar soon. Thus, the Mughal Empire, the missing Qara Koz, the numerous battles, the luxurious city life and the final evacuation are the major real incidents which are adopted by Rushdie in this work. These form the realistic oriental voice of *The Enchantress of Florence*.

The tale of the occident begins with the portrayal of three friends. These three boys, Antonino Argalia, Niccolo il Machia and Ago Vespucci represent the licentious ways of the Florentine life. Their childhood and Argalia's decision to leave the place of his birth seem to be the conventional rendering of the provincial life. The influence of Christianity and the Pope add more realistic tones to the narration. The supremacy of the Catholic Church is often treated in a sarcastic manner by Rushdie.

The life in the city is always in a muddle. Debauchery and anarchy are the rules of the day. Both, the rulers and the ruled, are corrupted alike. This casts a shadow of betrayal over them. In this aspect, Rushdie finds that the East and the West are the same. The sensuousness prevailing in these societies provide certain special privileges to some women, especially to the ill-reputed ones. They prosper and gain more powers over the ruling class. The flourishing trade relations with the East improve the life conditions of the West. The shipping industry develops very fast and the companies are in need of a great quantity of man power. The image of the adventurous voyager is made popular by the industrialist with this purpose in mind. Many youngsters lost their lives in pursuit of this image and many survived like Argalia.

The war with the Turks and the religious conversions make the accurate depictions of the crusades and the related cruelties. Florence shares the western concept about the Middle East as the abode of barbarianism. So the conversion of Argalia to Islam creates a sensation in the city. His return to the native land with the mysterious princess increased this feeling of surprise. The shifts to the totally unknown habitats, whether knowingly or unknowingly, create a lot of troubles to Argalia and Qara Koz. They are on constant move between the two worlds. Their internal as well as external voices remain complimentary with each other.

Argalia begins his journey out of his necessity to survive, while Qara Koz does the same out of her desire for adventure. The male remains submissive and victimized, but the female is the powerful agent who is capable of bringing about transformations to her surroundings. He is always being manipulated and she knows how to manipulate even the emotions of a strange society. In the end, Rushdie portrays her as the powerful survivor who is capable of making further ventures. Men are ready to sacrifice themselves for her benefit, even if history fails to trace the track of the run-away princess any further. So the story comes to a standstill in the factual manner.

The fantasy voices

The novelist makes a clever use of fantasy throughout the work. He erases the differences of cultures and overcomes the difficulties of distance with the magical aid of fantasy. The novel begins like a fairy-tale. The voice of the omnipresent narrator describes the unnatural appearance of the foreign traveller. Then his past ventures are dealt with in detail. The story of his childhood is often repeated as if it is a magical chant. The three friends' search for the mandrake marks the culmination of those days. After that, they get separated, and each one moves on in his own way.

Argalia's days with Andrea Dorea, the captain of the trading ship contains certain elements of contradiction. The young man exerts some enchantment over the captain. He narrates his story and the listener falls into a deep sleep. Then Argalia gets hold of some secret documents from the captain and escapes to the kingdom of the great Mughal Emperor, Akbar. This city is portrayed as the abode of all kinds of sorcery and black magic. The golden lake in the middle of the city proclaims the glory of the enchantments.

In this magic orient, nobody seems to be content with anything or anyone. The emperor himself remains suspicious about the rivalry of his own children. His mother and her sister in law represent the proud ancestry of the Mughals and they are the most reliable chroniclers of the country. The enchanting presence of the ideal queen, Jodha, who is the personification of all the hidden ambitions of Akbar, remains as the most powerful creation of fantasy till the arrival of the real enchantress, Qara Koz.

The country lives in its dreams and even in the brothels magic hatches up. Sorcery and charms flourish in the streets and often the rich and the poor alike take part in these. The influence of necromancy makes some of them commit heinous deeds. The reappearance of Qara Koz marks a turning point in the city. The reinvention of the once erased history is made possible solely through the help of magic. The eternal

youth possessed by the mysterious lady announces the power of her magic spell. The process of re-enlivening the princess costs the life of the artist who drew her portraits. The man ends up as a captive inside his magical picture. The unravelling of the strange story of the orient princess takes place through the voices of different narrators. Mogor dell'Amore, i.e. the 'Mughal born out of wedlock' acts as the major narrator. The rest of the story is revealed through the voice of Gulbadan and Hamida Bano. Very rarely, the voice of the novelist too interferes.

The occidental concepts of magic and sorcery do not vary much in from its orient counterpart. The beautiful ladies, who possess enough charm to attract men, are considered as enchantresses. Such ladies were plenty in Florence too. Even the clergy supported such beliefs with the hope of gaining more material profit through it. The brothels were the places where men often get crowded. These admirers of female charm often end up in miseries. Sometimes, they may resort to black magic too, to get their beloved back.

The Turkish ways of black magic included the erasing of the slave's memory. These slaves remained as the storehouses of their owner's memories. They were devoid of any personal memories and Rushdie identifies this as the "brain colonization" (*The Enchantress of Florence* Chapter 13 "In the children's prison camp at Uskub" 236). This fantastic waking up of the slave girl is narrated in a realistic manner in this work. Dreams are the other major source of the voices of fantasy. They often remain prophetic in nature, both in the orient and in the occident.

The objects which create magical effects include the magic mirror of the Medici family, which reflects the image of the most beautiful lady of the province in it. The mirror loses its spell quite accidentally. The witch hunting and religious persecution differentiates the Western scenario from the East. Still, the novelist portrays the powerful return of the forlorn princess to her ancestral land. The aura of mystery that he created around her is capable of bringing down all the arguments of reason and logic. The Emperor feels enchanted by her and forgets all about his own creation, Jodha. Qara Koz grows so powerful in his mind that the Emperor replaces his earlier beloved with this adventurous princess.

Conclusion

The multitudes of voices, which stand independent of each other, mark the work as a truly polyphonic one. The novelist does not attempt to make any conclusive remarks in the end. So, *The Enchantress of Florence* can be considered as a as a literary attempt which is truly "multiform in style and variform in voice" (Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination* "Discourse in the Novel" 261). The voices in the work vary between that of the Emperor to the concubines. These totally independent characters live according his or her principles. No one seems to be superior to the other. Even the supernatural ones, who hold the capacity to enter into the others' private affairs, do so only if they are invited to. Even intellectual slavery is treated as a trespass and a crime as in the case of the Memory palace episode.

There are no boundaries mentioned in this novel and even the idea of physical distance is often challenged by the novelist. The work contradicts the images offered by the conventional cultural studies and attempts to travel beyond time and space in the secret wings of fantasy. So, the novel can be treated as a truly polyphonic venture by Rushdie, the great story teller of the present century.

Bibliography

- Rushdie, Salman. *The Enchantress of Florence*, Vintage Books, Random House, London 2009. Print
- Bakhtin, Mikhail *The Dialogic Imagination* "Discourse in the Novel" Ed. Michael Holquist, Transl. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, University of Texas Press, Austen USA 1981. Print
- _____. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* Ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Transl. Vern. M. McGee, University of Texas Press, USA 1986. Print

Web sources

- "Polyphony" *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia* Available online: <https://en.wikipedia.org>
- "In Theory Bakhtin: Dialogism, Polyphony and Heteroglossia" Available online: <https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk>
-