

2. Displaced Identities of Transnational Migrants in Salman Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*: A Cross-cultural Perspective

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Abstract:

*The postcolonial era has manifested its specialty in the evolution of postmodern discourses which have cross-cultural effects on the contemporary society. The new era of globalization has churned the nuances of transnational migration which is essentially a postcolonial factor. Migration of indigenous populations to various countries around the globe induces a new set of social expectation, cultural values and beliefs. This new cultural environment postulates a craving for the past life which is effectively dealt with in Salman Rushdie's works of art. The prospects of religious conversion and its counter effects are also elaborated by Rushdie in his novel, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*. This paper highlights Rushdie's successful attempt in blurring the frontiers of the East and the West. Migrancy and cultural displacements form the strength of Rushdie's novels and he highlights his displaced migrants as decentered beings, unable to free themselves from the cultural pull.*

Keywords:

Migration; Discourses; Postcolonial; Postmodern; Cross-cultural; Globalization; Beliefs; Rushdie; Migrants

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Full text:

The postcolonial era has manifested its specialty in the evolution of postmodern discourses which have cross-cultural effects on the contemporary society. The effects of imperialism and colonialism have shaped the Third World countries in the political and economic grounds. These countries experience a cultural hegemony and this is clearly exposed in postcolonial writings. The new era of globalization has churned the nuances of transnational migration which is essentially a postcolonial factor.

Transnational migration has lent the world a new set of community, transcending national borders. Migration of indigenous populations to various countries around the globe induces a new set of social expectation, cultural values and beliefs. This new cultural environment postulates a craving for the past life which is effectively dealt with in Salman Rushdie's works of art. Further, the prospects of religious conversion and its counter effects are also elaborated by Rushdie, especially in his seventh novel, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*. In this novel, Rushdie makes a successful attempt at blurring the frontiers of the East and the

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West. This paper also captures the plight of dislocated individuals who long for their cultural belongingness. The narrator of the story being Rai, the story spins around Bombay in the beginning and later towards the West. Rushdie has pinned his hopes in connecting the East and West to fit into the transnational lifestyle.

Religious conversion in India and its impending cultural crisis is clearly exposed by Rushdie. Rai who dreams for the promised land of America and yet nostalgic about Bombay leads a garbled life with no religion to embrace. So instead of getting religious practices from his father, he inherits the Bombayness, “Bombay was what my father gave to me. Instead” (60) Rushdie, through Rai, discloses the past roots of Islam in India. As he affirms, the Muslims in India are all the “children of converts” (74) who have previously embraced Islam. Through this statement, Rushdie asserts that Muslims in India abide by the hybrid cultures of both the Arabian Muslims and the Indian culture as well. Rai’s father, who is an Indian Muslim, has a constant longing to know about his roots, especially about his “mislaid personal identity” (74). His love for the Bombay city continues along with his quest towards its “pre-history” (79).

Piloo Dhoodhwala, the local dairy businessman and neighbour of Rai, exposes the sad dilemma of people who have undergone a religious conversion, “Convert,’ he said. ‘You know what is it? I will tell. Religious conversion, it is like getting on a train. Afterwards, only the train itself is where you belong; neither the departure platform nor the arrival platform. In both these places, you are totally

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despised. Such is convert” (70). Piloo decisively disputes that cultural changes can never be remunerated as they end up like a “power cut” (70) that disconnects a person from “the history of his race” (70). Rai details the pain of religious conversion as he has experienced the wrecked history of his family’s past religious life. The immigrant religions always suffer a fracture from a sturdy cultural history and this doubts the identity of the converts and puts them in an in-between space. Rushdie exposes the pain of displaced identities and shows their alienated status throughout.

Vina Apsara, on the other hand, a native Indian by birth and brought up in the West, detests India and develops pessimistic ideas about the country. These pessimistic impressions on India disclose the cultural displacement that can destroy the psyche of a person. Vina completely hates India and dismisses the very thought of leading her future life there. She disgusts everything Indian. Being an Indian by birth, her Western upbringing makes her repulsive towards the Indian culture. As she lists her hatred for India, Rushdie paints the broken ties with the alien country and thereby discloses the pain of dislocation:

And there’s plenty of it to hate. I hate the heat, and it’s always hot, even when it rains, and I really hate that rain. I hate the food, and you can’t drink the water. I hate the poor people, and they’re all over the place. I hate the rich people, they’re so goddamn pleased with themselves. I hate the crowds, and you’re never out of them. I hate the way people speak

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too loud and dress in purple and ask too many questions and order you around. I hate the dirt and I hate the smell and I specially hate squatting down to shit. I hate the money because it can't buy anything, and I hate the stores because there's nothing to buy. (72)

Rushdie, in his *Imaginary Homelands* clearly illustrates the fact that a “full migrant” (277) experiences “triple disruption” (277). He says that a person’s past cultural codes like language and place can never be completely displaced. It remains partial within their inner thoughts provoking their longing for their roots and culture. As he further elaborates:

He loses his place, he enters into an alien language, and he finds himself surrounded by beings whose social behavior and codes are very unlike, and sometimes even offensive to, his own. And this is what makes migrants such important figures: because roots, language and social norms have been three of the most important parts of the definition of what it is to be a human being. The migrant, denied all three, is obliged to find new ways of describing himself, new ways of being human. (278)

Rushdie further details his ideas on alienated beings through Sir Darius Xerxes Cama, the Parsi gentleman of Bombay and explains the “fourth function of *outsideness*” (72). As he says, the estranged individuals are isolated because, they are “*simply born not belonging, who come into the world semi-detached... without strong affiliation to family or location or nation or race; that there may even be millions, billions of such souls, as many non-belongers as belongers*” (73) And

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Rushdie evidently confesses that these non-belongers are considered to be the “different ones, the outlaws, the freaks” (73). The dislocated migrants experience alienation and cultural displacement:

The idea of a man without a nation seems to impose a strain on the modern imagination. A man must have a nationality as he must have a nose and two ears. All this seems obvious, though, alas, it is not true. But that it should have come to seem so very obviously true is indeed an aspect, perhaps the very core of the problem of nationalism. Having a nation is not an inherent attribute to humanity, but it has now come to appear as such. (Gellner 6)

Here in this context both Rai and Vina are to be categorized as the outlaws who are forever banished from their cultural belonging. Rai’s pathetic experiences of his religious past and Vina’s alienation in India label them as outlaws and freaks. Also Rushdie portrays the displacement of Rai from Bombay to show his alienation. Rushdie himself suffers the agony of being dislocated from Bombay and through Rai, conveys the anguish of being stripped off from the mother country. Rai’s words are clearly Rushdie’s very own words:

I am writing here about the end of something, not just the end of a phase of my life but the end of my connection with a country, my country of origin as we say now, my home country I was brought to say, India. I am trying to say goodbye, goodbye again, goodbye a quarter century after I physically left ...

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Because as it happens I didn't go of my own free will. As it happens I was driven out, like a dog. I had to run for my life. (203)

Rai, on leaving the Apollo Bunder apartment in Bombay feels regretful as he tells, "it did not occur to me, when I left my Apollo Bunder apartment, that I was going for good, that I would never again set foot in those rooms; nor on that street" (247). He remembers India as a "part" of his own self, where his "parents lay buried" (247). India, as he says, remains "as essential as a limb" (247) for him. He bids goodbye to India in a poignant way,

India, I have swum in your warm waters and run laughing in your high mountain meadows... I have walked your filthy streets. India, I have ached in my bones from the illnesses engendered by your germs. I have eaten your independent salt and drunk your nauseatingly sugary roadside tea... India, my too-muchness, my everything at once, my Hug-me, my fable, my mother, my father and my first great truth. It may be that I am not worthy of you, for I have been imperfect, I confess... India, fount of my imagination, source of my savagery, breaker of my heart.

Goodbye (249)

On the other hand, Ormus Cama's dislocation from Bombay to America is explained without any nostalgic sentiments for the mother country. He has left India "without a second thought" (250). In other words, he has left the native soil "as if it didn't exist" (250). His expedition to the "New World" (250) declares an estranged

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life in the “new homes” (251) yet to be seen. As a sign of accepting the new culture, he changes wholly like an American.

He himself has dressed carefully for the journey, arraying his body in the casual wear of America: the Yankees baseball cap, the white Beat Generation T-shirt with the ragged cutaway sleeves, the Mickey Mouse watch. There is a touch of Europe too, in the black hipster jeans which he literally charmed off the legs of an Italian tourist at the Gateway, a susceptible youth, one of the first long-haired Westerners to arrive in India in search of beaches and enlightenment. (251)

These characters that Rushdie carves are “travellers between the worlds” who die in their old worlds to be “reborn in the new” (254). In other words, as Rushdie puts it up, they are “transatlantic rats” (260) making up their journey towards the “exotic, fabulous, unreal” Western world. They are in reality “under worlders” (260), who are “aliens on a strange planet” (266). Though Ormus opts to leave India for America, at the very moment of touching the alien soil, he feels “out of land” (271).

The transnational crossings initiated by the overlapping of territories have become an unavoidable factor in the daily life of the contemporary era. The diasporic networks are oriented by cultural connections throughout the world. These transnational connections represent the exclusions that are constantly experienced by minority communities within a major cultural domain. The loss and

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unsettlement of the migrants display their broken past as well as their cross-cultural crisis in their new alien land.

Rushdie proves that even if a migrant chooses to accept the transnational lifestyle, he is sure to feel the pangs of alienation. Migrancy and cultural displacements form the strength of Rushdie's novels and he highlights his displaced migrants as decentered beings, unable to free themselves from the cultural pull. In his *Step Across This Line*, Rushdie describes the frontier as "an elusive line, visible and invisible, physical and metaphorical, amoral and moral" (78). The transnational connections of migrants fix them into a new set of cultures and Rushdie has clearly focused the double vision that tears them apart. Frontier crossing makes Rushdie a successful writer on transculturalism and he asserts himself as a postcolonial writer in this contemporary era of globalization.

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