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Cosmopolitan Oeuvrein Salman Rushdie’s “*The Enchantress of Florence*”

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Abstract

Salman Rushdie, the master raconteur, corroborates cosmopolitan perspective in the novel *The Enchantress of Florence*. In tune with his avocation, he establishes a creative hiatus between self and other; oriental and occidental; power and powerless; reality and fantasy. The schematizing of the cosmopolitan perspective is achieved through inventing a narrative space. Another point of substantiation for his outlook is the delineation of diasporic characters, who are drawn from disparate geographical locations. The cultural references are of the Italian Renaissance and the Mughal Dynasty of India, and convey an overt message of cultural conglomeration. The other valid reason that could validate Rushdie’s choice of register is that he accommodates his narrative lingo for the liberal space of expression. There is a distortion of historical authenticity by way of mixing fact and fantasy, which he does it as a ploy of subversion. Thus, the accomplished masterpiece attains the cosmopolitan oeuvre as desired by Rushdie.

Keywords: cosmopolitan, perspective, hiatus, oriental, occidental, diasporic, Renaissance, Mughal Dynasty, culture, register, lingo, subversion

Salman Rushdie’s *The Enchantress of Florence* is an art piece of universal appeal, that rejects the norms of time and place, and paves the way for a conglomerate of cultural vision. The entire narrative is spun around the diasporic characters. Any kind of structural imposition of locale and setting is given little significance, though they have a transit value of the magical time frame in 15th century. The narrative centre is occupied by a mythicized persona, Enchantress. Almost all the characters delineated are sketchy in the back ground of the Italian Renaissance and in the zenith of Mughal dynasty. There appears an interweaving of many stories with a keen sense of detail. The East symbolized by the Mughal dynasty and the West by the Renaissance Italy share the artistic, religious and cultural excellence alike,

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suspending the superficial man-made borders of time and place.

Rushdie draws the narrative with the diasporic characters, Qara Koz, Mogar dell' Amore (Vespucci) and Akbar. The Emperor Akbar's dilemma in accepting a foreigner into his family substantiates the inclusiveness of diasporic identity and the openness of worldly outlook, which is not hampered by narrow nationalism. "To allow him into the family would be a sign that he was indeed pursuing Abul Fazl's idea of becoming the world-king, that he could incorporate into his line—into himself—persons, places, narratives, possibilities from lands as yet unknown, lands which might, in their turn, also be subsumed" (*The Enchantress of Florence* 317). Rushdie perceives the replacement of migrant rather than displacement. There is an assimilative stance in the way Rushdie treats migration.

Rushdie's narrative distorts time sequence as he indulges in metafictional narrative modes. There is a deliberate distortion of chronology while referring to the historical figures who partake as characters in the fictional enterprise. The prominent figures mentioned, Moghul Emperor Akbar, who reigned during the period 1556-1605 AD, had no simultaneity with Machiavelli, who lived through 1469-1527 AD. Rushdie deftly creates a time frame devoid of historic fidelity, situating

both Akbar and Machiavelli in a simultaneous time setting. It is also emphatically said of Rushdie, who creates timeless characters, but for a metaphorical signification of representative excellence of the disparate East and West. His indulgence is more of a comparative cultural statement that dissolves boundaries of time and place.

Rushdie's narrative relies on orature, an Eastern story telling mode, which is replete with digressions. It is not a linear narrative in terms of Aristotelian structure which moves from beginning through the middle to the end. It has a pyrotechnical structure:

...goes in great swoops, it goes in spirals or in loops, it every so often reiterates something that has happened earlier to remind you, and then takes you off again, something summarises itself, it frequently digresses off into something that the story-teller appears just to have thought of, then it comes back to the main thrust of the narrative. (qtd. Teverson 45)

It is also commented upon that his narrative structure as having omnibus integrative character in its outlook.

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Rushdie's narrative in *The Enchantress of Florence* follows a kind of 'hypodiegetic narrative,' a form that has a narrative within a narrative, as put forth by Mieke Bal and Rimmon-Keenan. It has stories intertwined into stories. It has a vast stretch of traversing continents, from the Renaissance Italy to Mughal Empire, while paying due attention to cultural and philosophical facets of the milieu. Rushdie is desirous of encompassing the cultural connectivity through the character, Mogar dell'Amore, the other name Vespucci is one of the narrators, is a migrant. He is shown as a picaro, who very often metamorphizes into different roles.

Rushdie envisions religion as a point of socio-cultural convergence and it should not be treated as a bone of discontentment. He has extended discussions on religious philosophies and their motives. The assimilative nature of religions and the individual liberty to spread the religions also cited at a context. There is a mention of exchange of tenets of religious faith between the 'New World' of Europe, having Italy as its cultural centre and the Mughal Empire under Akbar's reign. The religious emissary comprising of three Jesuits sent to Akbar's court in Circa 1580 is a piece of historical relevance that lends credence to the narrative. The individual liberty of disowning and converting into another religion also finds mention in the talk of Argalia: "Or who

knows? I might turn Turk myself. Argalia the Turk, Wielder of the Enchanted Lance, with four huge Swiss giants, Moslem converts, in my retinue. Swiss Mohammedans, yes. Why not. When you're a mercenary it's gold and treasure that talk, and for that you have to go east" (*The Enchantress of Florence* 139). The focus of the mercenary attitude and materialistic outlook denuded of religious affiliations are seen when they travel to east in search of bounty. Rushdie distorts the venerated image held by intellectuals about il Machia (Machiavelli). The religious conviction of il Machia in the comment of Vespucci substantiates his character:

He was not a deeply religious man, il Machia, but he was a Christian. He avoided mass, but he believed all other religions to be false. He held popes responsible for most of the wars of the period, and thought of many bishops and cardinals as criminals, but cardinals and popes liked what he had to say about the nature of the world better than prince. He...was not a heretic,...and though there were aspects of the rule of the Mussulman Sultan that he was prepared to learn from and even to praise, the

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idea of entering such a potentate's service was a nauseating one (*The Enchantress of Florence* 246).

Rushdie inks on the religious matter as a subjective issue and his characters Argalia and il Machia conform to the socio-cultural conditions, yet exercise their liberty of thought over religion. The religious and national attachments lead to squabble among the foreigners in the Mughal court. Vespucci, the messenger of Queen Elizabeth becomes an object of suspicion to the Jesuits, Father Acquaviva and Father Monserrate. Abul Fazl, an eminent personality in Akbar's court expresses his displeasure over the trustworthiness of Vespucci and alleges that he could be a spy.

“The Portuguese are pirates” said Mogor dell' Amore (Vespucci). “They are buccaneers and scoundrels. No wise man should trust what they say.” “Father Acquaviva of the Society of Jesus is an Italian like yourself,” Abul fazl rejoined, “and Father Montserrat his companion comes from Spain.” “If they come here under the flag of the scurrilous Portugee,” the other insisted, “then

Portugee pirate dogs is what they have become.” Loud Laughter broke out from a place above their heads, as if a god were mocking him (*The Enchantress of Florence* 70).

The political and cultural squabbles existing among the European visitors are satirized by Rushdie by creating a cosmopolitan exchange of ideas among the Italians, Spanish, Portuguese and Indian.

The Enchantress is the central character, who acts as a link between the Medicis and Mughals. Vespucci, the narrator from Italy wishes to narrate a story to Akbar that could unsettle the dynasty itself of their set beliefs regarding the relationship between Vespucci and the Mughal Emperor Akbar, as uncle and nephew. The Enchantress, Qara Koz is presented as the mother of Vespucci, who in fact was the lost Moghul princess. The narrative unsettles Akbar and his relation with Qara Koz. Insistent upon to continue the serpentine story with layers of plot one over the other, touches upon generations of genealogies of Genghis Khan, Lorenzo de Medici, Vlad the Impaler, Machiavelli, Amerigo Vespucci, Christopher Columbus, Botticelli and Elizabeth I. Rushdie's perception of hybrid construction is operative at all levels of the narrative, that opts for heterogeneous stretch of life. Vespucci describes the Enchantress as,

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“There was once an adventurer prince named Argalia, also called Arcalia, a great warrior who possessed enchanted weapons, and in whose retinue were four terrifying giants, and he had a woman with him, Angelica...” (19). “What a short journey from *enchantress to witch*. Only yesterday she had been the city’s unofficial patron saint” (297).

She passes through various states, which Rushdie fossilises through ‘the Memory Palace.’ The description of enchantress passing through various stages evokes a dream like reality. The character Angelique’s role is assigned to connect the disparate worlds of Medicis and Moghuls, representatives of Christianity and Islam respectively; and the descendants of Abraham. Rushdie realizes a religious cosmopolitan perspective in creating a unified vision.

Vespucci turns out to be an unreliable narrator. As an enchanter and story teller, he casts a spell over Akbar. Under the influence of the spell Akbar assumes Qara Koz as his queen, which is the union of the East and West. At the end of the novel, Vespucci disappears leaving a void and a deep discontentment in the mind of Akbar. “Vespucci’s story was concluded. He had crossed over into the empty page after the last page, beyond the illuminated borders of the existing world, and had entered the universe of the undead, those poor souls whose lives terminate before

they stop breathing” (343). Rushdie attempts loss of identity as in the case of Vespucci and transformation beyond nationality as in the case of Qara Koz, whose experiences are illustrative of cosmopolitan oeuvre that dissolves borders of time, place and mind.

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