



MYTHOLOGICAL REFERENCES: GLITTERING GOLD IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S NOVELS *GRIMUS, MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN & THE MOOR'S LAST SIGH*

AMANDEEP KAUR

Ph.D English, Registration no. : TUMARCH18538/20

Tantia University, Sri Ganganagar (Rajasthan)

Email : amandeepk053@gmail.com



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Abstract

The term which is most frequently used to describe Salman Rushdie's style is magic realism which is a distinguishable genre. Salman Rushdie employs Indian myths and epics and blends Sufi, Hindu, Greek and Christian mythologies alongwith pre and post - modernist literature into his construction of narrative forms. Rushdie's use of various mythologies impart a deeper sense and meaning to his novels as clearly visible in *Grimus*, *Midnight's Children* and *The Moor's Last Sigh* . Rushdie invests his narrative with a peculiar universality by using various mythologies and allusions.

Keywords: Mythologies, various, novel, employed, different

INTRODUCTION

"Ambitious, chaotic, fantastical, mythic
.....

Rushdie's stylistically bold, time – juggling
Bildungsroman." (Abele Robert)

Salman Rushdie, Indian born British writer is famous and leading novelist among the writers of Indian English literature. He is also known as an effective but controversial writer in modern English fiction across the globe. Salman Rushdie in his novels always aims to explore contemporary reality by using myths.

The employment of various mythological references in *Grimus*, *Midnight's Children* and *The Moor's Last Sigh* establishes Rushdie as a myth – maker novelist. Rushdie's novels contain different Oriental and Occidental myths such as Hindu, Islamic, Greek and Christian. Salman Rushdie's encyclopedic use of myths finds the deep reality behind his thematic as well as structural patterns of

the novels. His contemporary history becomes a mythical history or a future history. A. S. Rao has pointed out :

"Rushdie has a knack of combining cognitive facts of life with the normative abstractions of history in his own mock serious style.

He has a technique of implication with which he makes the past, present and future to bunch off at once into simultaneity of impression."

WARPED MYTHOLOGIES IN GRIMUS

Grimus is Salman Rushdie's first novel which is focused on a narrative poem, *The Conference of the Birds* written by the Persian poet Fariduddin al – Attar in which twenty- nine birds are said to be persuaded by a hoopoe, a messenger of a BirdGod to make a pilgrimage to the God.

Grimus is a wonderful novel in which various Sufi, Hindu, Christian and Norse mythologies

dominate the plot of the novel from the beginning to the end. Mujeebuddin Syed has stated that :

“Salman Rushdie’s first novel, *Grimus* (1975) is marked by a characteristic heterogeneity that was to become the hallmark of later Rushdie novels. Strange and esoteric at times, *Grimus* has a referential sweep that assumes easy acquaintance with such diverse texts as Farid Ud Attar’s *The Conference of the Birds* and Dante’s *Divina Commedia* as well as an unaffected familiarity with mythologies as different as Hindu and Norse. Combining mythology and science fiction, mixing oriental thought with Western modes, *Grimus* is in many ways an early manifesto of Rushdie’s heterodoxical themes and innovative techniques.”(135)

The title of the novel, *Grimus* is anagram of *Simurg*; the name of a bird in Sufi myth. So, Rushdie’s employment of various mythologies is reflected in the title itself. This Sufi myth is described in the text as :

“The *Simurg* is the Great Bird. It is vast, all – powerful and singular. It is the sum of all other birds. There is a Sufi poem in which thirty birds set out to find the *Simurg* on the Mountain where he lives when they reach the peak, they find that they themselves are, or rather have become, the *Simurg*. The name, you see, means Thirty Birds. Si, thirty : Murg birds, Fascinating, Fascinating The Myth of the Mountain of Kaf.”(*Grimus* : 256)

Salman Rushdie’s first novel, *Grimus* is an exercise in fantastical science-fiction and the title ‘*Grimus*’ as an anagram of the name ‘*Simurg*’ means an immense, all – wise fabled bird of Pre – Islamic Persian mythology. Dilip Fernandez rightly explains:

“*Grimus* is an anagram of *Simurg*, in Persian mythology the bird with reasoning power.”(104)

So, different myths that Rushdie employs presents such marvelous, strange and queer worlds of

miracle in *Grimus* that not only enchant its readers but at the same time create a sense of wonder in them.

Salman Rushdie in *Grimus* uses different mythologies as Norse, Hindu, Persian along with various Islamic allusions. D. C. R. A. Goonetilleke in his book ‘*Salman Rushdie: Macmillan Modern Novelists*’ expresses his view point about Salman Rushdie’s use of mythologies in *Grimus*. He writes about these warped mythologies that :

“Rushdie invests his narrative with a peculiar universality by his use of myth and allusion. Many more than Attar and Dante make their presence felt. Norse myth appears. Deggle calls himself *Lokki* – appropriately. *Loki* is the God of Evil, mischief – maker, source of disharmony gives the mistletoe to the blind God *Hodur* and the mistletoe..... The myth and allusion are at the service of parody.”(11 – 12)

Rushdie employed different mythologies in his novel and it is right to say that Attar and Dante provide the book’s basic sources, Norse and Hindu mythologies provide some of the novel’s important motifs, while Sufi and Vedantic thoughts are at the core of the novel’s theme.

MYTHOLOGICAL REFERENCES IN MIDNIGHT’S CHILDREN

The title of the novel *Midnight’s Children* refers to the 1,001 children born within the hour after the stroke of midnight on the day of India’s Independence, August 15, 1947, each with a special gift or power. The names of the important characters and the title indicates the idea of *Midnight’s Children* being born with magical powers is a myth.

Saleem in the novel creates a story with the political, historical events, facts, fantasy and mythologies. The battle between Saleem and Shiva reflects the ancient, mythological battle between the innovative and devastating forces in the world. The reference to Shiva, the Hindu God of both destruction and procreation and Saleem as narrator represents Brahma, the God of creation responsible

for creating the world. Shiva and Parvati referred to Hindu God and Goddess. Dr. M. Yogesh highlights the mythological references as Rushdie employs in the novel:

“The idea that myth is being played off against history becomes clear in the names of the three important Midnight’s Children - Saleem Sinai, Shiva and Parvati. The name Saleem Sinai lends itself to a variety of interpretations, One of them being the association with Mount Sinai and Moses. Shiva, according to the narrator, was named after ‘ the god of destruction and procreation’.

Saleem’s sister is loyal to Saleem as Hanuman was to Rama.....”(5) Mythology is one of the most important element in the magic realism technique. In his second novel, *Midnight’s Children* Rushdie uses this magic realism technique in an ironic and playful manner for recording his narrative in mythical terms.

Different myths and legends are invoked as Saleem’s fable like story unfolds. There are so many mythological references especially from Hindu mythology as various characters and legends from the Hindu epics like Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, Rama, Arjuna, Bhima and the battle of Kurukshetra are included in the novel. There are so many mythological allusions to the Musa or Moses as the last name of character Saleem Sinai, ‘ Sinai’ is linked with Mt. Sinai and Moses. Saleem the narrator of the novel associated himself with the elephant – headed Lord Ganesha and reason behind this association in his nose and his love for writing. Rushdie suggests more justification for Saleem’s very large nose in ‘ *Midnight’s Children and Shame*’ as :

“the map of India all of a sudden for me resembled a very large nose hanging into the sea.”(8)

There are passing references to Parsi religious practices, in particular, to a human hand chewed by vultures from the Parsi Tower of Silence that periodically falls on Ahmed Sinai’s face from the sky in Delhi like a slap from Destiny, and to

Cyrus Dubash’s doting widowed mother conjuring her own into the role of the Parsi, Messiah, Lord Khusro Khusrovand, illustrating the danger of fanaticism that stalks all practitioners of all religions at all times.

There is an extensive use of Hindu myths in the text. Salman Rushdie refers to both Reverend mother and the former Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi as embodying Shakti image. Rushdie makes use of the myth of Shiva Lingam to explain away the moral turpitude reaching the maniac levels in the higher echelons of society blinded by their opulence.

In *Midnight’s Children* mythologies or different myths are correlated with real events of India’s Independence from British rule. Saleem, the narrator’s life is associated to India’s path as new nation. Rushdie describes in the novel that India’s Independence therefore can be seen to take its own mythic qualities. As in the novel :

“a new myth glinting in the corners of its eyes, August in Bombay : a month of Festivals the month of Krishna’s birthday..... a new myth to celebrate because a nation which had never previously existed was about to win its freedom..... was nevertheless quite imaginary ; into a mythical land, a country which would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will... it was a mass fantasy.”(MC : 112)

Thus, it is not only Salman Rushdie’s magnum opus but also colossal work of fiction which includes the whole of authenticity of the Indian subcontinent using myths. These mythological references are incorporated in the text to bring out the human myth condition and to trace reality which increased the scope of the English fiction.

VARIOUS MYTHOLOGIES IN THE MOOR’S LAST SIGH

Salman Rushdie’s novel ‘ *The Moor’s Last Sigh* ’ is a story of da Gama family and India presented in an enchanting prose style with use of threads of different myths that leads towards originality. Salman Rushdie uses various Biblical,

Hindu and mythological stories in the larger framework of the narrative.

The story of the novel is basically a mythical story in which all the events, characters, historical references have been woven skillfully incorporating - the Home Rule League of Annie Besant, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, formation of states - Maharashtra and Gujrat, bomb – blasts in Mumbai.

In the novel Rushdie employs large number of references from Hindu mythology. Rushdie has revived the notion of 'avatar' (reincarnation) linked with Hindu mythology in Aurora. Abraham and Aurora's house named 'Elephanta' depicts an allusion to the elephant headed, Lord Ganesha - the Hindu God. Ganesh Chaturthi, famous Hindu festival associated with Lord Ganesha has also been highlighted by Rushdie. Aurora dances on festival of Ganesh Chaturthi at Chowpatty, the place for the ceremony of 'Ganesha Vasarjan' is narrated as :

"Once a year, the gods came to Chowpatty Beach to bathe in the filthy sea; fat – bellied idols by the thousand, papier - mache effigies of the elephant -headed deity Ganesha or Ganpati Bappa....."(TMLS : 123)

As per Roman mythology Aurora is associated with the Goddess of dawn . According to the myth she flies across the sky and announces the arrival of the sun in the morning. She also represents the East as a place and power of the stories, imagination and fantasy. Another mythological reference associated to Roman mythology, Lucifer - the planet Venus when appearing as the morning star, is the son of Aurora, the Goddess of dawn.

Most of the novel has shown the best integration of Hindu, Roman, Biblical, religious and mythological stories. Aurora Zogoiby's painting, 'The Kissing of Abbas Ali Baig' catches an innocent event at a cricket match and rotates it into an erotic report :

"a tangle of womanly limbs and the cricket's pads and whites that recalled the eroticism of the Tantric carvings at the Chandela temples of Khajuraho."(229)

Various mythologies are embedded by Rushdie in the novel to present authenticity of modern India. The acute nature of Rushdie's themes cannot be comprehended unless we consider myth in true sense. In an interview with Amrita Dhillon about this novel, he writes that :

"this his first novel which had been written on computer and the first he had written about Mumbai and India without going or visiting these places, compelling him instead to draw an information collected in the journals and diaries he compiled during his previous visits to India."(138)

So, the novel, *The Moor's Last Sigh* is woven around the Moraes Zogoiby's reminiscing of his family saga of four generations. The novel's subversion of the notion of image of Mother India is discernible in the portrayal of Isabella and Aurora who are mother and daughter respectively. In the novel Aurora's behavior rightly portrayed by P. Balaswamy as :

"Isabella's only child Aurora also harbours a deep hatred and ill will towards her grandmother. Her reactions to Epifania's last, dying moments on the chapel floor on the Christmas eve of 1938 are so cold and calculated..... that shows Aurora to be some kind of damoness, equaled in horror only by Sufiya Zinobia in her tearing moments."(56 – 57)

So, *The Moor's Last Sigh* subverts the image of the ideal Mother India in the depiction of Aurora's temper towards her own grandmother and father . *The Moor's Last Sigh* is woven around the theme of subversion of the traditional notion of art as representation of reality, as a symbol of solidarity, unique and immortal.

Thus the novel, *The Moor's Last Sigh* is a tribute to the influence of reminiscence and his reincarnation of reality in the form of myth.

CONCLUSION

This paper is an attempt to explore the intermingling of different mythologies in the novels of Salman Rushdie. The myth emerges from the

plot which consists of the various mythical adventures and journeys. Thus, Salman Rushdie's use of various mythological references in his novels *Grimus*, *Midnight's Children* and *The Moor's Last Sigh* creates the marvelous setting for the development of plot and themes.

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