

Quest of Modern Man: From Angst to Love

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ABSTRACT

Salman Rushdie, a name to reckon with in contemporary Indian English Fiction has represented this angst of modern man in all his novels. In his fictional narrative, the modern man finds a voice to express his dilemma of existence amidst a society that has evolved into a global one but in the process has lost on the local. The man has been able to transcend the boundaries of nations, space and matter but has hardly any knowledge of his own 'self'. In each of his novels, Rushdie depicts the individual's struggle with his self and his gradual transformation through the healing power of love and acceptance.

KEYWORDS

Salman Rushdie; Self; Individual love.

Contemporary fiction is replete with stories revolving around the theme of anguish tormenting the soul of modern man. A victim of his times, modern man is represented as an individual torn and fragmented, oscillating between the pulls of tradition and modernity, caught up in the conflict of cultures, allegiances and identity crisis. The existential angst of modern man victimizes him to the level of insanity, rage and alienation.

Salman Rushdie, a name to reckon with in contemporary Indian English Fiction has represented this angst of modern man in all his novels. In his fictional narrative, the modern man finds a voice to express his dilemma of existence amidst a society that has evolved into a global one but in the process has lost on the local. The man has

been able to transcend the boundaries of nations, space and matter but has hardly any knowledge of his own 'self'. Gripped by fear, ignorance and anger, a man after breaking down the barriers around him has constructed new ones within him. Wandering aimlessly, through pain, loss, betrayal and anger, he is on an eternal voyage of self-discovery.

A true representative of his age, Rushdie portrays the quest of modern man from angst to calm, from ignorance to knowledge, from anger and hatred to peace and love. In each of his novels, Rushdie depicts the individual's struggle with his self and his gradual transformation through the healing power of love and acceptance. The present paper taking into consideration four select novels of Rushdie analyzing the crucial

link between self-realization and the healing touch of love and relations that enables the individual to transcend the bounds of inner barriers of crisis and identify one's true self.

An eloquent spokesperson of multiculturalism and hybridity, Rushdie equates love with a happy *mélange* of differences:

I wanted to cling to the image of love as the blending of spirits, as *mélange*, as the triumph of the impure, mongrel, conjoining best of us over what there is in us of the solitary, the isolated, the austere, the dogmatic, the pure; of love as democracy, as the victory of the no-man-is-an-island, two's-company Many over the clean, mean apartheid Ones. (MLS 289)

The Moor's Last Sigh (MLS), written at a time when he was forced into hiding after the world famous 'Rushdie affair', reveals the novelist's intense desire to be heard. In the character of Moraes or the Moor, Rushdie depicts his own need for self-expression.

The novel an ode to the lost multicultural world of ancient Moorish Spain before the crusade is a symbol of contemporary India and its loss of multiculturalism and secular spirit. Love is a strong emotion that not only binds two individuals together but taken in its comprehensiveness can also encompass the entire humanity. Rushdie laments the loss of this love at the personal as well as at the national level.

The Moor's mother Aurora da Gama and his father Abraham Zogoiby... "fell in pepper love, up there on the Malabar Gold." (MLS 90). But their passionate love did not sustain the strain of betrayal and deceit.

The passionate love of Aurora and Abraham that heralded the advent of later events in the narrative succumbed to the anxiety innate to Aurora's character and

duplicity in Abraham's. The angst of modern man amidst the transitoriness of life and times is best depicted in the character of Aurora. She is confused and alienated in her anguish that characterized post-independent India. In her attempt to comprehend and represent life with all its authenticity and complexity, she chooses the expressionistic technique in her paintings, to the "fantastic" (MLS 174). Her filial relationship with her son, the Moor is the basis of her affirmation to life and even her preoccupation with the portrayal of the *mélange* of multiculturalism and the modern world with its dissolution of borders finds its expression through the portrayal of her Moor in her famous Moor paintings. Betrayal of her motherly love finally seals her destiny and she dies in defiance of everything that dictates the hatred and denial of love, silently forgiving her son as a last gesture of compassion.

The Moor who betrays his mother's love and trust for the love of a woman, Uma finds his nemesis in her persona. Inheriting the anxiety born out of abandonment and loss of relations, Moor or Moraes suffers from the anger of the ignorant. He blames his mother for her rejection and though aware of the diabolical nature of Uma who tried to kill him, yearns for her love.

Moraes, alone in his exile staggers through life without any sense of self, struggling with an inner crisis of chaos, rage and confusion. It is only when his father reconnects with him and brings reconciliation with the memory of his dead mother that he is able to form a stable sense of direction in life. "There had been reconciliation, an explanation accepted, a son gathered to his father's bosom. A broken bond renewed." (MLS 322). His quest to trace the lost painting of his mother is symbolical of his desire to re-link with life, love and relations through an exploration and realization of

his true self. Though his quest possibly ends on a tragic note yet it does not fail in its purpose of transcendence from the alienation of his angst to the affirmation in love as Aoi, his companion in captivity says, "Defeated love is still a treasure, and those who choose lovelessness have won no victory at all." (MLS 425). His possible death by the ruins of the real Alhambra resonates with the central theme of the novel as well as the desire of every man, ". . . that most profound of our needs, to our need for flowing together, for putting an end to frontiers, for the dropping of the boundaries of the self." (MLS 433).

In the love of Ormus Cama and Vina Apsara, Rushdie delves into the anguish of modern man in life as well as in love. If acceptance of love had led Moraes to a voyage of self-discovery, then it had transformed the two protagonists of *The Ground Beneath her Feet* (GBF) from the moment they laid eyes upon each other. The fragmented characters of Ormus and Vina find solace and completeness in the other. Vina's relationship with the Merchant family also settles her disquieted spirit but also breaks it apart later with its own disintegration. The betrayal of relationships that had marred her life from the start unsettles her for life and even her love for Ormus fails to heal her fragmented psyche:

In their passionate relationship, one cannot live without the other, but to make matters worse, they cannot really live with each other: their selves are simultaneously drawn to each other and continuously forced apart. (Hensen 133)

It is the lack of a nurturing parental love in both their lives that shatters them. Umeed, the secret third angle in the tale is also transformed by their love. Desperately in love with Vina, he awaits his turn to bask in her love. All the three characters in the novel: Ormus, Vina and Umeed are driven by the force of their love. The course that

their life takes is in a huge way decreed upon by the influence of their love and relations. Ormus goes abroad in search for his Vina while Umeed decides to leave in order to prove himself worthy of her. If lack of filial love had thrown out the former too far from their nest, an abundance of love made the latter claustrophobic of the city of his parent's love and a reminder of final disintegration and death.

Ormus and Vina's love finds its expression through their music that unites the whole of humanity into crowds of love, transcending barriers of race and colour. Their love, however, is not stable enough to withstand the instability of their characters. Vina dies unexpectedly as broken as she always was; disenchanted and alone while Ormus delusional as ever is obsessed with the thought of her resurrection, dies long before the bullet finally hits him dead. It is Umeed alone who is strong enough to shoulder the responsibility of love, though stolen it might be. He yearns for Vina's acceptance of his love instead of the leftover bits she offers to him at her own sweet disposal. Love binds these three characters together but it is not able to help them transcend the depths of their anguish. Umeed fails to follow when Vina, at last, accepts his love fully, and her death seals off any possible chances of their relationship attaining its wholeness.

Rushdie seems to say through his story that it is not higher love as Veena and Ormus call their love to be that gives meaning and completeness to life but it's the ordinary human love with all its responsibilities and commitment that helps modern man transcend his anxieties, frustration, alienation and fragmentation. Umeed proves to be second time lucky in finding love and his relationship with Mira Celano and her little daughter Tara. The relationship finally endows his life and identity with completeness and security:

Here's ordinary human love beneath my feet. Fall away, if you must, contemptuous earth; melt rocks, and shiver, stones. I'll stand my ground, right here. This I've discovered and worked for and earned. This is mine. (GBF 575)

Man grappling with the complexities of modern life yearns for freedom; freedom to choose, freedom to decide, freedom to one's own individuality; to carve out a space of one's own amidst all. "But love is what we want, not freedom" (GBF 53). The self is not complete without relationships; family ties, friends, love.

Love is the sign of humanity as well as our character; it bestows harmony and tranquillity to our inner being.

The positive aspect of love is evident in its selfless action and sacrifice. Only when love is selfless and non-possessive can it set the soul free from the meshes of inner conflict and confusion. But when it succumbs to the depths of negativity it gives rise to the wrath of the furies that scorches the soul in the fires of Hell.

dhyayato visayan pumsah
sargas tesupajayate
sangat sanjayate kamah
kamat krodho bhijayate

(The man dwelling on sense-objects develops attachment for them; from attachment springs up desire, and from desire (unfulfilled) ensues anger.)
(Goyandka 2.62)

Malik Solanka is a man fleeing his past. The obsessive possession of his creation, Little Brain and her eventual rejection of him as she becomes commercialized unleashes in him the demon of *Fury* (F). His attachment to his doll obliterates all his other relationships into the shadows. Reminiscent of his tormented past, the dolls are in fact his

only relations in whom he had found comfort and companionship in his childhood, ". . . the only family he could bring himself to trust." (F 223).

A victim of child abuse at the hands of his stepfather, Malik abandons one relation for another. The love of his wife, son and friends fail to fill the void in his soul and he is unable to reciprocate their love fully.

His tortured and fragmented psyche is unable to relate to any relationship and he flees from his family to live in the vicious clutches of his inner fury that is gradually pulling him down towards complete degeneration, even to the point wherein he contemplates killing his own family. His intense angst gives him the frequent loss of memory and violent behavioural outburst. The arrival of Mila Milo in his life helps re-channelize his fury from its destructive course towards creation but is hardly the stable anchor that could quench its hunger into calmness. It is true love in the form of Neela Mahendra that proves to be the saving grace, which saves him from drowning.

. . . this bond felt like strength . . .
Neela was optimism's justification .
. . if Mila Milo had unlocked the floodgate, Neela Mahendra was the flood. In Neela's arms, Solanka felt himself begin to change, felt the inner demons he feared so much growing weaker by the day . . . Pack your bags, Furies, he thought, you no longer reside at this address . . . Neela's love was the philosopher's stone that made possible the transmuting alchemy. Rage grew out of despair: but Neela was hope fulfilled. (F 205-06).

Neela's ultimate act of selfless sacrifice; dying to save the life of Malik and her crew is the true sign of love in which Russell truly glimpses the divine. Her lesson of affirming to love and

relations transforms Malik to confront his past demons and transcend the existential dilemmas that haunted his inner being. Sacrificing her own life for him and her crew she teaches him to love and live life; to value relationships, "The earth moves. The earth goes round the sun." (F 255). Malik's act of affirmation towards life is evident in his attempts to re-connect with his son Asmaan. ". . . conjuring up all his lost love and hurling it high into the sky . . ." (F 259), Malik trying to catch the attention of his son shouts, "Look at me, Asmaan! I'm bouncing very well! I'm bouncing higher and higher!" (F 259). His leap into the air is his leap from alienation to affirmation and assimilation.

When love dies, it leaves only ruins around. Death of love, of humanity, has pushed the whole world to the brink of destruction twice; another time, and it won't survive. When love is betrayed and innocence is led astray; love transforms into hatred and Paradise turns into Hell. Another novel from the pen of the artist lamenting the loss of a multicultural world, *Shalimar the Clown* (STC), portrays the personal story of love, innocence and betrayal that bleeds into the public outrage of Kashmiriyat and brotherhood. The novel is a plea by Rushdie for love and relations to be given a chance, "The family was eternal and would not, must not change . . ." (STC 220).

Love defines the way of life in Kashmir, transcending divisions of religion and race. Love triumphs in their way of life as is evident in the marriage of a Muslim boy Shalimar with a Hindu girl, Boonyi. Betrayal of love for the sake of an illusory freedom mars the lives of the two protagonists as well as the people of their village and the entire region. Love betrayed turns into anger and revenge.

All that remained between them [Boonyi and Shalimar], perhaps, was hatred, but this yearning hatred-at-a-distance was surely

also one of love's many faces, yes, its ugliest face. (STC 263)

Shalimar's oath of vengeance after Boonyi's betrayal runs its due course on the sidewalks of violence and death. Taking refuge in the extremist group he awaits his time to kill Boonyi and later traverses the globe to extract his revenge from the wrongdoer, Maxmilian Ophuls. But the presence of their daughter India foils his attempts because India is the living reminder of their relationship.

India grows up in ignorance of her true identity, neglected and unloved by her foster mother. Timely intervention of her father and his love saves her from ruin yet it is not able to render her psyche its wholeness that was lost in the labyrinth of lies and deceit.

Murder of her father unveils the secrets of her life thereby reconnecting her with a very important missing part of herself. Her connection with her dead mother ultimately completes her identity as Kashmira, who symbolizes the inextinguishable life force that defeats the forces of darkness and hatred by its steely resolve and resilient demeanour. Her acceptance of Yuvraj's love and her final triumph over Shalimar is a celebration of love and acceptance over hatred and denial; of finally rewarding the quest of modern man in the transcendence over angst and uncertainties towards a realization of one's true identity; in a victory of humanity. "There was no India. There was only Kashmira, and Shalimar the clown." (STC 398).

In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, the bond of filial love gives a meaning and sense of purpose. In *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* higher love transcends even death but it is ordinary human love that sustains life and helps man to assimilate and accept, which is again reflected in the triumph of love in *Fury* and *Shalimar the Clown*. In fact, the quest of modern man to know the self is incomplete without a sing of love. It is in

humanity that the self truly realises itself. that is the sign of our humanity.” (GBF “Venus significat humanitatem. It is love 414).

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