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Uprooted Identity in Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*

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Abstract

Rushdie's own view on root and home has undergone transformation from *Midnight's Children* to *Ground Beneath Her Feet.* In *The Moor's Last Sigh,* however, this intimate connection is loosened, Moraes nailing his narrative to a landscape beyond India's borders. Thus, displacement, uprootedness and disorientation Rushdie's fiction is abundant, but and it leads the migrant to develop multiple roots. The author himself claims these roots in India, Britain, and the United States. The characters he creates will never find what they have lost, because their home country will never be the same they once left but through literature they can create new Indias and rediscover their cultural identities. The present paper has two parts—the first will deal with theorising the terms such as 'root,' 'migrant' and 'identity,' and then undertakes textual analyses Salman Rushdie's novel, *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995) in the same light.

Keywords: Roots, Home, Identity, Displacement, Uprooted Identity

The present paper has two parts—the first will deal with theorising the terms such as 'root,' 'migrant' and 'identity,' and the second part will undertake textual analyses of the uprooted identity of migrants as delineated in Salman Rushdie's novel, *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995).

I

In common parlance, 'root' is a scientific term and is used for the part of the plant that grows underground, provides anchorage to it and absorbs water and nutrients supplying nourishment for the entire plant. In literature, the term denotes the source of identity and is a means of providing anchorage to people. Root, in fact, is the point of origin. It provides meaning to the identity. It could also be defined as the feeling or connection that a person

feels for a place where he or his parents used to live in his past. The roots help us to be in touch of our nativity and the effect of this lineage is not easy to eradicate. Malkki observes that "roots", "soils" and "family trees" are related to ideas of kinship and national identity (22-44).

Rushdie claims that this feeling of attachment to one's roots is especially true for Indians as "India is a continent of deeply rooted peoples. Indians don't just own the ground beneath their feet; it owns them, too" ("June 2000," 299-300). Thus, root or home is the lived experience of a locality. It is a matrix of diverse known experiences and intimate social kinships of past. This spatial incarceration is not only literal or botanical but moral and psychological also. According to Brah, "Its sounds and smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings, or the excitement of the first snowfall, shivering winter evenings, sombre grey skies in the middle of the day [. . .] all this, as mediated by the historically specific everyday of social relations" (192). Roots or home is a source of rejuvenation and revival. Root is like "gnarled growths sprouting through the soles. Roots […] designed to keep us in our places" (*Shame* 23). The Indo-Fijians have a saying about one's roots: "One's roots are where one's umbilical cord is buried" (Datt 90-91).

Thus, root is a matrix of diverse known experiences and intimate social kinships of past. This spatial incarceration is not only literal or botanical but moral and psychological as well and needs moral and spiritual nourishment for its healthy anchorage. Simone Weil says:

> Just as there are certain culture-beds for certain microscopic animals, certain types of soil for certain plants, so there is a certain part of the soul in every one and certain ways of thought and action communicated from one person to another which can only exist in a national setting, and disappear when a country is destroyed. (l5l-152)

Rushdie's ideas about home and roots are not limited to belonging and succumbing to a place. It is far away from this limited way of being. For him "the past is a country from which we have all emigrated" (*IH* 12). Root is meaningful dialogue and contact with society of inhabitance that allows migrants to break out of the routine and destructive modes of behaviour or thinking in which they are stuck in foreign land.

Another term that is used in the paper is 'identity,' which is a way others perceive us. It is our public image. A person's physique, his entire self-including mental and psychological aspects is the territory onto which identity forms a shape. The individuality of a person is sharply demonstrated by his physiognomy. Facial or bodily traits are identification marks of a personality and their transformation transform the identity also. The social

process is seen as precondition for the development of an individual's identity as identity is "something that people do which is embedded in some other social activity, and not something they are" (Antaki and Widdicombe 191). We act to present an image of ourselves which fits with community values as far as possible. Therefore, all identities are "thoroughly socially constructed" (Jenkins 20).

The reactions of others have an impact on our sense of self and identity so it is understandable that we would act to present an image of ourselves which fits with community values as far as possible. Antaki and Widdicombe further observes about identity that "The important analytic question is not therefore whether someone can be described in a particular way, but to show *that* and *how* this identity is made relevant or ascribed to self or others (191). Identity, therefore, is our band of anchorage with this world. It is a strong sense of belonging. The questions like who we are, where we belong, what position we occupy in the society can be answered with this process of identification. Identity is a dynamic process of retelling and reinventing oneself through time and space. Hall considers "identity as a 'production' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (*Identity* 222).

Thus, identity is "an extremely complex construct" and simplistic definitions of what it actual signifies are "difficult to find as there is no neutral way to characterise it" (De Fina 15). It involves overlapping of certain inherent and inborn static qualities with other qualities that are modified with the changing time and circumstances in adapting to it. In other words, though the content of identity changes dramatically, its basic constituents remain the same.

Rootless mobility is a feature that dominates the contemporary fluid world wherein migrants and expatriates with divided or uprooted identities have occupied distinguishable part of the population of each country. Migrants, in fact, are ethnic minority groups residing in host countries but maintaining strong emotional and material links with their homelands. These lines of the famous English poet, Matthew Arnold in the 'Stanzas from the Grande' aptly describes a migrant's condition: "Wandering between two worlds, one dead, / The other powerless to be Born/ With nowhere yet to rest my head / Like these on earth I wait forlorn" (Allott 305). This oscillation of the migrant between two worlds--where one is his homeland that he has left behind and is dead, and the other, the land of his present inhabitance that cannot replace his homeland—creates difficulties, ambiguities and dynamism in the process of his identity formation, adoption and adaptation. He always seems to be asking: 'where is home?' Home/root is a mythic place of desire, a place of no return, for him. In spite of live

memories of past in their heart, they keep trying assimilation in alien place thus deserving to be called magical in spite of being invaders.

The problem of a migrant is not merely a matter of adapting to a new environment, it is much more profound: a loss of maternal womb, a wound that can never be healed. The problem is of multiple kinds of rooting, of excess rather than of absence, of creating psychological and emotional discrepancy. Uprooted migrants deal with problems of hybridization and discrimination, and also of adjusting to the old and the new. The migrants seem to be saying "'We are. We are here.' And we are not willing to be excluded from any part of our heritage" (*IH* 15). The predicament of an uprooted migrant is brought to life very effectively through Moor's portrayal.

II

The Moor's Last Sigh celebrates rootlessness, plurality, and excess of belongings through Moor Zogoiby, a multi layered character of post-*Midnight's Children* period of India--a period of struggle and rise of fundamentalism and the technique used in post-modernism characterised by challenging the barriers.

Family and social surrounding, the pivotal point in identity formation, are the prime contributors of uprooted identity of Moor, the protagonist and narrator of the novel. Moor belongs to a minority class who inherits the mixed and impure ancestry with Catholic mother, Aurora and a Jewish father, Abraham. He is raised as "neither Catholic nor Jew" but a "jewholic- anonymous, a cathjew nut, a stewpot, a mongrel cur. [. . .] Yessir: a real Bombay mix" (104). The complex family history presents Moor's personality divided on religious and political grounds.

Moor's "double-speed existence permits only half a life" (145), thus, at the age of ten, the Moor was "a child trapped in the six-foot-six body of a twenty-year-old giant" and possessed by "a terror of running out of time" (152). He is 36, and yet burdened with the body of a 72 year old man. The social and political upheavals of eighties and nineties act as a determining factor in the life of both nation and its minority resident, Moor. His story starts when colonial period is about to end and a new post-colonial period showing traces of the previous period was about to start. It was a moment when people's perception of themselves and of the world was changing which requires people to reconsider all of the ways of defining themselves, their history, future and the world they live in.

Moraes Zogoib, on the demand of Vasco Miranda, his mother's rejected lover, spins the yarn of the Zogoiby-da Gama saga from his premature birth and abnormal high-speed

aging, through his family's business feuds, to his fatal visit to Benengeli, which "appears to replicate the author's predicament by foregrounding a sense of banishment and impending death" (Salgado153).

Moor's identity bears witness to inter and intra country migration as his parents have migrated from "an extinction to be mourned" (119) to Bombay in 1945. The fragmented state and the struggle of Moor to root him in a place, is heightened by the diversity of world of the characters he is surrounded by. He lives between the family members having disparity in nationalistic and cultural views. Epiphania, Aurora's grandmother favours British Empire as she owes her business and riches to colonial power. Francisco, Aurora's condemns British rule saying: "The nation's wealth is being shipped off, madam: at home our people starve, but British Tommy is utilizing our wheat, rice, jute and coconut products" (18). This type of division kept moving from one generation to another as acknowledges Moraes: "This, too, is part of my inheritance: the grave settles no quarrels" (27).

This exiled individual who faces an identity crisis strives hard for identity. At home, he struggles between the global, capitalist world of his father and intellectual and aesthetic world of his mother, and in outside world empty, postmodern hybridity of Uma Sarasvati, his beloved, and after his betrayal in love his encounter was with the violent world of *bhai* culture of Mumbai. Moor's identity crisis culminates in Moraes's own final migration to Spain.

Thus, along with physical deformity, it is the ambiguity of both the pillars-- family and social surroundings of Moor-- that restricts his clear bonding. The first mainstay, his family is already very complex with its intermingled family history, and the second basis is social surroundings undergoing a period of flux. Living in this India of liminal periods, Moraes suffers from conflicting ideas of religion, culture and belongings.

His deformity and his insufficiency to find an emotional support aggravated his feeling of uprootedness. Whosoever he tried to seek emotional support from turned out to be a fake. He finds his mother who tried to stifle his personality by her possessiveness. Uma, his true love turned out to be a counterpart of his mother: "faithless and destructive" (Baker 242). She even tried to murder Moor but died consuming the same poison she had prepared for Moor. This incident broke Moor's heart totally. The end of his life turns out to be a new beginning as he says in the novel: "It is time for [. . .] the truth about myself to struggle out, at last, from under my parents' stifling power" (136) and "I need no longer be what ancestry, breeding and misfortune had decreed, but could enter, at long last, into my self—my true self" (295).

In search of his new identity, Moor becomes the right-hand man of Raman Fielding with his colossus six feet and gives him a true satisfaction and he says, "I found, for the first time in my short-long life, the feeling of normality, of being nothing special, the sense of being among kindred spirits, among people-like-me, that is the defining quality of home" (305). But after the murder of Fielding by Abraham in Bombay power struggle, Moor escaped to Spain.

In Benengeli Moor is left to feel that he is a "nobody from nowhere, like no-one, belonging to nothing [. . .]. All my ties had loosened. I had reached an anti-Jerusalem: not a home, but an away. A place that did not bind, but dissolved" (388). Benengeli, a microcosm of post-modern globalized world is inhabited by uprooted people from different parts of Europe living an empty and deceptive lives. Moor's escape to Spain also symbolises his return to origin, in search of true identity. It is the place where Moor's ancestor, the sultan Boabdil had abandoned his power. His situation only changed from narrow definition of identity of India to a state in Spain where any sense of identity is relinquished. Moor failed to assimilate in Spain proving Rushdie's fear true about cultural hybridity: "it can degenerate into empty forms of amalgamation, in which the elements coalesce only because they have been stripped of all serious content" (Cantor 135). Towards the close of the novel, the Moor's disillusionment increased with the loss of his previous identity of India which he has rejected during his departure from Bombay for "looking forward to Spain [. . .] the place whence we had been cast out, centuries ago. Might it not turn out to be my lost home, my resting-place, my promised land? Might it not be my Jerusalem? (376)

However, in Spain also he could not accomplish his true identity. He was caught in such a situation where he could neither claim his Indian identity nor could he claim Spain, the pure space of his ancestral home. Instead of feeling of being at home, he experiences feeling of being among strangers "speaking English, American, French, German" (390). To achieve ambivalence, Moor looks back and remembers his life in Bombay. But, remembering home can not substitute the pleasure of being physically at home as memories "could never be adequate replacement for real places. What you think of eating halwa in the imagination?" (Sharma 27).

This is the ambiguity of situation that memory which is said to be no replacement of real home is the only means of uniting with the homeland. The migrant cannot feel at home in a strange land, no matter how heavenly the surroundings are. For them "The meat is good, the butter so sweet, but we miss home" (Alexander 214).

Caught between the desire for home and the reality of homelessness, Moor's uprooted identity yearns for a stable soil to stay foot on. Through Moor's life, Rushdie suggests that in the global world, we have to modify our definition of belongings. We need to extend our thought process making it mutable to incorporate new changes to make our identity and culture enriched. Mondal aptly says: "Rushdie's discourse on migration has thus shifted from an earlier affiliation with postcolonial theories of transnationalism and diaspora, both of which complicate and dismantle nationalist perspectives on belonging, home and identity, to a species of cosmopolitanism" (181).

Rushdie ends the novel on a positive note that one can have multiple roots. The author himself claims multiple roots as in India, Britain, and the United States. Moreover, migrant's homeland would have also undergone great transformation from the time they have left it. To restrict oneself to roots is to blind oneself to the multiplicity of attachments that people develop with places through living in them, or remembering. No doubt, it is not easy to be on each side and outside at the same time, to mingle in foreign land with the critical look of the outsider, to show involvement with a sense of detachment. But this is the excellence that is needed to live in a constantly transforming modern world. There is truly a need not to deny the importance of place in the construction of identities. Rushdie hence suggests that migrants can eventually become global citizens and still keep their native identity intact by perfectly harmonizing the process of retaining a personal identity and yet being able to merge with the total picture.

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