

**Andalusian Poetics: Rushdie's *The Moor's
Last Sigh* and the Limits of Hybridity**

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Oh Bombay! *Prima in Indis! Gateway to India! Star of the East
with her face to the West!* Like Granada—al-Gharnatah of the
Arabs—you were the glory of your time.

(Rushdie *The Moor's Last Sigh* 372)

The title of Sir Salman Rushdie's first full-length, post-fatwa novel, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, enunciates what appears to be an elegiac tale about a fallen empire. It refers to the last Nasrid King's sigh after he hands over the keys of the Alhambra, the last seat of Muslim power in Europe, to the conquering Catholic Monarchs of Spain, Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile. Yet, what unfolds thereafter is a Jewish-Indian yarn about family feuds, betrayal, disillusioned artists, caste politics, and communal violence—all spun five centuries later (1992) by an anomalously fast-aging narrator-protagonist. But the title does not simply invoke the end of an Islamic rule; it also invokes the end of the exotic sybaritic pleasures of the Cordoban courts and the royal fineries of the Granadan emirates with which Rushdie's Western audience is all too familiar, and about which it is ever desirous to know more.¹ Rushdie's growing notoriety in cosmopolitan halls of fame, especially after the publication of the internationally acclaimed *Midnight's Children* and after the *succès de scandale* of *The Satanic Verses*, has made him the target of numerous accusations—namely, his “manipulation of history” in order to cater to the “the exoticist predilections of his Western metropolitan reading public” (Huggan 71–72). Moreover, taking into account the perceived post-9/11 pro-West strain in Rushdie's recent non-fiction pieces, one also wonders whether “those who had always dismissed [him] as another panderer to Western tastes for the colonial exotic [were] right after all” (Sawhney and Sawhney 435).² In response to such accusations, Graham Huggan argues that Rushdie is self-consciously contributing to an

emerging Indo-Anglian literary tradition whose “capacity for an ironic recycling of the clichés that have historically dominated Orientalist representation” has itself acquired the appeal of the exotic (80).³ While a whiff of the exotic may continue to cling to Rushdie’s fictional works, I argue that *The Moor’s Last Sigh* in particular is consistently alive to the ways in which (even) the subversive content of postcolonial hybrid aesthetics can be absorbed by the dominant discourse and recycled into a dehistoricized, innocuous exotic commodity. More precisely, I draw on what Huggan calls “strategic exoticism” (i) and argue that *The Moor’s Last Sigh* inscribes a post-exotic Andalusian Arabness that grows out of Rushdie’s misgivings about the capacity of hybridity art and an Indian-style *convivencia* to counteract intractable communal terrorism.⁴

The story of Granada’s downfall, Rushdie notes, provides the “background” for the failure of India’s pluralism. In fact, it is woven into the narrative of *The Moor’s Last Sigh* “as a kind of metaphor for modern India and for the ruptures of cultures not only in India but in the modern world” (*Conversations* 202). The *mise-en-abîme* of the Granadan theme is therefore read by a sizable number of critics as the signature of Rushdie’s engagement with the competing discourses of fundamentalism and pluralism in India’s national and cultural history. Such critics invariably argue that *The Moor’s Last Sigh* conjures the history of Arab Spain as a viable multicultural model that the author wished for post-independence India (Cantor 325; Cundy 111; Ghosh 137). The emergence of “anti-democratic political leaders,” the alarming rise of Hindu nationalism, and the global market economy—all have shattered the democratic-secularist vision that Gandhi and Nehru had for India after independence (Chauhan 209). *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, in this sense, represents “an elegy for [a] lost age” (Chauhan 210), for an era where different religions, cultures, and ethnicities could have existed as palimpsest, as they did in Arab Spain four and half centuries ago (Cundy 113; Hassumani 115; Deszcz 40).⁵ Other critics, by contrast, draw attention to the relation between Rushdie’s story of the fall of Granada and his expressed misgivings about overvalorizing multiculturalism (Cantor 324–25, 337) and aesthetic hybridity (D. Ahmad 1, 11–12) as postmodern modalities of subject identification.

While I take my cue specifically from Cantor's and Ahmad's arguments, I want to suggest that Rushdie's postmodern superimposition of Andalusian history and India's national narrative in *The Moor's Last Sigh* is less a nostalgia for an exotic and lost Golden Age, as many Rushdie critics have suggested, than an attempt to map out the limits of post-colonial hybridity as an empowering subject position. Removed from its Moorish setting and grafted onto India's national history, Boabdil's legend not only indexes the imbrications of various historical and national narratives, but it also helps re-think the relationship between modern memory and the past, politics and representation, in the articulation of a contemporary hybrid subjectivity.⁶ Rushdie's appropriation of Boabdil's notorious story in *The Moor's Last Sigh* reveals suggestive allusions to the pitfalls of seeing medieval Arab-Spain as the possible locus of a recoverable multicultural utopia. Rushdie's westward-looking invocation of the glittering but bygone glory of Arab Andalusia from within modern subcontinental politics is less the signature of a nostalgic idealist searching for a *proto*-multicultural model than an exercise in parodic post-exoticism. I argue that Rushdie's evocation of Andalusia, as an ideal multicultural model for strife-ridden India, is coterminous with his scruples about the ironic possibility that some forms of Indian fundamentalism (political, religious, ethnic, and/or artistic) may appropriate such a model for their own purposes. As such, the apparent nostalgia for an ideal multicultural hybridity built on the model of Arab Spain is parodically undercut in the novel by Rushdie's postexotic tropes. Such tropes, I argue, articulate his misgivings about the potential failures of certain forms of hybridity art. In the face of intractable religious fanaticism and political extremism, Rushdie intimates, such abstract notions as hybridity, plurality, multiculturalism, and liminal subjectivity may potentially be vacated of their historical significance and resistive value.

The post-exotic in *The Moor's Last Sigh* operates as a useful trope that first moves beyond what Chris Bongie describes with reference to fin-de-siècle exoticism as a "discursive practice intent on recovering 'elsewhere' values" (5). Second, the trope allows Rushdie to uncover the corrupt structures of corporate capitalism and state power and to re-map the

contours of a postcolonial Indo-Anglian cultural praxis moored in the history of India's religious and national politics.

A postmodern mock-epic, the novel chronicles the rise and fall of the four-generation spice-trading Zogoiby family. It is narrated à la Tristram Shandy by Moraes Zogoiby, alias Moor, the son of the double-dealing spice merchant Abraham Zogoiby, a Spanish Jew who is presumably the illegitimate descendant of the Arab sultan Abu Abdullah of Andalusia (known as Boabdil), and the Catholic matriarch-cum-artist Aurora da Gama, a descendant of the renowned Portuguese explorer, Vasco da Gama. Like Scheherazade, Moor protracts his own life by spinning the yarn of the Zogoiby-da Gama saga from within an Alhambra-like citadel in Benengeli, Spain.⁷ Here he is held captive by Vasco Miranda, who is a decidedly second-rate artist and Aurora's spurned lover. It is for Vasco Miranda that Moor writes the story of his family's life, from his premature birth and high-speed aging, through his family's business feuds, to his fatal visit to Benengeli to recuperate his mother's painting, also called *The Moor's Last Sigh*, which Vasco has stolen by way of revenge.⁸

Rushdie's incorporation of the notorious story of the weeping Boabdil within that of an Indian-Shandyan, "cross-breed" anti-hero empties the Granadan mythos both of its Romantic sentimentality and exotic grandiosity (5). The oft-exotified tale of that "last sigh for a lost world" (4) is reduced from a semi-historical link to the Jewish-Indian diaspora to the hereditary asthmatic gasp of "a Jewholic-anonymous," as Moraes likes to describe himself (104). Typical of Rushdie's talent for narrative deflation, the historical unexpectedly collapses into the physiological. More important, however, is that Rushdie weaves the Granadan leitmotif into the fabric of his Indian yarn in such a way as to single out a category of self-serving artists who market the fashionable idea of the hybrid based on their entitlement to boundless creativity and unbridled freedom in the pursuit of their art. Vasco Miranda is one such artist. A second-rate Goan painter striving beneath Aurora's artistic shadow and tormented by his unrequited love for her, Vasco eventually manages to bring himself under her protective wing. However, he is soon cast out of the Zogoiby household because of the obscenity of a portrait that Abraham has com-

missioned him to draw of Aurora, who is pregnant with her second child. Originally, the "Aurora Portrait" displays the beautiful mother sitting cross-legged on a gigantic lizard with an invisible child suckling at her exposed breast. Offended not only by the explicit indecency of the portrait but also by the absence of his first-born daughter, Abraham peremptorily gives Vasco Miranda his marching orders. Humiliated but ever faithful, Vasco retreats to his studio where he spends three days working on the same canvas layering over it "an equestrian portrait of the artist [Vasco himself] in Arab attire" and giving it the fabulous and gaudy title, "*The Artist as Boabdil, the Unlucky (el-Zogoiby), Last Sultan of Granada, Seen Departing from the Alhambra....Or The Moor's Last Sigh*" (160–61). Once put up for sale, Vasco's "lachrymose self-portrait *en arabe*" (180) meets with unprecedented commercial success, and catapults his fame to celebrity, making him "the darling of international moneyed establishment" without whose murals "no new hotel lobby or airport terminal was complete" (159).

The lucrative success of Vasco Miranda's "airport art" (253) allegorizes the proliferation of underground corporations that contravene the business regulations put into place by the government in its effort to reconstruct the country's infrastructure after independence. The Khazana Bank International (KBI), for instance, "the first financial institution from the Third World to rival the great Western banks in terms of assets and transactions" (334), is one such corporation. Not only does it monitor "shadow accounts" belonging to the world's "most-dangerous" organizations, it is also allegedly involved in uranium-enrichment projects in collaboration with "oil-rich countries and their ideological allies" (335). Moreover, Abraham Zogoiby's "Siodi" (Cashondeliveri) company and talcum powder business are used as mere cover-ups for his other underhanded and more lucrative dealings in narcotics, arms, and even in the KBI's secret scheme of manufacturing "the so-called Islamic bomb" (341, 181–85, 250–51, 332, 335). Moraes sadly relates that his father was even involved in human trafficking, procuring forsaken temple girls for a Mogambo-like Muslim Mafiosi whom he deploys as instruments of coercion and intimidation in his daily transactions. Disillusioned, Moraes comes to see the New Bombay (and all India by extension) as a

simulacral city succumbing to an invisible, greed-driven entrepreneurial class and mammon-minded intellectual élite:

This city itself, perhaps the whole country, was a palimpsest, Under World beneath Over World, black market beneath white; when the whole life was like this, when an invisible reality moved phantomwise beneath a visible fiction, subverting all its meanings, how then could Abraham's career have been any different? How could any of us have escaped the deadly layering? How, trapped as we were in the hundred per cent fakery of the real, in the fancy-dress, weeping-Arab kitsch of the superficial, could we have been penetrated to the full, sensual truth of the lost mother below? How could we have lived authentic lives? How could we have failed to be grotesque? (184–85)

Vasco's Indo-European hybrid art soon develops into profit-oriented, self-serving exoticism. His Western-style artistic career, described as a "spiced-up rehash of the European surrealists...for which the owners of public buildings would pay truly surrealist sums" (148), shows the extent to which the so-called hybridity art can be compromised by a consumer-based cultural market. As Moraes explains, had it not been for the "huge foreign-currency fortune" that Vasco amassed while promoting his career in cities like New York and Lisbon, he would not have been able to build his Alhambra-like "hilltop folly" in Benengeli (253).

It is no wonder that he chooses Benengeli to lead an expatriate's life cloistered behind the walls of his mock-Andalusian fortress. The Spanish city, as Rushdie describes it, is a small-scale megalopolis unto itself, where the multicultural heritage of Andalusia is being submerged by the consumerism of commodity culture. As Moraes meanders through the thoroughfares of Benengeli in search of Vasco's dwelling, Rushdie paints a distressing picture of the Andalusian setting gradually receding before the global reach of capitalist flows and massive demographic movements:

I made my way down the little lane and found myself in a most un-Spanish thoroughfare, a "pedestrianised" street full of non-

Spaniards....This thoroughfare, which, as I would discover, was known by the locals as the Street of Parasites, was flanked by a large number of expensive boutiques—Gucci, Hermès, Aquascutum, Cardin, Paloma Picasso—and also by eating-places ranging from Scandinavian meatball-vendors to a Stars-and-Stripes-liveried Chicago Rib Shack. I stood in the midst of a crowd that pushed past me in both directions, ignoring my presence completely in the manner of city-dwellers rather than village folk. I heard people speaking English, American, French, German, Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, and what might have been either Dutch or Afrikaans. But these were no visitors; they carried no cameras, and behaved as people do on their own territory. This denatured part of Benengeli had become theirs. There was not a single Spaniard to be seen. “Perhaps these expatriates are the new Moors,” I thought. (390)

In this contemporary Spain, Cantor suggests, Moraes “encounters a strange simulacrum of the Moorish regime, a hollow echo of its genuine multiculturalism” (333). The city’s Moorish past is buried under “a world of falsely universal brand names, epitomized by the fast-food chains that spring everywhere and belong nowhere” (Cantor 334). And the “zombification of the characters on the postnational street,” as Laura Moss puts it, indicates the devaluation of cultural and historical assets and the onset of a neo-*Reconquista* by the modern consumer-Moors of the fashion industry.

The line that separates multiculturalism and consumerism is perhaps as thin as that which separates progressive modernity and mere novelty. In Rushdie’s works (both fictional and non-fictional), the modernization of post-Independence India is problematically linked to the secularization of religious thought. In *The Moor’s Last Sigh* Jawaharlal Nehru becomes the target of Rushdie’s political satire, as the Indian punditji’s modernist urban reforms prove less progressive than disruptive. At Cabral Island, the pro-Nehru idealist Francisco da Gama, Moraes’s great grandfather and India’s renowned “patron of the arts,” seeks a young Frenchman’s “architectural genius” to build what Epifania, the Anglophile Macaulay

minutewoman, calls two “madhouses” set in the resplendent gardens of his otherwise magnificent, traditional-style mansion. The houses are obviously an outrageously alien combination of sharp angles, awkward patterns, and mismatched color motifs (15–16). Francisco’s “architectural genius” is evidently Le Corbusier (Charles-Edouard Jeanneret), the famous French-Swiss architect commissioned by the Congress government to re-construct the city of Chandigarh to reflect a Nehruvian vision of a modern, secular India, and India unshackled by tradition and aspiring to a brighter future. Nehru’s reliance on LeCorbusier’s International Style to recreate a progressive India that would be unshackled by superstition and religious icons was often criticized “for its disregard of Indian conditions and India’s architectural heritage. Too sprawling, too forbidding in its monumentality, the city [Chandigarh] appeared remote from the realities of Indian life” (Metcalf and Metcalf 237). Francisco’s architectural extravaganza, then, works to ridicule Nehru’s socialist idealism and its failure to implement a genuine Indian *gestalt* where India’s diverse cultures and histories are organized into a seamless whole.

Rushdie’s satirical treatment of Nehru’s city planning projects is inspired by a well-known case in Arab-Spanish architectural history. After the Christian conquest of Cordoba in 1236, the city’s Great Mosque, built by successive Umayyad caliphs over the span of two centuries (785–988), was transformed into a Renaissance-style Christian cathedral. Early in the fifteenth century, a *coro* (nave) was installed in the middle of the mosque supposedly to reinforce its structure. And when King Charles V of Spain visited the site guided by the proud Christian clergy, he could only express dismay and regret at the outcome of what he himself had commissioned: “You have built here what you, or anyone else, might have built anywhere; to do so you have destroyed what was unique in the World.” The king’s rebuke remains “one of the most crushing royal rebukes on matters architectural ever delivered” (Fletcher 2–3). Even Moraes at one point discontentedly compares his hybrid identity to “a Catholicized Córdoba mosque....A piece of Eastern architecture with a Baroque cathedral stuck in the middle of it” (387 emphasis in original).

Just as the *Reconquista* bishops hastened to make a religious and political statement by catholicizing the Mosque of Cordoba four and a half

centuries ago, Nehru too wanted to make a similar statement by prematurely modernizing/secularizing India. Both of these hasty architectural decisions have failed to answer the question asked by the narrator of *The Satanic Verses*; namely “how does newness come into the world? How is it born? Of what fusions, translations, conjoinings is it made” (8)? Instead of gradually infusing modernity into the still-recovering body of post-British India, and simultaneously failing to meet the more pressing needs of the nation's indigent areas, the new government rushed to create modern edifices and national emblems that are as incongruously and awkwardly as the *coro* in the Cordoban mosque. A great architect disregards neither the *genius loci* (space) nor the historical context (time) of his designs (Docherty 265). Likewise, the project of modernity must disregard neither the tradition from which it seeks to depart, nor the collective cultural memory it seeks to remap.

If one fixates on the putative virtues of being a cultural hybrid, on that fashionable “myth of *excess* of belongings,” one ends up losing the sense of direction and purpose enabled by firm grounding in the tradition one seeks to revise (A. Ahmad 127 emphasis original). That a serious engagement with Islam *from within*—that is, from within its constitutive logic and tradition—has been absent in postcolonial discussions, as Anouar Majid has noted, is perhaps one of the reasons why stereotypes about it remain rampant (viii, 3, 19). Moreover, such an uninformed and skewed fixation eventually de-historicizes the socio-political and economic specificities of other cultural formations in different locations as well. Current incantations about cultural hybridity lift it from its geo-political context, diminish its contestatory thrust, and thus reduce it to what Homi Bhabha calls a mere “exoticism of multiculturalism” where the politics of difference cedes the ground to a poetics of diversity (38).⁹

Rushdie is profoundly aware of the ways in which de-historicized notions of cultural hybridity may fail as modalities of self-identification and tropes of resistance. Despite his perceived post-9/11 pro-West allegiances, Rushdie remains nevertheless unequivocal in his dismissal of Western, rightwing, anti-Evil rhetoric. Such rhetoric, he avers, is misleadingly abstruse and stereotypically divisive, precisely because it

“dehistoricizes these events [9/11 attacks], depoliticizes, and even depersonalizes them,” and by so doing, it becomes a form of fundamentalism unto itself (*Step 377*).¹⁰ Furthermore, I argue that a postcolonial hybridity (be it an art form or a critical discourse) that ceases to be sensitive to the very social totalities and political complexities that determine its production and circulation either becomes an ineffective and insular form of idealism or renders itself vulnerable to the very fundamentalism it seeks to transcend. As Dohra Ahmad argues, “hybridity-based art will inevitably function according to the rules of a world in which fundamentalisms still dominate. Upon entering the public sphere, even a work of art that intends to contain multiplicitous and provisional meaning opens itself to the possibility of reductive reading” (12). Because it carries within it elements of the dominant culture—albeit for subversive purposes, as Bhabha defines it—the hybrid is likely to be recuperated and absorbed by that very culture (13). Moreover, because it idealizes the ambivalent plurality of its enunciative space, the discourse of hybridity often obfuscates what Edward Said describes as “the actual *affiliations* that exist between the world of ideas and scholarship, on the one hand, and the world of brute politics, corporate and state power, and military force, on the other” (119). The exclusionary “cult of expertise and professionalism” encouraged by the academic institution today, and the all-inclusive cult of hybridity in postcolonial thought, are simply two sides of the same idealist coin (119). While academic and institutional disciplinarity generates compartmentalized fields of knowledge production by setting the boundaries of intellectual enquiry, the postcolonial discourse of hybridity too often glosses over the underlying sites of social hierarchies and networks of uneven power relations precisely by amplifying the range of its cross-cultural purview.¹¹

The recuperation of the hybrid by the dominant discourse is nowhere better illustrated than in one of the novel’s remarkable situational ironies where Aurora’s “dance *against* the gods” at the annual Hindu carnival is gleefully interpreted by the celebrants as her worshipping of their elephant-headed god (315 emphasis added). Though her dance is meant as a symbolic enactment of her subversive aesthetics it does not ward off the veritable tidal wave of Hindu nationalism that the festival is intend-

ed to celebrate (Coetzee 13). Unable to distinguish the dancer from the dance, however, fundamentalism immediately absorbs both, and Aurora dies on a hilltop at the festival after she has danced out her last. Aurora's visions of a hybrid and secular India seem to underestimate the power of Indian communalism to contain and recycle them for self-motivated political purposes. In the same way, Rushdie's ideals of artistic freedom and multicultural diversity as they are developed in *The Satanic Verses*, appear to have underestimated their potential recuperation by Muslim fundamentalism (D. Ahmad 13).

Rushdie's treatment of the myth of hybridity as the opposite version of the myth of authenticity is manifest in Aurora's Moor paintings.¹² Superimposing public commentary with personal experience, Aurora's paintings are divided into three phases. The first phase (1957–77), which she painted between Moraes's birth and Indira Gandhi's electoral defeat, is defined by their colourful, optimistic variations upon the Boabdil story. The second phase (1977–81), established her as India's uncontested artistic voice, but marked by a sense of loss and despair. The third and final phase (1981–87), presents "the dark Moors," those pictures of exile and terror," in which the Arab King becomes for the first and last time her primary subject matter (*Moor's Last Sigh* 218). Aurora's treatment of the Granadan theme in these works stands in stark contrast to that of Vasco Miranda's. While Vasco's portrayal of the tearfully departing Arab King exudes Romantic sentimentality and exotic nostalgia, Aurora's suggests an expressionistic and minimalist encapsulation of all the sorrow evoked by Boabdil's eviction from his cherished Alhambra palace (218).

Like her pro-Nehru father, Aurora favours a secular Indian democracy where national identity is defined not by religious faith, but rather by a shared belief in cultural pluralism, freedom of expression, and collective responsibility. Even as a child she has little room in her imagination for India's deities. Once, upon being grounded for having pilfered her grandmother's elephant-goddesses, little Aurora creates her first painting—a mural in which a "hyper-abundance of imagery" suggests Mother India, but it is an India from which God "or indeed any other representation of any other divinity" is conspicuously absent (60). Aurora's "early

Moors” pictures similarly reflect a sense of hope for a secular, multicultural India in the second half of the millennium. They display not an “Authorised Version but Aurorised Version” of a multicultural India, a painterly amalgam of “Mughal splendours” and “Spanish building’s Moorish grace” where The Alhambra palace is mapped over Malabar Hill, Granada over Bombay (225–26). Aurora’s “Mooristan” is not an Andalusian sanctuary for Jews, Muslims and Christians only, but a “land-sea-scape” (227) inhabited by humans, ghosts, folktale heroes and sea creatures (226). Her vision of a secular *Indialusia* is prompted by a desire to paint Andalusia’s *convivencia* into India’s pluralism, “to create a romantic myth of the plural, hybrid nation.”¹³ Indeed, “she was using Arab Spain to re-imagine India” (227).

Soon after the debacle of Indira Gandhi’s Emergency Rule and the arrival of the short-lived and notably ineffectual rainbow coalition of the Janata Party (1977–80), Aurora’s Moor paintings enter their second phase. Still interfacing personal angst with public commentary, Aurora’s hybrid art now grows forebodingly nebulous, apocalyptic, but always agonizingly personal. More precisely, it interweaves her sense of loss (the death of her eldest daughter, Ina) with her “Cassandran fears for the nation, her fierce grief at the sourness of what had once, at least in an India of dreams, been sweet as sugar-cane juice” (236). In their second phase, immediately after Moraes abandons her and instead intends to pose instead for her rival Uma Sarasvati, an up-and-coming sculptor and his scheming girlfriend, Aurora’s Moor paintings become dismal, black and white sketches. Boabdil constantly lurks in the background as Moraes’s doppelgänger rather than as his royal progenitor. Aurora’s hybrid paintings become increasingly characterized by their double-exposure technique where the Moor is a faint figure eerily hovering over her canvases, more a figure of haunting than of longing. The last Nasrid Arab ruler of Granada is no longer the exotically sentimental Sultan with his white charger, bejeweled turban, and ever-melancholy demeanour as originally depicted by European romancers and by Vasco Miranda’s popular murals. He is now depicted as a wraith “crossing the frontier between the metaphors of art and the observable facts of everyday life” (239). Born of Aurora’s “maternal jealousy” and of her disillu-

sionment both in Mrs. Gandhi's and in the Janata Party's unimpressive governance (247), the Arab Sultan is no longer the "particoloured harlequin" of her earlier and optimistically patriotic phase, but the harbinger of apocalyptic visions.

Aurora's final Moor paintings draw such visions to their extreme conclusion, thus foreshadowing her own failure to bring any real change to the India she depicts on her canvases. Not only do these last paintings give expression to her agony over the departure of her son and the death of her older daughter, Mynah, but they also reflect "the defeat of the pluralist philosophy" she has envisioned for India throughout her career (272). This is the period when Moraes is mistakenly imprisoned in the ghastly Bombay Central dungeons for the suspected murder of Uma Sarasvati and then bailed out by Raman Fielding. Fielding is an anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant, pro-caste, pro-sati Hindu nationalist whom Rushdie models after Bal Thackeray, the notorious leader of the ultraright Shiv Sena Party and who was responsible for the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992 (298–99). Dismayed by the grotesqueries of Hindu revivalist politics, and more so by her own son's involvement in them, Aurora begins the last phase of her Moor paintings, also referred to as the "dark Moors" series.¹⁴ After the tragedy of Operation Bluestar in Amritsar, which led to the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi and to reprisal killings between Hindus and Sikhs, and with the growing popularity of Fielding's/Thackeray's "Maharashtra-for-Mahashtrians" sectarian platform, Aurora's final Moor paintings begin to exhibit a postmodern sense of disintegration and fragmentation:

Aurora had apparently decided that the ideas of impurity, cultural admixture and *mélange* which had been, for most of her creative life, the closest things she had found to a notion of the Good, were in fact capable of distortion, and contained a potential for darkness as well as for light....This "black Moor"....became a haunted figure, fluttered about by phantoms of his past which tormented him though he cowered and bid them begone. Then slowly he grew phantomlike himself.... was robbed of his lozenges and jewels and the last vestiges of

his glory; obliged to become a soldier in some petty warlord's army....reduced to mercenary status where once he had been a king, he rapidly became a composite being as pitiful and anonymous as those amongst whom he moved. Garbage piled up, and buried him. (303)

What Saleem Sinai calls "the chutnification of history" in *Midnight's Children* has now become Aurora's "junkyard collage" in *The Moor's Last Sigh* (315).¹⁵ The idea of the hybrid as the central metaphor of her mythic imaginings of the nation soon dissolves into deep-sunken phantasmagoria, where the Andalusian king loses "his metaphorical rôle as a unifier of opposites, as standard-bearer of pluralism." No longer "a glorious butterfly" (227), Boabdil the Unfortunate is a now a post-exotic "semi-allegorical figure of decay" (303).

The apocalyptic dimensions of Aurora's late style echo Rushdie's concerns about idealized conceptions of cultural hybridity. In many respects, Aurora's Moorish paintings may be deemed a failure, for, despite their genuine structure of feelings, they do not resonate with, much less affect, the everyday realities of India's oppressed. Even when the young Aurora's artistic zeal leads her to venture into Bombay's favelas in order to "capture history in charcoal" during one of "the great naval and land-lubber strikes," she does so from the safety of her "American motor car" with its "gold-and-green curtains" over "the rear windscreen and back windows" (129). And when she is rebuffed by the strikers as "a questionable figure" from the city's wealthy suburbia, she returns disguised in "a cheap floral-print dress from Crawford Market" the better to mingle with her subjects (130). And mingle she does, just as her mock dance later allows her to mix with the jubilant crowd at the Hindu fiesta. "My mother always possessed the occult power of making herself invisible in the pursuit of her work," Moraes confirms admiringly. Nonetheless, her knack for invisibility exposes neither the "invisible reality" of her husband's shady businesses and his clandestine blue-collar workforce, nor Raman Fielding's secret political machinations (184). Eventually, when her "clearly subversive, clearly pro-strike" sketches are exhibited (131), neither the British authority nor indeed any of the strikers seem to care

enough to notice them. Neglected by both the oppressor and the oppressed, Aurora's sketches linger only temporarily for the predilection of select fellow artists and highbrow intellectuals.

Although unmotivated by any political self-interest, Aurora's ivory-towered, late-style art is a failure, precisely because its variations on the Andalusian theme do not foreground realistically enough the plight of India's masses. Because of her irredeemable penchant for the "Epic-Mythico-Tragico-Comico-Super-Sexy-High-Masala-Art" (148–49), as Vasco Miranda sardonically puts it, Aurora's art keeps her apart from the India of the overcrowded, impoverished quarters inhabited by her own servants (193–94), of the stinking prison cells controlled by Fielding's "neo-Stalinist" Hindustani regime (231, 285–90), and of the underworld businesses run by Abraham Zogoiby and his Muslim mafia (222, 295). Instead of absorbing this kind of India and painting it into existence, Aurora reverts to the theme of an Indian mythopoeia drenched in the fantasy of an Andalusian-style multicultural utopia. Rather than rubbing shoulders with India's downtrodden and fighting against its caste hierarchies and class injustices, she surrounds herself with a coterie of Bombay's sophisticated and upper-class dilettantes, primarily known as "the Doctor, the Lady Doctor, the Radiologist, the Journalist, the Professor, the Sarangi Player, the Playwright, the Printer, the Curator, the Jazz Singer, the Lawyer, and the Accountant" (202).

The esoteric loftiness of Aurora's late work may be associated with what many secular leftist critics have identified as a disconcerting metropolitan elitism in Rushdie's fiction. Aijaz Ahmad, for instance, situates Rushdie and his early novels (*Grimus*, *Shame*, and *Midnight's Children*) within "an ideological location which makes it possible for [him, i.e., Rushdie] to partake, equally, of the postmodernist moment and the counter-canon of the "Third World Literature" in Euro-American academies (125). Rushdie's modernist-postmodernist thematization of Third World concerns (postcoloniality, nation-building, modernity, tradition, religion, patriarchy, oppression) blankets his own "ideological moorings in the High Culture of the modern metropolitan bourgeoisie" (125). Moreover, Ahmad finds Rushdie's work, "right up to *The Satanic Verses*," and especially in *Shame*, characterized by a postmodernist commitment

to the “fragmentariness of experience,” which consequently forecloses the “realist option” and leaves out actual experiences lived by real people under concrete conditions (138-39). Whether or not these presumably neglected experiences will be revisited by Rushdie, Ahmad admits, can be “[found] out only from later work” (139).

My reading of *The Moor's Last Sigh* parts company with Ahmad's argument here to note that the cultural universalism, which he identifies as the mark of Rushdie's indebtedness to the High Modernism of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Ezra Pound's *Cantos* (128), is re-inscribed within the paradigm of postmodern realism. By this I mean the ways Rushdie's postmodern aesthetics are inextricably tied to historicist representations of social reality.¹⁶ In *Shame*, as well as in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, “History,” to use Simon Daring's apt phrase, “is never derealized” or abstracted into postmodern narrative virtuosity (461). After *The Satanic Verses* and “the intimate demonstration [he has] had of the power of religion for evil” (*Conversations* 159), Rushdie is unmistakably more cognizant of, and more attuned to, the political implications of his literary productions, on the one hand, and the limitations of the oppositional politics of postmodern parody and postcolonial hybridity, on the other.¹⁷ As Moss observes, the difference between *Midnight's Children* and *The Moor's Last Sigh* is that the latter parodies the magic realism of the former, and

the parody is juxtaposed with an expansion of political awareness in the increased politicization of the narrative; the increased exposure of corruption in corporate India; the increased depiction of the devastation wrought by religious fundamentalism in Bombay, and the increased hopelessness of secular pluralism. (122–23)¹⁸

As the novel demonstrates, an obsessive and abstract preoccupation with artistic multiplicity, liminal subjectivity, and cultural hybridity may well blur these specifications and make them empty allegories for pseudo-realities that de-historicize specific social and historical relations of power. This is sufficiently illustrated and critiqued in the novel through Vasco Miranda's commercial aesthetics, Francisco's/Nehru's urban modernity,

and ultimately through the figure of the post-exotic Moor in Aurora's hyper-hybrid paintings. Through the failure of these characters-cum-artists, Rushdie warns against the transformation of postmodern hybridity from a primarily social condition into a worn-out metaphor and/or critical category that elevates all too conveniently the discourse of post-colonialism into abstract intellectualism.

Replicating its own condition of production (both Moraes and Rushdie write the story while in confinement), *The Moor's Last Sigh* brings into focus the ineluctable intertwining of its inherent "imaginative truth" (*Imaginary Homelands* 10) and other determining forces that operate outside it (such as religious extremism, commercialism, censorship, politics of (mis)reading, media monopoly, and so on). The pre-fatwa self-exile, the chosen "elsewhereness" of the "literary migrant" which Rushdie theorized as an empowering position that allowed him to "speak properly and concretely on a subject of universal significance and appeal" (*Imaginary Homelands* 12, 15, 21), as well as the post-fatwa "odd position of an exile," into which he was forced (*Conversations* 201), must therefore be read as historically and politically determined spaces. These predetermined spaces continue to inform and re-shape the modes of his literary productions and the kinds of critical reactions they generate. To celebrate homelessness and displacement in terms of the post-modern postulation that we are all hybrid migrants who effortlessly float across borderless spaces does not dislodge the dichotomous paradigms of dominant discourses; even less does it curb the invisibly operating but equally hegemonic forces of global capitalism. As Majid aptly puts it, "theorizing displacement does not render the global capitalist apparatus harmless" (190).

By exploring the potential failures of hybridized aesthetics, Rushdie critiques overzealous theorizations of the hybrid, the eclectic, the frontierless, the de-centered, and the free-floating so much in vogue in current postcolonial scholarship. For such theorizations often tend to neglect the immediate social and historical relations of power that constitute the very conditions of their determination. Privileging theories of cultural hybridity and transnational, free-floating subjectivity over historical and geo-political specificity masks the contingencies of capi-

talist structures of power that inform people's experiences in different ways and in different locations (Behdad 231–32). Repeatedly re-constituted and re-imagined by Aurora in her mythically hyperbolic but eventually apocalyptic Moor paintings, the figure of the Andalusian King suggests a symbolic lament for the hybrid as a worn-out postcolonial metaphor rendered all the more unhelpful by the escalating sectarian violence in India in the 1980s and 90s. His transmogrification on Aurora's canvases from a multicoloured figure of hope to a postlapsarian "figure of decay" simply nullifies the subversive value of a hybridity paradigm ungrounded in the politics of class and location. As such, the post-exotic Arab King in *The Moor's Last Sigh* figures less as an agent of social change than as hybridity's unmoored Moor—its phantasmagoric hollow man.

Notes

- 1 Rushdie had already shown interest in Arab Spain earlier in a short story, "Christopher Columbus and Queen Isabella of Spain Consummate their Relationship (*Santa Fé, AD 1492*)," which he included in his *East, West* collection (1995). Arabo-Islamic history is also evoked in the title of a "small project," as Rushdie describes it compared to a "big adult book" like *The Moor's Last Sigh* (*Conversations* 200)—namely, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1991), a children's collection of short stories whose eponymous hero is named after the Abbasid Caliph Haroun al-Rashid (786–809), a renowned patron of the arts and one of the characters in the *Arabian Nights* (Menocal 273–74; Hourani 196). Curiously, in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Muslim characters are almost absent, except for "Scar," Abraham Zogoiby's gangster, and Abbas Ali Baig, a well-known cricketer whose public embrace with one of his female fans becomes the subject of one of Aurora's most nationally acclaimed paintings.
- 2 In Rushdie's post-9/11 op-ed pieces, a shift has been noticed "from a recognizable liberal-left position" (as demonstrated in *Imaginary Homelands*) to a perceived pro-American stance characterized by its mainstream generalizations about Islam (as demonstrate in his recent non-fiction collection *Step Across This Line* as well as in several other articles appearing in such newspapers as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and the *Guardian* (Sawhney and Sawhney's 433). See also Ali's scathing critique in the *Guardian* of leftwing literateurs, such as Salman Rushdie and Martin Amis, who have turned after September 11, 2001 into pro-U.S. "belligerati" operating within "the antechambers of the state department" (n.pag).
- 3 See also *Step Across this Line*, 374–75.

- 4 The post- in "postexotic" here refers specifically to a subversive narrative strategy where the (peripheral) author simultaneously tropes and puts under erasure the traditional Orientalist/exoticist *topos* of the exotic Arab. The distinction between exoticism and post-exoticism in this respect parallels Appiah's distinction between postcolonialism and postmodernism where the post- in postcolonialism, "like that of postmodernism," is one "that challenges earlier legitimating narratives" (98–99). Similarly, I deploy the prefix "post" in post-exotic, not as an indicator of *prepositional* chronology, but as a marker of *disruptive* epistemology.
- 5 Rushdie's concept of the palimpsest also applies to identity as a necessarily hybrid construct, a layering of multiple histories, origins, cultures, and languages that overwrite each other without any being wiped out completely. For a detailed discussion of this concept in the novel, see Coetzee and Greenberg.
- 6 The presence of Christopher Columbus at the 1492 capitulation ceremony to seek Queen Isabella's sponsorship for his voyages to the East also indicates the intersecting of two imperial narratives, that of Arab Islam in Europe and that of Europe in the New World (Schultheis 590–91).
- 7 Benengeli is an allusion to Cite Hamete Benengeli, the fictional Arab author of *Don Quixote*, which Miguel de Cervantes claims to have translated.
- 8 Moraes's journey to Benengeli parallels the journey made by the Umayyad prince Abd al-Rahman from Damascus, then the seat of Muslim power, to Morocco and from there across the Strait of Gibraltar to Southern Spain. After the Abbasids took over Damascus in 750, slaughtering all the Umayyad princes and ruling the Muslim world thereafter for over five centuries (749–1258), Prince Abd al-Rahman was the "sole survivor" whose only choice was to flee westward and live in exile under Arab North African sovereignty. It took only six years for this young, half-Arab half-Berber, "assumed-dead Umayyad prince" to rally around him an army of Berbers disgruntled at their ill-treatment by their arrogant Arab overlords and to win a crucial battle against Cordoba's Arab governor in 756. The invasion of Cordoba was an easy one, but it was decisive enough to reinstate the Umayyad dynasty on the fertile steppe of Hispania for the next seven centuries and thus to change for ever "the face of European history and culture" (Menocal 6–8). Just as the exilic *emir* (Prince) Abd al-Rahman leaves Damascus and rides west to restore and proclaim his family's rightful rule from his palace in Cordoba, so Moraes leaves Bombay and flies to Benengeli to reclaim his mother's stolen paintings and eventually preserve her memory through the story he writes while being held captive by Vasco Miranda. Moraes's journey also symbolically retraces the entire geographical gamut of the Islamic Empire from its easternmost edges in India and China to its western reaches in Africa and Iberia. (Incidentally, the shape of the crescent, national emblem of many Islamic countries nowadays, reflects the geo-political trajectory of the Islamic Empire when it reached the zenith of its expansion by the mid-eighth century.)

- 9 According to Bhabha, cultural diversity designates “the recognition of pre-given cultural contents and customs” which often “gives rise to notions of multiculturalism, cultural exchange or the culture of humanity,” whereas cultural difference designates “the process of the *enunciation* of culture as ‘knowledgeable,’ authoritative, adequate to the construction of systems of cultural identification” (34 emphasis in original).
- 10 Rushdie’s post-9/11 writings indicate clear admonitions against overconfidence in the parodic capacity of the hybrid as well as in the purported limitlessness of artistic freedom. He writes:

The problem of limits is made awkward for artists and writers, including myself, by our own adherence to, and insistence upon, a no-limits position in our own work. The frontierlessness of art has been and remains our heady ideology....And now, in the aftermath of horror, of the iconoclastically transgressive image-making of the terrorists, do artists and writers still have the right to insist on the supreme, unfettered freedoms of art? Is it time, instead of endlessly pushing the envelope, stepping into forbidden territory, and generally causing trouble, to start discovering what frontiers might be necessary to art, rather than an affront to it? (*Step* 379)

Not that Rushdie is preaching artistic parochialism, but his main concern is that we are now living in an era where borderlines (geo-political, religious, national, racial, and otherwise) are being re-drawn, and it is the responsibility of the artist/intellectual to keep them in sight all the while trying to re-imagine adequate means of negotiating them.

- 11 Majid makes a similar argument when he suggests that hybridity and homelessness in postcolonial studies are transformed from symptoms of postcolonial trauma into abstracted universal virtues (35).
- 12 In *The Satanic Verses*, the art critic Zeeny Vakil is Rushdie’s spokesperson against the myth of authenticity and for cross-cultural hybridity: “She [Zeeny] was an art critic whose book on the confining myth of authenticity, that folkloristic straightjacket which she sought to replace by an ethic of historically validated eclecticism, for was not the entire national culture based on the principle of borrowing whatever clothes seemed to fit, Aryan, Mughal, British, take-the-best-and-leave-the-rest?” (52). In *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, however, she reappears as Dr. Zeenat Vakil, “a brilliant art theorist and devotee of Aurora’s oeuvre,” researching the dialectic of eclecticism and authenticity for a book-length manuscript the title of which parodically evokes that of Bhabha’s well-known essay on hybridity, *Imperso-Nation and Dis/Semil/Nation: Dialogics of Eclecticism and Interrogations of Authenticity in A.Z.*” (329).
- 13 I avail myself of this neologism to describe how Aurora’s and Rushdie’s Andalusian poetics inform their re-imagining of an Indian secular pluralism.

- 14 Because of Uma Sarasvati's machinations, Moraes is expelled from *Elephanta*, his parents' household, and becomes one of Raman Fielding's underworld "elite enforcers" (305).
- 15 Sanga offers a detailed discussion of this process of "chutnification" in *Midnight Children* as a metaphorical embodiment of "the hodgepodge associated with hybridity" (76).
- 16 Ghosh makes a similar argument. She claims that Rushdie's use of culture specific codes challenges the potential recuperation of the postcolonial (India in this case) under the theoretical and descriptive umbrella of Western postmodernism. In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, more specifically, Rushdie's hybridization of English, turning it into an "Indian vernacular," is "an example of a situated cultural hybridity that disallows Western appropriations of the postcolonial into discourses of postmodernity" (130–31 emphasis in original).
- 17 I refer here to Hutcheon's definition of postmodern parody as a form of cultural and narrative praxis that intervenes in the critical reconstruction of history in the present: "What I mean by 'parody'...is *not* the ridiculing imitation of the standard theories and definitions that are rooted in eighteenth-century theories of wit. The collective weight of parodic *practice* suggests a redefinition of parody as repetition with critical similarity that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity" (26 emphasis in original). My argument therefore develops from within the overlapping terrain of Hutcheon's definition of postmodern parody as both a citational *and* critical recuperation of history and Bhabha's conceptualization of the postcolonial discourse of hybridity as an ambivalent site of repetition and difference.
- 18 Moss also suggests that if *The Moor's Last Sigh* appears to be less politicized than *Midnight's Children*, it is because Moraes is not an agent of history, like Saleem, but rather "subject to its processes" (124). While Saleem "*affects* history," Moraes is "*affected*" by it. "As a citizen of 'Rushdieland,'" she adds, "Moraes is an ironic inversion of Saleem" (124 emphasis in original).

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