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NEW WAYS OF PERCEPTION: AURORA'S PAINTING AND NATIONAL IMAGING IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *THE MOOR'S LAST SIGH*

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Abstract

This article investigates the extent to which Rushdie's female character, Aurora, in The Moor's Last Sigh *uses paintings to visualise a nation in fragments. Through these fragments, we see how various semi-legendary and half-invented histories have been fused in order to arrive at an interpretation of India's past and present condition in order to see how Rushdie imagines and suggests a utopian vision of its future. The female character's recourse to painting subverts patriarchal stigmatisation and inserts history into paintings thereby breaking the frontier of historical "facts" in order to rewrite them from a perspective different from misogynistic interpretation. Such paintings introduce new ways of reading artistic representation in postcoloniality and provide an alternative view of Rushdie's society, one that can be described as post-patriarchal, without necessarily prioritising the female. It is a composite vision that suggests the participation of all, irrespective of previous binaries and a move from traditional arts to a modernist style. Through paintings, the female "Other" in Rushdie's work gains recognition, not just in regional but also in international circles as her paintings lay colonial hegemony and patriarchy to rest by the innovative vision of a woman whose voice speaks for women/artist both in India and in the diaspora. As such, using the postcolonial theory and new historicism, we argue that the female artist's challenge to misogyny through the art of painting is her inventive empowerment to represent a model for a creative hybridity of Orientalist and Western art.*

Keywords: *visual art, the frontier, Orientalist, hybridity, misogyny.*

Introduction

The idea of representation in postcolonial studies is becoming increasingly fluid especially as writers, deprived of speech in oppressive regimes are exploring new, overlapping frontiers in their art to articulate and identify with the vision of the oppressed and the disgruntled. Such transcendence is characteristic of Salman Rushdie whose social disconnectedness resulting

from the fatwa against him issued by Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran in 1989 inspires him to experiment with painting in order to reconnect with his society The paintbrush and the canvas thus provide Rushdie with a new voice which satirises the overall representations in the oral and written literatures of the Indian subcontinent. In *The Moor's Last Sigh* published in 1995 in the heat of the *fatwa*, Rushdie depicts a female artist, Aurora Zogoiby, whose paintings stand emblematically as a satire of all forms of discrimination and stigmatisation. Using the postcolonial theory and new historicism, this paper argues that her paintings subvert historical "facts" and rewrite them as a counter-misogynistic interpretation. Ironically, while her artistic insight is inspired by loneliness, her life story on the whole is reminiscent of the early years of the *fatwa* when Rushdie had to change over fifty safe-houses within six years. The daughter of a perpetually absent business woman, and an incarcerated father, the unspoken words in little Aurora are articulated through the paint brush as she "began her life in art during those long motherless hours" and giving her a "talent for drawing" (45).

Our concern, therefore, is to examine visual arts as Rushdie's innovative empowerment of a female subaltern. Her paintings satirize historical facts, social life, religion and politics as another form of *écriture feminine* that resonates with Helen Cixous' stance in "The Laugh of the Medusa" by suggesting that the paint brush frees her from the phallocentric order of language. According to Cixous, such freedom is "an act that will also be marked by woman's seizing the occasion to speak, hence her shattering entry into history, which has always been based on her suppression" (312). As a form of language then, how does painting liberate her from the conservative forces in the Indian subcontinent where her work is still not recognised because she is a woman? Furthermore, can such articulation suggest that present artists speak through characters whose platforms become alternative voices that enrich the artistic landscape? In answering these questions, we wish to underscore the fact that art has evolved from the Renaissance to postcolonial periods with an increasing bias to reflect a composite world and not just its privileged ideologies. The voices in canvases so to speak, reveal the power of indigenising language as suggested by Ngugi wa Thiong'o in *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*:

> Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture, at their politics and at their social production of wealth, at their entire relationship to nature and to other human beings. Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form of character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world. (16)

Rushdie's concern with this strategic role of language in a globalising context stages recalcitrance as a postcolonial impetus to adjust to the global ambivalence of how and why art is produced. By privileging the female as his mouthpiece, and visual art – not just fiction – as the medium of revolt, Rushdie deliberately disguises his "presence," confounds the conservative establishment and ridicules its purely male pantheon as a dated structure of power in an increasingly multi-voiced and multi-faceted world. From the straying distance of

his writing, Rushdie thus feminises the potency of language by making a female painter the new agency for its valorisation. Aurora's paintings describe a modern enterprise that celebrates all forms of art, and equally creates a new identity for India, one that associates other countries who affirm multiculturalism through visual art. Consequently, her paintings respond to the need for a language that reflects a pan-Indian spirit that necessarily defines itself within the geopolitical space of globalisation. Part of the reason for this paradigm shift relates to Lois Tyson's claim that structuralists perceive the world from a conceptual framework which is a feature of human consciousness. As such, the artist does not discover the world; he/she "creates" it according to innate structures within the human mind especially because "language is the most fundamental of these structures, and the one through which our beliefs are passed on from one generation to the next, it makes sense that it is through language that we learn to conceive and perceive the world the way we do" (214). Evidently, the different perspectives through which Aurora's paintings depict the Indian worldview, and how they equally embody the potential for artists to represent the world more compositely, provide the basis of a unique voice that questions previous hegemonies and at the same time, suggest a more enabling alternative.

Indian History Through Aurora's Canvas

Spanish history constitutes the background of *The Moor's Last Sigh*. The Moor of the title is Boabdil, the last Moorish monarch of Granada, itself the last stronghold of Moorish rule in Spain. The last sigh refers to Boabdil's reaction when in 1492 he was forced to leave the seat of his power, the Alhambra, by the conquering armies of the Catholic monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella. We understand therefore that "The Moor's Last Sigh" is not simply the title of Rushdie's novel; it is also the title of a painting that plays a crucial role in its narration of Indian history, or rather two paintings with the same name, one done by Vasco Miranda and the other by Moraes' mother, Aurora da Gama Zogoiby. In *The Moor's Last Sigh* Rushdie interweaves Indian and Spanish history through Aurora's different paintings that underscore how the Jewish ancestors of the businessman, Abraham Zogoiby, are said to have come to India as a result of the same Christianization of Spain that led to the expulsion of the Moors. According to family legend as will be seen through Aurora's paintings, the Indian Zogoibys are "descended from Boabdil himself, who, after his loss of Granada, purportedly had an interracial romance with a Spanish Jewess (83). Unlike Rushdie's contemporaries such as Vikram Seth, Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan etc who hardly conceive of characters that engage the subcontinent identify as a temporal imperative, Rushdie's Aurora questions the clear-cut division between history and fiction, which according to Stephen Greenblatt and Catherine Gallagher in *Practicing New Historicism*, history has become more literary and literature more historicized:

> [our] project has never been about diminishing or belittling the power of artistic representation, even those with the most problematic entailments, but we never believe

> that our appreciation of this power necessitates either ignoring the cultural matrix out of which the representations emerge or uncritically endorsing the fantasies that the representations articulates. (9)

Against such background, Aurora's paintings offer a self-reflexive view of history as a relative, human construct which shatters previous assumptions of historical homogeneity. This position contradicts the contentions 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" (Laouyene, 145). According to Laouyene, the title 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. He further suggests that 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" (150).

Rather, Rushdie envisages an alternative future for the subcontinent through Aurora's portrayal of Moorish history painted as a "golden age" of inter-communal harmony which highlights a hybrid culture through paintings as:

> an attempt to create a romantic myth of the plural, hybrid nation; she was using Arab Spain to re-imagine India, and this land-sea-scape in which the land could be fluid and the sea stone-dry was her metaphor – idealised? sentimental? Probably – of the present, and the future, that she hoped would evolve [...]. Aurora Zogoiby was seeking to paint a golden age. Jews, Christians, Muslims, Parsis, Sikhs, Buddhist, Jains crowded into her paint-Boabdil's fancy-dress balls, and the Sultan was represented less and less naturalistically, appearing more and more often as a masked, parti-coloured harlequin, a patchwork quilt of a man; or, as his old skin dropped from him chrysalis-fashion, standing revealed as a glorious butterfly, whose wings were a miraculous composite of all the colours in the world. (227)

This projected vision of the region goes beyond nationalist concerns as borders are ambiguous while the figure of Boabdil represents an inclusive, transcending, hybridizing ideal. Aurora's futuristic vision is more accommodating, which is why there is an influx of painters and photographers from all over India on "pilgrimage to Aurora's door to ask for her blessing on their works" (202). Such paintings connote an alternative nationalist discourse of the subcontinent, one that can be described as post-patriarchal, without necessarily prioritising the female. Her paintings inform a composite understanding of the country with the participation of all, irrespective of limiting binaries based on political affiliation, language, ethnicity, sex, religion and region.

One example by which Aurora re-historicises the subcontinent's multi-version post is her painting of Spanish-Moorish history in which the story of Boabdil, the last Muslim king

of Spain is summarised and introduced to us as the "last Prince of al-Andalus; [...] Abu Abdallah, last of the Nasrids, known as 'Boabdil'" (79). Only the last moments of his kingship in 1492 are painted as the Sultan Boabdil of Granada surrendered the keys to the fortress-palace of the Alhambra, "last and greatest of all the Moors' fortifications, to the all-conquering Catholic Kings Fernando and Isabella, giving up his principality without so much as a battle" (79-80). On his departure, Boabdil, turning around to the Alhambra one last time, sighed and wept, hence the title of the novel. Such history is re-visualised and given its importance in a relative context in which "history" now:

> constitutes, [...], for the human sciences, a favourable environment which is both privileged and dangerous. To each of the sciences of man, it offers a background, which establishes it and provides it with a fixed ground and, as it were, a homeland; it determines the cultural area – the chronological and geographical boundaries – in which that branch of knowledge can be recognised as having validity. (Foucault, 371)

Knowledge of the different phases of the history of the Indian subcontinent becomes imperative in the understanding of the premise from which Aurora's paintings are visualised especially as history inspires her art through which where all things emerge into the glittering existence of her canvases. In *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale labels such a historical novel written in the postmodern era as "the postmodernist revisionist historical novel" because "it revises the content of the historical record, reinterpreting the historical record, often demystifying or debunking the orthodox version of the past and revises it, indeed transforms the conventions and norms of historical fiction itself" (90). Aurora's paintings introduce such a revisionist perspective and implicitly draw on a Columbus subtext, based on the date 1492, to suggest that the subcontinent forms part of the ancestry that "discovered" America. Columbus' own historical confusion over the route to India and his further re-naming of Native Americans as "Red Indians" can be put in perspective. In this overlapping re-historicisation, we see Rushdie exploring the multi-perspectival locations in visual art as possible sites for new meanings and enlarged identities.

Rushdie considers Aurora the goddess of Indian paintings because she is the first to articulate how the history of different religious rivalries can be reconciled through the images she paints and which become important for the colonial administration since these rivalries impede colonial expansion "... Aurora Zogoiby was seeking to paint a golden age. Jews, Christians, Muslims, Parsis, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains crowded into her paint-Boabdil's fancy dress balls... (227). This new way of looking becomes an inspiration to the British colonial administration which then commissions her paintings to replace the many artefacts collected from different parts of the world in the Prince of Wales museum. Rushdie's preoccupation here is to celebrate art from all perspectives. His pro-female bias for instance, is self-explanatory, radicalising artistic engagements beyond male structures, and thus advertising as

it were not just personal glory for the liberated female, but also national pride. No wonder then that Aurora gets national and international recognition as her works are displayed in the Prince of Wales Museum and it is the first time the institution recognizes and honours a female artist:

> It was a considerable event in the life of the city. Banners advertising the show were everywhere [...]. Aurora was garlanded, eulogised, and showered with flower-petals, flattery and gifts. The city bowed down before her and touched her feet. Even Raman Fielding, the powerful M.A. boss, turned up, blinking his toady eyes, and made a respectful pranam [...]. 'Therefore I say with some authority that art and beauty must serve national interest also. Madame Aurora, I congratulate you on your privileged exhibit.' (260-61)

Through this speech celebrating Aurora's paintings in Bombay, the politician, Raman Fielding, tells the people that Aurora's paintings can be considered a radical moment for the country beyond visual aesthetics seen when:

> Is it one of our great Hindu artists? No matter. In India, every community must have its place, its leisure activity – art et cetera – all. Christians, Parsis, Jains, Sihks, Buddhists, Jews, Mughals. We accept this. This too is part of ideology of Ram Rajya, rule of Lord Ram. (61)

Through Aurora's paintings, it can be argued that she is moving from traditional art to a modernist style. The Prince of Wales' museum represents conservative historical authority which Aurora's works challenge through a liberal and more inclusive voice. The new works also signal a shift in consciousness, away from the traditional binary of Self and Other to a re-othering in which identities are restored as ideological boundaries collapse. In colonial terms, this may be seen as a version of the empire writing back and being recognised as such. Besides, the female Other gains recognition not just in regional but also in international circles. By replacing the artefacts in the Prince of Wales museum with Aurora's paintings, colonial hegemony is finally laid to rest not by patriarchal policies of post-independence leadership, but by the innovative vision of a woman whose voice had been suppressed both during and after colonialism. Here, it can be argued that Rushdie is making a political statement, first in favour of the Indian liberal woman/artist whose voice is perceived as liberating; and second, against conservative forces in India and the subcontinent where her paintings are still not recognised. Aurora's paintings advocate a change of perspective in life as a whole, and acknowledge the hybridity of the colonial and postcolonial contexts, so that insistence on the purely indigenous is seen as dated. Her canvases introduce the model for a creative hybridity of Orientalist and Western influences which is, however, portrayed as being viewed with suspicion by those who demand a clear preference for either/or:

> Artists who were truly in thrall to the West, and spent their careers imitating, to dreadful effect, the styles of the great figures of the United States and France, now abused her for 'parochialism', while those other artists – and there were many of these – who floundered in the dead sea of the country's ancient heritage, producing twentieth century versions of the old miniature art [...], reviled her just as loudly for 'losing touch with her roots'. (178)

In writing back to the empire, *The Moor's Last Sigh* however represents Aurora's hybrid and eclectic artistic vision as a viable way of reconciling Indian and Western elements; does not portray Western influences or modernity as alien ingredients in Indian culture. That is why Aurora's dying wish is that her work should not be sold, but instead "donated to the nation on condition that a gallery was built in Bombay to store and display it properly" (328); and where it will further inspire women all over the world to become painters and even architects. This wish is realised in Rushdie's later work, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999), where the architectural ingenuity of another female character, Ameer Merchant, is seen when, in the words of her son, she designs the city of Bombay:

> When my mother wasn't with me – when I was riding on my father's shoulders, or staring, with him, at the fish in the Taraporewala Aquarium – she was out there with her, with Bombay; out there bringing her into being. For of course construction work never stops completely, and supervising such work was Ameer's particular genius. My mother, the master builder. Like her dead father before her. (79)

The fact that Mr Merchant allows his wife to become an architect indicates a degree of success in Aurora's desire for equal opportunities for men and women, and equates Ameer Merchant's love for Bombay to a mother's love for a son. Rushdie suggests here that the architectural beauty of Bombay needs to be nurtured through a female touch, so as to eradicate the slums that have been a characteristic of male indifference. Ameer Merchant thus supervises the different construction sites in the city like a good mother would follow up the growth and progress of her child. The inter-textuality here indicates how the multitude of Aurora's paintings about the history of her country signals new ways of looking through artistic culture that depicts historical and cultural transition. This claim benefits from Homi Bhabha's own assertion in *The Location of Culture* that:

> The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the past and the present. It creates a sense of new as an insurgent act of cultural transition. Such acts do not merely recall the past as social calls or aesthetic president. It renews the past, refiguring it as contingent 'in between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performances of the present. (9)

The art of painting therefore invites us to participate in a cultural newness in which pictures and architecture metaphorically become a medium to discuss the important themes in history and literature. Aurora's paintings invoke anew, the historicity of texts and the textuality of history in a way that is reminiscent of Louis Monstrose's argument in "Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture" that:

> By the historicity of texts I mean to suggest the cultural specificity, the social embedment, of all modes of writing […]. By the textuality of history, I mean to suggest, firstly, that we can have no access to a full and authentic past, a lived material existence, unmediated by the surviving textual traces of the society in question […]; and secondly that those textual traces are themselves subject to subsequent textual mediations when they are construed as the 'documents' upon which historians ground their own texts, called 'histories'. (20)

In this respect, Aurora's paintings thus carry textual traces of the history of the society that future generations will explore to understand the history of the Indian subcontinent since the days of Vasco da Gama. In conclusion, the way Aurora paints the history of the subcontinent blurs the stereotypical category of reading historical facts in history books. Such artistic historicity offers a more innovative and re-imagining that suggests an increasing multi-cultural global discourse.

The Canvases of Aurora's Society

Part of Aurora's innovatory art as we have so far suggested is her ability to represent Indian social life on canvases. In one canvas, which she names *The Kissing of Ali Baig*, and which satirises the ban of direct kissing, she paints the famous cricket test match against Australia at Bombay's Brabourne Stadium in 1960 where a kiss becomes a national disgrace. The general euphoria when Ali Baig secures victory for his Indian team turns into a national disgrace when "a pretty young woman ran out from the usually rather staid and upper-crust North Stand and kissed the batsman on the cheek" (228). The fact that Baig is expelled from the match as a result of that kiss is indicative of Aurora's dissatisfaction with fundamentalist religious orthodoxies. Aurora's painting which captures this incident becomes a comment on the state of India painting, a snapshot of cricket's arrival at the heart of national consciousness, and more controversially, a generational cry of sexual revolt especially as Ali Baig is forced to make a public pronouncement refuting ever kissing the lady. The eventual expulsion of Ali Baig from the team is the basis of the painting's controversial critique of patriarchal hegemony and the social forces inhibiting women. Given that Cricket is intimately linked to colonial mindset that complemented the patriarchy in India; Aurora's painting becomes a statement on how a colonial activity can be used to address lingering aspects of exclusion and stigmatisation. Furthermore, as a crusader of social justice, Aurora's paintings satirise those patriarchal institutions that encourage homosexuality underground as a lucrative

form of business in some Indian cultures. In *The Moor's Last Sigh,* homosexuality falls under labelling subcategories such as "Hijra", "Danga", "Double Decker" and "Kothi." The portrait of Aires wearing the veil falls within the homosexual category of "Kothi" since he becomes the female partner in the gay relationship and the person who receives during oral and anal sex. Aires can be considered "Kothi" because according to Venkatesan Chakrapani et al. in "HIV Prevention Among MSM in India: Review of Current Scenario and Recommendations," the Kothi:

> main profession is sex work while dressed as females; however, they do not dress as females when they are not working. During anal sex, 'Kothi' are both penetrated and penetrate, while they are also both the givers and receivers in oral sex. Kothi however, do not have intercourse with other Kothi […]. Kothi tend not to be castrated and in most cases do not ever plan to become castrated […]. Often, Kothi are married to females […]. Among the Kothi community there is a wide range in the degree to which Kothi acts female. Kothi that only dress in women's clothes to solicit sex are married, do not have feminine mannerisms or wear make-up are considered 'simple Kothi." (4)

Through her paintings, Aurora satirises the prevalence of gay activity when she paints a portrait of her homosexual uncle, Aires da Gama, whose sexual escapades with Prince Henry are revealed from the viewpoint of his wife, Carmen Lobo, on their wedding night:

> On her wedding night her husband had entered her bedroom late, ignored his terrified and scrawny young bride who lay vaginally quaking in the bed, undressed with slow fastidiousness, and then with equal precision slipped his naked body (so similar in proportion to her own) into the wedding-dress which her maidservant had left upon a tailor's dummy as a symbol of their union, and left the room through the latrine's outside door [...] she saw the wedding-dress gleaming in moonlight as a young man rowed it and its occupant away, in search of whatever it was that passed, among such occult beings, for bliss. (13)

Here, Aurora is satirising not just the cultural endorsement of the sex-starved wife's plight, but also castigating a queer habit which disrupts the matrimonial institution. The hypocrisy and arrogance involved in the practice threatens social harmony. Aurora's painting castigates the growing rate of gay relationships in the subcontinent as she foresees the possibility that some time, probably in the near future, the Indian society will begrudgingly admit that the marriage of same-sex couples is, if not a legal right. This concern is feasible especially because in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, it is practiced by a politician like Raman Fielding who initiates youths into his M.A Party through homosexual activities as he "preferred male company" in the hope that "the assembled company would arrive at a point of sweaty, brawling, raucous, and finally exhausted nakedness, [...] slapping buttocks and patting thighs" (300).The effect of homosexuality is that condoms are not frequently used, which is

why Aires and Prince Henry contract syphilis. As such, Aurora's paintings become a new militant voice against homosexual relationships and sensitise youths as a means to reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS.

As a mother, Aurora's personal life equally becomes an important theme in her paintings. Her love for her son, Moraes, is narrated through painting especially when Moraes falls in love with Uma Sarasvati. In a typically Freudian sense, Aurora denounces the relationship because it threatens the mother-son bond and explains why she paints Uma as a vulture. By naming the painting, *Mother-Naked Moor Watches Chimene's Arrival*, Aurora invokes a picture of Moraes naked while behind him on the 'sill of a scalloped window stood a vulture from the Tower of Silence" (246). As a manifestation of maternal jealousy, this painting reminds us of Picasso's own "confessions" of how the mood of his relationship influenced his art. For Aurora, the intensity of emotions against Uma makes the latter to be portrayed as a malevolent figure and a pretty witch who is out to snatch her son away like Chimene does to the Moor while his mother, Ayxa, watches in the story of *Velazquez's Las Meninas.* In Aurora's painting, "the Moor and his lady made love in many settings [...]. Ayxa the mother was always somewhere in these pictures, behind the curtain, stooped at a keyhole, flying up to the window of their lover's eyries" (259).

The departure of Moraes with Uma affects Aurora's artistic abilities as evident in her incomplete canvases on which she palimpsests worlds coming together, with the water world painted over the world of air. These canvases which she names *Mooristan* reveal places "where worlds collide, flow in and out of one another, and washofy away. Place where an air-man can drowno in water, or else grow gills; where a water-creature can get drunk" (226). Such images reveal a disturbed painter who has lost hopes of ever regaining the love of her son. Aurora's agony is further heightened when her daughter, Ina, is killed in a disguised gas accident during her crusade to investigate the inhumane treatment given to the female workforce in a chemical factory by their male officials. For this reason, the painting which Aurora names *Moor and Ina's Ghost Look into the Abyss:*

> was afterwards seen as the first in the 'high period' of the Moor series, those high-energy, apocalyptic canvases into which Aurora poured all her agony at the death of a daughter, all the maternal love that had remained unexpressed for too long; but also her larger, prophetic, even Cassandran fears for the nation. (236)

The death of Ina reveals a society where female activism is inhibited through violent means. Through Aurora's canvases, we see women ironically fighting an apparent lost battle, when "Cassandran fears" remind us not only of the misery of the doomed goddess in Greek mythology, but also of the consequences of her being neglected. Unlike the Greek subaltern, who suffers from the male sentence in silence, Aurora, as Hilton Hubbard suggests in "Love, War and Lexico-grammar: Transitivity and Characterisation in *The Moor's Last Sigh*" is

saved by a combative spirit which represents women's determination in India to dominate their environment and most particularly, their men folk. According to Hubbard, the main female characters in *The Moor's Last Sigh* appear to "act, rather than be acted upon" (12), a clear indication that the subaltern can indeed speak.

From another perspective, family and religious disputes are reflected in Aurora's paintings, and draw on her childhood experiences in Cochin. By immortalising these disputes in her paintings, notably in *The Scandal*, she is unable to conceal her anger. Consequently, as "the Menezes people all have serpents' heads and tails and the Lobos, of course are, are wolves" (102), the origin of the conflict between the two families which begins from business later moves to religion when Aurora proposes to marry Abraham. Aurora is involved in this conflict because it is a marriage proposal considered scandalous because Abraham is a Jew and Aurora, a Catholic. For this reason, their wedding is not celebrated religiously as:

> The Bishop of Cochin refused to countenance the idea of Abraham's conversion, and Moshe Cochen the leader of the Cochin Jews declared that under no circumstances could any Jewish marriage be performed. This is why – I now reveal for the first time – my parents were so keen to speak of the event in the Corbusier chaley as their wedding night. (104)

As a result of this refusal, Aurora and Abraham elope to Bombay where they forever consider their first love encounter in the Corbusier as their wedding day. Aurora's involvement in such inter-religious conflict definitely becomes one of the reasons for her satirical paintings about the present social situation given that she believes in a new India that practices inter-religious kinship. Such kinship will display that the country is using its diversity as potential vehicle for social development.

Representing Politics on Canvases

Aurora's canvases are inspired by her composite knowledge of aspects of Indian life, part of which is her participation in the political struggle of the country. As a politician, she decides to mediate her activism through art, and consequently paints the troublesome road to India's independence to the extent that her studio becomes an embodiment of her society; her canvases reveal that

> modern history was there too, there were jails full of passionate men, Congress and Muslim League, Nehru, Gandhi Jinnah, Patel Bose Azad, and British soldiers whispering rumours of an approaching war; and beyond history were the creatures of her fancy. (59)

She names these political canvases her "*Chipkali* or *lizard pictures*," Kekoo Mody, one of her activist friends suggests that "the pictures were clearly subversive, clearly pro-strike and therefore a challenge to British authority" (131). The fact that at the time of independence several exhibitions of her paintings are organised by Kekoo Mody as a way of attracting British recognition of the subversive nature of her paintings, is indicative of her role in the struggle for independence. The significance of her paintings in the liberation struggle is highlighted and recognised by the award she receives at independence as recalled by Moraes that "nine months before I was born, Aurora Zogoiby travelled to Delhi to receive, from the President's hands and in the presence of her good friend the Prime Minister, a State Award – the so-called 'Esteemed Lotus' – for her services to the arts" (175). With this award, Aurora becomes an active member in the All-India Congress Party and becomes the voice of people who have realised that it takes a bold artist to satirise the high-handedness of colonial administration. Her actions reveal the extent to which she is implicated in the welfare of the society as a whole, for as Ngugi points out:

> The struggle for the freedom of expression should not be left to writers and artists. The fate and destinies of artists reflect that of the society as a whole. The struggle for the freedom of the artist is the struggle of the freedom for all [...]. The artist and society are bound to each other for ever. After all, human labour is the original artist and the basis of all art. (81)

Aurora's distinctive art thus reflects the socio-cultural and political mores of the subcontinent in a way that transforms her into an archetypal "bright star" which should illuminate the dark and darkened world of conservative forces. Her beauty and political charisma may be perceived through Moraes' description of the effects on others when he highlights that she bends "other people's light, her gravitational pull on people who fell towards her sun and its consuming fires" (136). It is this beauty that attracts Prime Minister Nehru towards her and leads to him fathering Moraes Zogoiby.

Furthermore, Indira Gandhi's ascension to power equally marks an important moment in Aurora's paintings as they celebrate the fight for women's political empowerment in her society. These paintings are divided into three phases: the first phase (1957-77), which she paints between Moraes' birth and Indira Gandhi's electoral defeat are considered the "great" and "high" years. The second phase (1977-81), establishes her as India's most successful artist who has glowing, profound works with which her name is most often associated, even though they were marked by a sense of loss and despair. The third phase (1981-87), reveal "'the dark Moors,' with pictures of exile and terror, in which the Arab King becomes for the first and last time her primary subject matter" (218). One of the reasons for these dark paintings is because after the defeat of Indira, Aurora realizes that women's participation at the higher echelons of the political parties is barred by patriarchal politicians. Such realization re-echoes Rushdie's critical stance in "India's New Era," when he condemns

Indian politicians in the BJP who refuse to recognize Sonia Gandhi, the wife of the late prime minister on her demand to stand as candidate during party elections when he says:

> I have two immediate wishes for the new era. The first is that the debates about "foreignness" can be laid to rest. Those of us who are part of the Indian diaspora, and who have fought for years to have Indians recognized as full citizens of the societies in which we have settled and in which our children have been born and raised, have found the attack on the Italian origins of Sonia Gandhi, the Congress Party's leader and widow of the slain prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, to be highly unpleasant. Even more unpleasant were the BJP's suggestions that her children, the children of Rajiv Gandhi, were also somehow aliens. You can't have it both ways. If Indians outside India are to be seen as "belonging" to their new homelands, then those who make India their home, as Sonia Gandhi has done for 40 years or so, must be given the same respect. (8)

Rushdie satirizes the sexist attitude that is propagated against Indian women when it comes to positions of authority like Sonia Gandhi who is refused party leadership on the grounds that she is a woman and of Italian origin. Rushdie's suggestions for a transition to social democracy are that the country should have a competitive party system, that political parties (and by implication the government) and trade unions be committed to social welfare, and that civil society activism should press for social issues to be included in the policy agenda. This proactive position results from Rushdie's experiences of a balkanised gender space whose reversal will translate policy into practical achievements without bias.

Having been alienated by the hypocrisy of practical politics, Aurora wants to engage it imaginatively. This new form of representing political participation is more militant and challenging because of its symbolic nuances. As mentioned earlier, Aurora's withdrawal from political affairs into the private realm inspires her use of the painting of Boabdil-Moor this time, from a pessimistic perspective; to narrate the fate of the nation. As a result of the different racial, religious and political rivalries, the Moor painting no longer stands for the ideal of a "rainbow nation," as would have been the case in South Africa, but represents instead Aurora's bleak image of contemporary India which is embodied by a collage of rubbish:

> The Moor-figure appeared to lose, in these last pictures, his previous metaphorical role as a unifier of opposites, a standard-bearer of pluralism, ceasing to stand as a symbol – however approximate – of the new nation, and being transformed, instead, into a semi-allegorical figure of decay. 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. (303)

Aurora's final dark paintings of contemporary India represent not only the elite's aversion to the poor, but its reaction of distaste for the new democratic forces in India, one of which is the Shiv Sena political party with its following among the slum-dwellers of Bombay. Her last paintings indicate isolation from the reality surrounding the slums. Therefore, since every painter paints from the history of his/her environment, Rushdie believes that individual history can be read against the background of his environment, and the lives of the individuals. To understand one life, therefore, we have to understand the lives of the people who interact with it. Although Bill Ashcroft argues in *On Post-colonial Futures: Transformations of Colonial Culture* that no artist can avoid the fact that his production occurs in some already determined discursive space, it should be understood that any such "determined space" (18) may also constitute the very base of conservative forces against which an artist like Aurora positions her vision. That is why at Aurora's death, the paintings that had been transferred to the national Gallery in Bombay are stolen by Vasco Miranda and taken back to Spain, because the Moor originated from this country and it is the initial inspiration for the painting with the hope of deciphering their messages as:

> In Bombay, there was a nocturnal burglary at the Zogoiby Bequest. The thieves were swift and professional; the gallery's alarm system was revealed as hopelessly inadequate, and, in more than one zone, totally dysfunctional. Four paintings were taken, all belonging to the Moor cycle, and plainly pre-selected – one from each of the three major periods, and also the last, unfinished, but nevertheless supreme canvas, "The Moor's Last Sigh." (363-64)

It is only later that Moraes discovers that the paintings of his mother are stolen by Vasco Miranda. Miranda is one of her students who considers her works inspirational, which is why in all his later paintings, his signature is always an image of a "cross-legged woman with one exposed breast, sitting on a lizard with her arms cradling nothing [...] or even the whole world [...], she indeed became the mother of us all" (160). The mother figure in his painting is Aurora, and given that Vasco Miranda cannot decipher the messages in the paintings, he transports them to his Alhambra Palace built in a remote village in Spain called Benengeli where he kidnaps another painter, Aoi Uë, a famous Japanese female painter to accomplish this task. Her eventual refusal which causes Miranda to kill her suggests that she wants Aurora's paintings to remain for posterity because they will be destroyed in the process of decoding since according to her, those who do not understand the importance of paintings "are inattentive, by and large. They do not read closely, but skim" (422). From another perspective, Ahmad Dohra argues in "Fundamentalism and Hybridity in *The Moor's Last Sigh*," that Aoi Uë's refusal to decode the painting symbolizes "Rushdie's guilt over the death of his Japanese translator for *The Satanic Verses* – vocalizes the idea that the text contains a single encoded meaning on the part of the author" (17). Dohra goes further that Rushdie argues that fundamentalist Muslims have hardly understood the messages in *The Satanic Verses* because they do not struggle to locate meaning in his intention, but find

reason only in their reception. This means that works of art like Aurora's paintings need to be studied deeply in order to decipher their symbolic importance. Aurora's paintings therefore suggest new ways of looking at, and representing the politics in the Indian society, in order to lay bare a composite vision that reveals the active participation of all. .

Conclusion

What we have tried to do in this paper is to analyze the female artist's challenge to misogyny as an inventive empowerment of women that represents a model for a creative hybridity of Orientalist and Western art. Linked thematically as well as theoretically, Rushdie's celebration of the art of painting through Aurora classifies and organizes key aspects and experiences grounded on the premise that postcolonialism celebrates several inter-disciplinary approaches of analysing paintings that can be used to represent socio-cultural, religious, political and economic happenings in developing countries. As Ania Loomba highlights in *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, "the term postcolonial has become so heterogeneous [...] and this difficulty is partly due to the inter-disciplinary nature of postcolonial studies" (12). Therefore, the art of painting in *The Moor's Last Sigh* reveals perspectives from which Aurora lays colonial hegemony and patriarchy to rest. Along these lines, we have argued that Rushdie encourages metamorphosis in the art of painting which if promoted can compete with other genres in Literature like prose, poetry and drama that celebrate the empire writing back as Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back* argue:

> What each of these literatures has in common beyond their special and distinctive regional characteristics is that they emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre. It is this which makes them distinctively post-colonial. (2)

This argument is sustained through *The Post-colonial Studies Reader* in which they say Postcolonialism involves discussion about experiences of various kinds: migration, slavery, suppression, representation, resistance, difference, race, gender, place and responses to the influential master discourses of imperial Europe. From this background therefore, we can suggest that Rushdie is the quintessentially international writer of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, whose internationalism is inclusive because it engages not just the margins of Empire, but also answers Gayatri Spivak's question as to whether the subaltern can speak, in the affirmative. Unlike previous border-crossing "internationals" like T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Henry James whose works still promoted the grand narrative of binary exclusion, Rushdie's work celebrates an interrogative postcolonial voice, but also stimulates a positive multiculturalism that exposes the traditional tyrannies of especially gender and ideological ascendancy. In Aurora, as we have argued in this paper, Rushdie imagines a provocative

juncture for both creative and critical complementarity in the sociology of the subcontinent's renaissance, and how this change implicates other previously parallel spaces more intimately, through the agency of visual art.

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