

# Salman Rushdie's Transgressive Heroines

ARPA GHOSH

## ABSTRACT

“Once a year, my mother Aurora Zogoiby liked to dance higher than the gods . . . Her white hair flying out around her in long loose exclamations . . . her exposed belly not ond-bad-fat but fit-cat-flat, her bare feet stamping, her ankles a-jingle with silver jhunjhuna bell-bracelets, snapping her neck from side to side, speaking incomprehensible volumes with her hands, the great painter danced her defiance, she danced her contempt for the perversity of humankind . . .” *The Moor's Last Sigh*

In almost all his major novel Salman Rushdie has depicted transgressive heroines who have flouted sexual, ideological and political conventions, giving primacy to desire over decorum. For him literature is not about portraying reality, but about disrupting and subverting it. The paper deals majorly with two novels: *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995) and *Shalimar the Clown* (2005). Both novels have heroines who refuse to live by the rules and pay for their nonconformism with their lives. Aurora Zogoiby is an artist, while Boonyi is a folk dancer. Aurora expresses herself through her palimpsest art, while Boonyi's transgression is sexual. If there is a line Boonyi and Aurora make it a point to step across it and, by doing so, lay open certain key issues about multiculturalism that is in the process of gradually and systematically getting destroyed by Bombay (currently Mumbai) and Kashmir. Aurora and Boonyi are lively women, greedy in their zest for life. At the same time they are heavily allegorized characters. In vital ways Aurora stands for the rainbow spirit of

Bombay of Rushdie's childhood, while Boonyi's healthy mixture of art and sensuality represents a Kashmir where Hindus and Muslims lived peacefully as friends, lovers and neighbours. The paper explores how women become the repository of Rushdie's blasted dreams, aporias of his relentless interrogation of lines and boundaries across communal, religious and political lines.

History will remember Salman Rushdie as the man who asked why. As a novelist it has been Rushdie's endeavour to capture the spirit of a time over and above its known facts and configurations. In his comments on his Booker winning novel *Midnight's Children* Rushdie admits that personal memory is fallacious. Yet, individuals remember plenty of things that the state would rather they forget. His formidably detailed historical vision comes to his aid when he sets out to people his grand palimpsestic canvases.

A pared-down stylist like J. M. Coetzee might well accuse Rushdie of overwriting and stylistic excess (Coetzee: 2002, 206) but the fact remains that Rushdie's epic-fabulist approach to his material is quite the opposite of Coetzee's austere, late modernist, Kafka-like approach to his.

A staunch believer in multiculturalism and secularism, Rushdie hates monocultural vision and focus and the consequent ditching of diverse, motley elements as foreign and unwanted. His vision of Bombay and Kashmir, in spite of flaws, elisions and simplifications, actually argues in favour of joyful, bounteous multiplicity while mourning the rapid destruction of such diversity due to politically motivated interventions.

*The Moor's Last Sigh* (1994) goes a long way to chart a motley, hydra-headed history of Bombay. The narrative travels back and forth in the typical Rushdie style thumbing its nose at linear narrative. The protagonist, Moreas Zogoiby, like his fictional

predecessor Saleem Sinai, is born quite late in the narrative. The history of Bombay is linked to the history of Boabdil's Spain from which place Moreas's paternal ancestors hail. His maternal lineage is the Catholic D'Gamas of Cochin. The picturesque ancestry of Moreas together with the 'open house' arrangement of his family with its Portuguese-Goan, Marxist and Anglo-Indian hangers-on make for a "pepper-spice family" and a Bombay that is colourful and heterogeneous. The Moor's words contain the seed of Rushdie's vision:

I wanted to cling to the image of love as the blending of spirits, as *mélange*, as the triumph of the impure, mongrel, conjoining best of us over what there is in us of the solitary, the isolated, the austere, the dogmatic, the pure; . . . I tried to see lovelessness as arrogance, for who but the loveless can believe themselves complete, all-seeing, all-wise? To love is to lose, omnipotence and omniscience. (289, MLS)

Rushdie's basic premise is that authenticity does not belong to the majority alone. The half-Christian, half-Jewish Zogoibys are as much entitled to their Indianness as the majoritarian Hindus.

Christians, Portuguese and Jews; Chinese tiles promoting godless views; pushy ladies, skirts-not-saris, Spanish shenanigans, Moorish crowns . . . can this really be India? Bharatmata, Hindustan-hamara, is this the place? . . .

No, sahibzadas, Madams-O: no way. Majority, that mighty elephant, and her sidekick, Majority-Minority, will not crush my tale beneath her feet. Are not my personages Indian, every one? Well, then: this too is an Indian yarn. (87, MLS)

If in *The Satanic Verses* Rushdie takes on Muslim conservatism,

in his third novel he challenges Hindu intolerance as manifested in its BJP, VHP and RSS incarnations (337 MLS).

The figure of Aurora Zogoiby, mother of Moreas Zogoiby, is of prime importance in this context since she, more than any other character in the novel, provides the authorial perspective. Aurora is the flamboyant Catholic artist married to a Jewish entrepreneur. She is a painter whose gigantic canvases capture a history of Bombay that is increasingly denied, written over and shown to be false by newly-risen Hindutya politicians like Mainduck Fielding.

Says Rushdie in his autobiography *Joseph Anton* that at the inception of the novel, the figure of Aurora Zogoiby haunted him:

... in the end understanding came: it would be a novel about artists and the Alhambra of Andalusia would be painted by an Indian woman, standing on top of Malabar hill in Bombay. The two worlds would meet in art. (290, JA)

In Aurora is to be found a confluence of myriad strands of history: Spanish, Moroccan, Portuguese, Cochin, Malabar, Christian and Jew. Aurora Zogoiby becomes a Rabelaisque character hostile to any kind of unipolar existence. At the age of sixteen she falls head over heels in love and marries the Jewish Abraham Zogoiby, a petty employee of her ancestral spice factory, a man eighteen years her senior, breaking important religious and class taboos in the process. As a child when shut up in a room for a week as punishment she fills its walls with wild, luscious frescoes and startles her father with the first display of her genius.

Every inch of the walls and even the ceiling of the room pullulated with figures, human and animal, real and imaginary, drawn in a sweeping black line that trans-

formed itself constantly, that filled here and there into huge blocks of colour, the red of the earth, the purple and vermilion of the sky, the forty shades of green; a line so muscular and free, so teeming, so violent, that Camoens with a proud father's bursting heart found himself saying, 'But it is the great swarm of life itself.' (MLS, 59)

Aurora is a precocious child whose paintings are 'adult' in treatment and content. From her childhood she wars against restrictions and bigotry. Instinctively she is a champion of her bold and feisty mother's decision to take the reins of the family business in her hands when her father is jailed for more than a decade. Her grandmother's blind hatred angers her so much that Aurora never hesitates to accelerate the old woman's death. Every decision in her life is driven by passion and love for heterogeneity rather than reason and calculation. When things start looking bad she asks her son to flee to Spain in an effort to understand the coming together of disparate worlds that forms the core of her vision.

Aurora is an artist who prefers to see the world through the lens of her art. With increasing desperation she tries to veneer the dystopian reality of later day Mumbai with layers of multicultural Moorish Spain, with 'a romantic myth of a plural, hybrid nation.' Coetzee points out how Rushdie makes use of palimpsest and ekphrasis in his paintings:

Aurora's paintings give a clear hint of what Rushdie is up to in his own 'Palimpsestine' project: not over painting India in the sense of blotting it out with a fantasy alternative, but laying an alternative, promised-land texture over it like gauze.

Besides the palimpsest, as pointed out by Coetzee, Rushdie also experiments with ekphrasis, the conduct of narration through the description of imaginary works of art. In Rushdie's hands ekphrasis becomes a handy device for recalling the past and

foreshadowing the future. (Coetzee: 2002, 202)

The fantastical richness of life that eludes Aurora in real life, she seeks to capture in her art:

Often she painted the water-line in such a way as to suggest you were looking at an unfinished painting which had been abandoned, half-covering another. But was it a water-world being painted over a world of air? . . . 'Call it Mooristan,' Aurora told me. ' . . . Place where worlds collide, flow in and out of one another, and washofy away. Place where an airman can get drowno in water, or else grow gills; where a water-creature can get drunk, but also chokeofy, on air. One universe, one dimension, one country, one dream, bumpo'ing into another, or being under or on top of. Call it Palimpstine.' (226 MLS)

The idea of India as palimpsest is encountered in Jawaharlal Nehru's *Discovery of India*:

India with all her infinite charm and variety began to grow upon me more and more, and yet the more I saw of her, the more I realized how very difficult it was for me or for anyone else to grasp the idea she had embodies. It was not her wide spaces that eluded me, or even her diversity, but some depth of soul which I could not fathom, though I had occasional and tantalizing glimpses of it. She was like some ancient palimpsest on which layer upon layer of thought and reverie had been enscribed, and yet no succeeding layer had completely hidden or erased what had been written previously. (Weickgenannt Thiara: 2009, 180)

Significantly, whereas Nehru concentrates on the concealed, lost

and mysterious essence/epicenter of the palimpsest, Rushdie, in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, is more interested in the collision point of contrary worlds. Whereas the former's vision is insightful and penetrating, the latter's vision is confrontational, provoking and dynamic.

Aurora is a daughter who has loved and idolized her mother, the feisty, go-getting Belle, without really getting the benefit of her company. Just as her mother passes on her fieriness to Aurora, in her own eccentric way, Aurora tries to do the same to Moraes by trying to form his worldview and include him in her paintings:

She suckled me, and the first 'Moor' pictures were done while I nestled at her breast: charcoal sketches, water colours, pastels and finally a large work in oils. Aurora and I posed, somewhat blasphemously, as a godless Madonna and child. (MLS, 220)

Moraes' reference to her as 'Godless Madonna' is an indulgent dig at the fact that she has many friends in high positions and there is rumour that Moraes may be an off-spring of her affair with none other than Jawaharlal Nehru before he betrayed her with Lady Mountbatten. The connection between Nehru's secular vision of India and Aurora's multiculturalism is indicated in this manner.

However, when Aurora feels Moraes has betrayed her love she never hesitates to cut him off from her life since idealism is far more important to her than parental love. Aurora is terribly honest about her art and cannot abide any compromise in that quarter. Her anger, her transgressions in life and in art make her a representative of the multi-hued Malabar-hills Bombay of Rushdie's childhood.

Aurora's transgression in art and in life is an outcome of

personal and collective family history: the polyglot artistic richness of Cochin's Jewish-Portuguese-Chinese historical tradition embalmed in the synagogue of Cochin where no two Chinese tiles are the same, Aurora's father's political idealism in the teeth of family opposition, her mother's courageous and reckless attempts to salvage family fortune from the jaws of bankruptcy and her grandfather's love for art and architecture find a rich fruition in Aurora's own artistic and defiant temperament. Like her mother, Aurora too displays a glorious abundance of natural energy and bold defiance.

Far from being a negative quality, in Aurora, transgression in life and in art is a celebration and a paean to the variety and multiplicity of life. When Vasco Miranda paints over some of her self-portraits with paintings of himself dressed as Boabdil the Muslim Spanish emperor who lost Granada to Catholic rulers Ferdinand and Isabella, it could signify two things: one, the weak-kneed male figure attempting but not quite succeeding in his attempt to replace the proud and strong queen; and two, traces of a 'lost' painting lingering beneath a fresh and weaker version, just as traces of a heterogeneous history will endure even after its summary destruction by an fanatical, monocultural history.

Aurora's chief opponent is Raman Mainduck Fielding, the bully-boy politician who plans to transform Bombay to Mumbai and raises the slogan "Mumbai for the Marathis" labeling the likes of Aurora as outsiders and denying their contribution to the history and appeal of the great city.

He [Mainduck] was against unions, in favour of breaking strikes, against working women, in favour of sati, against poverty, and in favour of wealth. He was against 'immigrants' to the city, by which he meant all non-marathi speakers, including those who had been born there, and in favour of its 'natural residents', which included Marathi-

medium types who had just stepped off the bus. (298-299, MLS)

In stark opposition, Aurora's vision has always been that of a glorious and magnificent reconciliation and cohabitation of opposites. Hence Aurora Zogoiby becomes Raman Fielding's designated enemy. Her artistic career is systematically destroyed by a politician who sees her as a threat to his reductionist *Ramrajya* ideology. When Aurora's paintings begin to disappear from museums, Fielding links it with the fall of Babri Masjid and in this way falsifies her contribution to the hybridized life of Bombay:

When such alien artifacts disappear from India's holy soil let no man mourn,' he said, 'if the new nation is to be born, there is much invader-history that has to be erased.' (364, MLS)

Marking out the Zogoibys as invaders Mainduck Fielding falsifies history. Aurora's war against the wily strategist is a war between an artist and a false historiographer. But this is not the only losing war Aurora fights.

Aurora's other adversary is her husband Abraham Zogoiby, who, once besotted by her beauty and boldness later hurts her deeply by engaging in nefarious activities like drug-trade and finally the Bombay blasts and secret manufacture of the H-bomb.

Aurora's third enemy is her one-time friend and flatterer, Vasco Miranda, a painter-plagiarist who is secretly envious of her genius, who seeks her success yet lacks her affirmative, multidimensional vision. He steals her pictures, duplicates her style and achieves financial success by marketing them successfully. But his canvases are vapid and vacuous compared to her rich, palimpsestic, intellect-challenging productions.

If Aurora represents the *joie de vivre* of the Bombay of Rushdie's childhood with its European and Anglo-Indian influences, Abraham, Vasco Miranda and Uma Saraswati stand for ruthless commercialism, criminal activities and lust for fame and lucre, integral elements that undermine the beauty and vibrancy of Bombay and gradually wear it down to a dark, crime-ridden, monoculture.

Whether it is Aurora Zogoiby of *The Moor's Last Sigh* or Boonyi Kaul of *Shalimar the Clown*, dance is foregrounded as a metaphor of contravention.

Once a year, my mother Aurora Zogoiby liked to dance higher than the gods. Once a year, the gods came to Chowpatty Beach to bathe in the filthy sea: fat-bellied idols by the thousands . . . There were in addition, many Dancing Ganeshas, and it was these wiggle-hipped Ganpatis, love-handled and plump of gut, against whom Aurora competed, setting her profane gyrations against the jolly jiving of the much-replicated god. (123 MLS)

Though her dance is appreciated by the crowds as a dance in deference to Ganesh, as is the wont of Hinduism to assimilate refractory elements, the dance is actually an act of defiance and an assertion of her transgressive multicultural self in opposition to the rabid Hinduism that fast encroaches upon her space. Ganesh is seen by Aurora as a totem of the rabid Hinduism that insists that she, scion of an ancient Indian house, is an alien in Indian soil.

In her sixtieth year Aurora crashes to her death while dancing on immersion day. Aurora's accident (in which her unscrupulous husband has a hand) can be interpreted as the fall of multicultural Bombay with its rich Jewish-Christian-Portuguese heritage and the corresponding rise of a monocultural Marathi-

dominated Mumbai.

As a woman, Aurora has always given priority to her emotional and artistic self. Though she dies a betrayed and disillusioned woman, in remarkable ways, Aurora reaches heights of professional and personal fulfillment.

Compared to Aurora Zogoiby, Boonyi Kaul is a character drawn on a smaller scale. Like Aurora, Boonyi, the heroine of *Shalimar the Clown*, attempts to live life on her terms and expresses herself through dance. In Boonyi's case it is the famous *Anarkali* dance in which a humble courtesan throws caution to the winds to give free artistic play to her love for prince Saleem. But whereas Aurora's flamboyant dance is an act of defiance, Boonyi's is an act of seduction.

In Boonyi's transgression Rushdie attempts to find a rewriting of the Ramayana; a reversed text in which Sita rejects her Ram to confront her demons:

The dignity, the moral strength, the intelligence of Sita was beyond doubt and could not so trivially be set aside. Boonyi gave the story a different interpretation. However much Sita's family members sought to protect her, Boonyi thought, the demon king still existed, was hopelessly besotted by her, and would have to be faced sooner or later. . . . It was better to be done with magic lines and to confront your destiny. (SC, 50)

Boonyi is unwilling to be cooped up in the idyllic remoteness of Pachigam. Her American lover provides her with a cosmopolitan exposure that she grabs as opportunity. If Aurora's trajectory corresponds to the degradation of heterogeneous Bombay to exclusive Marathi-Mumbai, Boonyi Kaul's life and times can be

tallied with the rapid militarization and politicization of Kashmir over a period of just one generation.

Boonyi's transgression is linked to female autonomy as celebrated by Nazarebadoor the shepherd-prophetess whose hut the outcast Boonyi finally occupies, and Pumphosh, Boonyi's dead mother whose ghost regularly communicates with her daughter. Much later when Boonyi's half-American daughter Kashmira returns to her mother's village, the *burkha-clad* women of Pachigam recognize in her the spark and boldness of her dead mother. Boonyi's transgression is blown out of proportion by interested parties, but it is in fact not against the laws of nature. If Aurora's transgressive dance is represented as a robust gesture of defiance, Boonyi's sexual escapade is an instinctive act of defiance and a bid to flee the small confines of Pachigam and view the world.

Both Aurora and Boonyi are projected as instinctual, life-affirming entities. Transgression in them is actually a manifestation of the *Will to Live*; a celebration of the choices and options provided by life. They are sexually warm and unafraid of transgression and experimentation in matters of the body. Unlike Aurora, who meets with resistance, Boonyi's youthful intimacy with Shalimar is benevolently supported by their families in spite of religious differences. This kind of tolerance is referred to as *Kasmiriyat* (239, SC), the age-old Kashmiri way of life that promotes fellow-feeling between Hindus and Muslims. The problem lies with Boonyi who experiences a degree of claustrophobia in the parochial confines of her remote village Pachigam and uses the influence of her besotted lover Max Ophuls, the American ambassador to India, as a way out of her isolated village. She voluntarily agrees to become his mistress in lieu of his promise to provide her with educational facilities.

Boonyi has often been seen as the embodiment of Kashmir.

Her healing process is one of the finest passages in the novel where Boonyi is almost unified with the rich and variegated herbs and shrubs of Kashmir.

The snow melted and she went out as far as Khelmarg and the wildflowers were coming out. She picked the bunches of *krats*, which could be eaten as a vegetable and was good for the eyes, and *shahtar*, which produced a sweetly cooling effect which mixed with the whey. . . . On the slopes of the mountain she found the shrub kava *dach*, which helped to purify her blood, and she ate too the fruit and leave of *wanpalak* or goosefoot. The white flowers of the shepherd's purse or *kralamond* were everywhere. She picked it and ate it raw. She gathered *phakazur*, fennel, and daphne, which was *gandalun*. As she ate the blue-flowered won-hand chicory and lay down in fields of maidan-hand dandelion she felt her life and her mind returning. The flowers of Kashmir had saved her. (SC, 229)

Boonyi's murder in the hands of her actor-turned-assassin husband—an act of honour killing which was never part of the old Kashmiriyat culture but is rather an off-shoot of the more heinous, militant, patriarchal culture of new Kashmir—could be interpreted as the murder of old Kashmir in the hands of her savage and combative new patriarchy. However, Boonyi is more of a human peg on which the narrator hangs his tragic narrative of Kashmir's degeneration from a land of religious tolerance and fine, nature-orchestrated, intellectual and artistic living to a dystopia of mutual hatred, suspicion, conspiracy, violence, death and fear.

A female tradition of prescient, occult knowledge is constructed around the persona of Boonyi. Boonyi's self-renewal after her bitter humiliation in the hands of her lover is viewed

in the nature-culture context. Whereas the men succumb to the soul-desiccating influence of culture, women try to retain a fast-fading knowledge of the magical powers of Kashmir's flora and fauna. Women plead in favour of a free spirit:

Pamposh Kaul in her daughter's dreams . . . told her about the unshackled future that shone on the horizon like a promised land she could never enter, the vision of freedom that had eaten away at her all her life and destroyed her inner peace . . . "A woman can make every choice she pleases just because it pleases her, and pleasing a man comes a poor second, a long way behind" . . . (SC, 53)

At the time when Pamposh was alive maybe multiple choices were available to women, but with Boonyi's coming of age circumstances change. The rape of her friend Zoon Misri in the hands of the Gegroo brothers is the first sign. Events snowball after that. The fatwa of burkha against Kashmiri women, the rape of Boonyi's mother-in-law and other women of the village, the gradual submission of the Pachigam women to the hard-core Islamic dictum of wearing burkha; this series of rapid developments reduce the options available to women. Boonyi's final interface with her estranged militant husband Shalimar becomes in this context a clash between nature and culture; a clash in which the former is beheaded by the latter.

In the final count, Aurora Zogoiby and Boonyi Kaul, are women who dream of a crossing over into an ideal world of dreams. While Aurora, by virtue of her genius, succeeds in achieving this reaching out for a certain span of time through her art, Boonyi fails miserably from the outset. Yet both are marked by their refusal to submit to the ugliness of the here and the now. In his celebrated essay *Step Across this Line* Rushdie observes:

We are living, I believe, in a frontier time, one of the great hinge periods in human history, in which great changes are coming about at great speed. On the plus side, the end of the Cold War, the revolution in communications technology, great scientific achievements such as the completion of the human genome project; in the minus column, a new kind of war against new kinds of enemies fighting with terrible new weapons. We will all be judged by how we handle ourselves in this time. What will be the spirit of this frontier? Will we give the enemy the satisfaction of changing ourselves into something like his hate-filled, illiberal mirror-image, or will we, as the guardians of the modern world, as the custodians of freedom and the occupants of the privileged lands of plenty, go on trying to increase freedom and decrease injustice? Will we become the suits of armour our fear makes us put on, or will we continue to be ourselves? The frontier both shapes our character and tests our mettle. I hope we pass the test. (Salman Rushdie: 2003, 442)

Aurora and Boonyi's spouses and paramours fail the test. Abraham, Shalimar and Max, all start out as men with fine possibilities, but along the road, they are caught up in cultural webs of corruption, promiscuity, violence and essentialism. The women on the contrary though torn by disillusion and failure to fulfill their potential succeed in repeatedly renewing themselves emotionally and spiritually and emerge as more stable and mature entities. Transgression does not destroy them; it enhances and enriches their humanity.

## NOTES

1. All textual references from Salman Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh*. London: Vintage, 1995. First published GB: Jonathan Cape, 1995.
2. All textual references from Salman Rushdie, *Shalimar the Clown*. US: Random House, 2005.
3. Salman Rushdie, *Joseph Anton*. London: Vintage, 2013. First published GB: Jonathan Cape, 2012.
4. Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*. First published GB: Granta Books, 1991. London: Vintage, 2010.
5. Salman Rushdie, *Step Across this Line: Collected Short Fiction 1992-2002*. London: Vintage, 2002. First published GB: Jonathan Cape, 2002. In 1491, the last Muslim ruler of Spain Muhammad XII, popularly known as Boabdil, lost Granada to Catholic monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella.
6. Nicole Weickgenannt Thiara, *Salman Rushdie and Indian Historiography: Writing the Nation into Being*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
7. Anna Guttman, *The Nation of India in Contemporary Indian Literature*. NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
8. Manav Ratti, *The Postsecular Imagination: Postcolonialism, Religion and Literature*. NY and London: Routledge, 2013.