

PLACES WITHOUT ROADMAPS:
SIGNIFICANCE OF *PLACE* IN
POSTCOLONIAL DISCOURSE

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In the post-colonial discourse, the simultaneous co-existence of place and language as a means of identity is at two levels; first, it becomes a “presence” in the writer’s mind in creating the mood and guiding the narrative destiny of his fiction; second, it becomes a means of internalizing the self and place for personal satisfaction. As this is true in many writers of the ‘80’s and beyond in the Indian novelists in English (such as Amitav Ghosh in his *Shadow Lines*, where Calcutta and to some extent, like Rushdie’s Bombay, becomes richly internalized symbol), Khushwant Singh’s Delhi (in his *New Delhi*), Shashi Tharoor’s demythicized world of Indraprastha (in his *Great Indian Novel*) and in Upamanyu Chatterjee’s fiction, Bapsi Siddhwa’s Lahore and Bombay, alike, and Rohinton Mistry’s Bombay and Canada (in his) — all become richly enduring “migrant metaphors”. In all these cases, in the post-Rushdie era, writers universalize “*personal*” description of the place, when they internalize their places — their imaginary homelands in their chosen linguistic metaphor. Here, language is the mode of internalizing the “*place*”. As they vivify the place in language and metaphor, irony and apathy, endearment and disgust — finally the *place* “becomes” the poet’s self.

In the case of Rushdie, all his historical/historyless destinations from Calf Island in *Grimus* to Chupland and Gupland are unique moments of “migrant metaphors”, ultimately the writer’s ‘motif’ of displacement is possible in fleeting moments of linguistic dislocation. What is “*place*” in Rushdie? It is nothing but as language “experiences” it. Language stylizes the writer’s self in his identity (in his unconscious level with a multiplicity of lands). Place is a phenomenological conception of the self and his experience is the suitable metaphor. Thus, “*place*” is not a geographical signifier of the writer’s vagabondage in language.

In the case of Salman Rushdie, as in many postcolonial writers, writing

contemporaneously, place is no longer a mere geographical entity as in the past, as in Narayan's Malgudi, Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (however mythicised it may be, with all its *Sthalapurana*). In Rushdie, as in Amitav Ghosh, "places" are nothing but "suggestive" linguistic markers of the writer's imagination, ever so fleeting. Ultimately "place" it is as exists in the writer's imagination. As "shadow lines" are "erased", they evoke "images" of writer's perception. Each "place" is stylized in various ways in the writer's imagination. as, in reality, they need not exist. What are apparent real-life monoliths (as Rushdie's Bombay with its humdrum and ambience, Ghosh's Calcutta with its Sunderbans setting), they are realized as highly personalized emotional spaces of the writers' imagination. Here, language is the medium of such a near poetic evocation. Thus, this paper has three parts: the first part discusses how the sense of "place" (vis-[^]-vis time) becomes the particular need of Rushdie in his fiction; second part discusses his stylistic devices in creating such poetic evocations of places, while the third part discusses how, ultimately, his novels become allegories of many places and times, as his goal is to evoke "imaginary home lands", emotively, unlimited by time and space.

Grimus is an imaginary ideal of scientific Utopia. Rushdie describes Calf Island Is bizarre, linguistic metaphors. He renders it in surrealistic detail. It was called Phoenix because it had risen from the ashes of a great city called Phoenix. Here, Rushdie is further mythicizing what is obviously a myth. It is a small town. Even its temporality is atemporal. Space is highly ethereal, the human "responses" and "consequences" of such a "place" are significant. As the narrative's intended purpose is "to locate" a timeless human consciousness, its consequences are in the realm of the impossible. Here, the "values" of the world are subverted. Here one will live long with an illness of the mind; one will bring grief and suffering to those whom they know. Here, the place is connated thus. There Death is "a blue fluid, blue like the sea, vanished down a monster's throat. Without the language of his ancestors for the archipelagoes of the world," Flapping Eagle drifted to Calf island. In a world of endless Phoenix myth of the Calf Island, Flapping Eagle lives for "a total of seven hundred and seventy-seven years, seven months and seven days". Calf Island is an "island of immortals", who found their longevity though unbearable and yet unwilling to give up. It has the likeness of self and mountain, of mist-isolated island and much-travelled continents".

Here, as according to Virgil Jones, are "analogies of human attributes and behaviour". For Flapping Eagle, "birds kingdom is remarkably suitable for myth makers". It has human parallel, with its own languages, courtship

and female ties. As he describes many birds, “the profusion of bird-gods in Antiquity,” Eagle is a symbol of the Destroyer in the Amerindian mythology. As the Gorfic planet is sometimes called Thera, it is found around the star Nus in the Yawy Klim galaxy of the Gorfic Nirveesu. The Gorfis look like “nothing so much as enormous sightless frogs” and made of rock.

In *Midnight's Children place* (vis-[^]-vis time) acquire even greater depth and purpose, than in *Grimus*. Here, like Time, Space is universalized. If in Rushdie, Time moves from temporal/historical to ahistorical eternity, *place* becomes a universal symbol of human drama. It is Bombay, in particular, it is true — yet it is universal — this drama could be everywhere — an archetype of provenance of human action. Here, in this narrativisation of human self in a holistic moment (of time and place), history may not be a mere background; it may be without any real life importance to the world of Saleem Sinai. For Rushdie, “memory truths” are more important than “literal truths”. According to Ralph J. Crane, the relationship between the nation and self in this narrative is “a metaphor for the relationship between any human being and his world”. Rushdie “chutnifies” history to “re-construct” (as it were) “our” history olfactorily, in deference to the history constructed by the Other. As he views history and place from this end (like all the postcolonial writers and thinkers, like Fanon), he believes that Eurocentric Other is incompatible with our life processes. He reverses ‘Othering’ by Orientalising (in Said’s sense) our history and sense of place. Thus, place, like time, is a product of our sense of legitimacy and “authority”. As we describe our sense of time in our attitude to history, place, too, has its own autonomy and pluralistic purpose. It is not a monolith, as construed by the Empire. Here, by re-employing new spatial designs, Rushdie is debunking all the derogatory metaphors of the Orient as an irredeemable “*place*” of depravity and inadequacy.

Thus, for Rushdie, time and space are not mere ectoplasmic methods to provide an erasable epidermal layer of history and place; nor does it. In any “vital” manner “touch” their lives. From the beginning, there are two histories or time and place realities: one is, Saleem and his birth, and the birth of other *Midnight's Children*. It is interesting to note that, right from their birth (on the midnight of August, 1947 till 1977 March), their lives are sought to be synchronized — though, in reality, it is the narrator’s (could be author’s) sense of history and place in a different mood, tone and purpose, from that of Saleem and *Midnight's Children*. As according to Frederick Jameson, in *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*, two novels of national allegories, there are two histories: one history of the nation and

the other as history as olfactory memory. It may be possible to say, that the author's sense of time and place predetermine Saleem's temporal and spatial contours, as he becomes a living symbol of human self, being "chained to history". This symbolic deliverance of Saleem Sinai from 1947 to 1977 is through the atemporal means of final decimation of his self. Thus, in all these cases, the narrator's sense of history and place have a far reaching significance. For Rushdie, his interest is in imagining near deathless metaphors of time and place. For him, time and place provide poetic spaces for imagining newer places and times. This is his aspiration and continuous 'motifs' in which the lives of Saleem, Grimus and others are possibilities of externalizing such a poetic longing. As thus his goal is strictly a "personal" emotional need, his true sense of time and place are mostly his sensory dreams of any time and any place.

In all these cases, it is ultimately through the innovative use of style that he "describes" himself. Here, style appears similar in their tone, syntax and lexicon. Rushdie stylistically evokes the world of material actuality with the world of fantasy. If one serves a narrative/topical end, the other is, indeed, his personal need. If one uses near referential language, the other uses the highly emotive near pseudo-statements of (I.A. Richards) with the polytonal associations of "suggestions". If the first one helps in rendering the prosaic situation (of historical actuality), the other wins our attention to give us joy.

Stylistically, as Rushdie employs a two-prong mode, a prosaic and poetic mode, ultimately, it is in his poetic rendering of his imaginative, dreaming self of place that acquires maximum significance. In the prosaic mode, language is intentionally factual and unemotional, bordering on near documentary evidence. Facts, not "effects" matter here. Here, Bombay is eked out in unemotional, factual detail. It could be called "landscape" of a typical urban setting:

And fishermen and Catherine of Braganza and Mumbaasevi coconuts rice; Sivaji's stature and Methwold's Estate; a swimming pool in the shape of British India and a two-storey hillock; a centre-parting and a nose from Bergerac; an imperative clock-tower and a little circus ring; (*Midsummer Children*, p.126)

Here, the verbs evoke action of concrete nouns of "swimming pool, clock tower, circus ring". And in another setting, the style is racy:

We headed north, past Breach Candy Hospital and Mahalaxmi Temple, north along Hornby Vellard post Vallabhai Patel Stadium and Haji Ali's island tomb, north of what had once been . . . the island of Bombay. We were heading towards the anonymous mass of tenements and fishing-villages and textile-

plants become in these northern zones . . . (Not at all far from where I sit within view of local trains!)

Here, even as the syntax is long and purposefully convoluted, and lexicon is referential, this description has, at the back of it, a creative voice of the narrator, to make them animate images of places, but not disinterested verbal hoardings.

In contrast, the near lyrical strain pervades in the vivacious use of language. Here, place is vivified in recurrent images:

Midnight's Children! . . . From Kerala, a boy who had the ability of stepping into mirrors and re-emerging through any reflective surface in the land – through lakes and . . . the polished metal bodies of automobiles . . . and a Goanese girl with the gift of multiplying fish . . . and children with powers of transformation: a were wolf from the Nilgiri Hills, and from the great watershed of the Vindhya, a boy who could increase or reduce his size at will, and had already been the cause of wild panic and rumours of the return of Giants . . . From Kashmir, where was a blue-eyed child of whose sex I was never certain . . . Some of us called this child Narada, others Markandaya, . . .

Here, as the language is evocative, lexicon carries with it the colour and landscape of the narrator's imaginative mind: words like, "reflecting surface in the land, the great watershed of Vindhya and the "blue-eyed child" and Narada and Markandaya – all appeal to the timeless sense myth and imagination. In another case, the world of legendary Caliph Haroon al-Rashid is evoked. In a similar way, Saleem Sinai, the self-styled expatriate in his own country, travels in secrecy through by lanes of Bombay, while on another occasion, Rushdie consciously mingles grim realism with an element of colour and splendour. Though this image may not have the ethereal quality of Narada and Markandaya, it is of the same kind:

I have not shown you the factory in day light until now. This is what has remained undescribed: through green-tinged glass windows, my room looks out on to an iron catwalk and then down to the cooking-floor . . . In day light, our saffron-and-green neon goddess does not dance above the factory doors . . . Human flies hang in thick white-troused clusters from the trains (*Midnight's Children*, p. 251).

On another occasion, Rushdie's typical sardonic humour is at a slight angle between reality and fantasy though in fact, it is an aspect of the writer's "personal" judgement: Bombay for him is "a glamorous leech." It is "really a mouth, always hungry and swallowing food and talent from everywhere else in India".

Stylistically, the world of fantasy and reality in conjunction is realized

in a splash of advertisement labels, “Kemp’s corner, past Thomas Kemp and Co, beneath the Air-India rajah’s poster . . . the Kolynos kid, a gleam toothed pixic in a green elfin, chlorophyll hat proclaimed the virtues of Kolynos Toothpaste (MC, pp.181-82) — where the images themselves are inflated by Rushdie’s “thyroid balloon of child with hair already sprouting tuftily on his lip”. The significance of the place also carries with it the political and cultural context. It is a conscious contrast. Bombay and Karachi are like two “sister-ships”. Karachi is “set between the desert and bleaky saline creeks, whose shores were littered with stunted mangroves. (Saleem’s), new city seemed to possess an ugliness which “eclipsed his own city (Bombay)”. At the heart of his Karachi was Ali Aziz’s house, “a place of shadows and yellowed paint.” There in Karachi, “oases shone in the tarmac of Elphinstone street”. “Umbilical Cord” is the holistic metaphor connecting his poetic imagination. It was “implanted in the earth”. It grew out of his poetic self to relate himself to the sub-continental psyche. Though physically drainage drained his inner life, his sense of “connection remained undrained”. He sailed to Karachi by the south-east with his “hypersensitive nose”. Finally, his retreat into India is mythicized in his vegabondage of places. He returned to India like Caliph Haroun - al lashid, “unseen, invisible, anonymous, cloaked through the streets of Baghdad”. He, thus, “flew through the air-lanes of the sub-continent.”

In all these willing dislocation of places – for whatever may be the purpose (identifying oneself with the sub-continent could be one of the purposes), Rushdie, the narrator-protagonist is conscious of the method of his imagination. For him, “matter of fact descriptions of the outre and bizarre” are not in so insignificant as “the stylized versions of the every day . . . (which are) attitudes of mind” form the kerb of his poetic purpose in evoking the spirit and “intended” need. To this extent, all places and even their names do not have any meaning and they are “still more than mere sounds”. The modern men, like Rushdie, are “the victims of the titles”. For example, “Sinai contains Ibu Sina, master magician, Sufi adept; and also sin the moon, the ancient god of Hadhramaut, . . . sin is also the letters as sinuous as a snake . . . Sinai when in Roman script the name of place-of-revelation. (*Midnight’s Children*, pp.364-365).

To this extent, his sense of place is through Ofactory perception. He seeks “nasal freedom” of places. He believes in “the spectrum of fragrances” and “nasal inheritance”. Sunderbans is “the forest of illusions”. The Rann of Kutch is “a chameleon area” and “amphibian terrain, which was land for half the year and sea for the other half.” The boatman Tais words also evoke the same world of “magic realism” of the place, where “Adam baba is just under the water’s skin”.

Stylistically, *Shame* employs more fantastic devices than *Midnight's Children*. Here, unlike in *Midnight's Children*, *place* is realized in surrealistic detail. If in the case of *Midnight's Children*, there is a tantalizing balance between the concrete and the suggestive evocation, here in *Shame*, the syntax and lexicon most obviously tilt towards the realms of the surreal:

In the remote border town of Q, which when seen from the air, resembles nothing so much as an ill-proportioned dumb-bell, there once lived three lovely, and loving sisters. (*Shame*, p.11).

Subversion (linguistic, most particular, though) is the predominant quality here:

Omar Khayyam Shakil was afflicted, from his earliest days, by a sense of inversion, of a world turned upside-down . . . he was living at the edge of the world, so close that he might fall off at any moment (*Shame*, p.21).

There are twin eternities of Omar Khayyam. Even the political identity (leave alone the geographical identity), is deliberately left to be mysterious. According to him, as there are two countries, one real and another fictional, his “story and fictional country exist “at a slight angle to reality”. ‘Q’ is not Quetta. He will “call it Karachi, and it will contain a ‘Defence’. Like Saleem, he is “a transplanted man”, borne across the countries and like all migrants, he also leaves history behind. In a mood of exaggerated dislocation, Rushdie tells us, that “a city is a camp for refugees”. He, like all migrants, “build(s) imaginary countries and try to impose them on the ones that exist”. In a revealing metaphor, he tells us that he is like “the ash of Yggdrasil, the mythical world – tree of Norse legend.” As the ash of Yggdrasil “will fall and darkness will descend, the twilight of the gods” would come, completing “a tree’s dream of death”. Thus, ‘Q’ real or imaginary, is at “a slight angle of reality”.

In a similar way, (though to a lesser extent), Chupland and Gupland of *Haroun and Sea of Stories* are highly stylized, even romanticized *places* of poet’s imagination. With their dystopic purposes, they are not meant to be real at all. They are deliberately subverted projections of the writer’s unconscious desire for freedom. As freedom is denied to the writer’s self, he glorifies the lack of it, in powerful, subverted detail, only to create a world of grotesque in our minds.

Here, the lexicon is meant to be strange and even unusual. Even their semantic or linguistic meanings are unusual. Each word has its autonomy of meaning and significance. It is an unusual language for an unusual experience:

The Moon, Kahani travels so fast . . . that no Earth instruments can detect it; also

its orbits varies by one degree per circuit, so that in three hundred sixty orbits it has overflowed every spot upon the Earth. (*Haroun and Sea of Stories*, p.67).

The land of the Guppy has Water Genie, process too complicated to Explain (PZz CZz) and “Thought Beams and Advanced Technology”. There is a story telling machine. Gup City is imaginatively stationed, both in its astronomical and geological setting, between the Sun Kahani, Earth’s second Moon. The Moon “travels so far that no Earth instruments can detect it.” Its “orbit varies one degree per circuit so that in three hundred any sixty orbits it has overflowed every spot upon the Earth.

Rushdie’s recent venture, *Moor’s Last Sigh* combines unmistakable fact, sensitized by personal detail. Here, it is not fantasy, in any case, but the geographical and historical reality that is internalized, with a sensory delight:

Pepper it was that brought Vasco da Gama’s tall ships across the ocean, from Lisbon’s Tower of Belem to the Molobar Coast; first, to Calicut and later, for its lagoony harbour, to Cochin. English and French sailed in the wake of that first-arrived Portugese, so that in the period called Discovery of India – but how could we be discovered when we were not covered before? (*Moor’s Last Sigh*, p.4)

Here, history and place are mostly in the realms of realism, though, as always with Rushdie, they are personalized tales of a family saga. The description of place in this case is, by and large, similar to near concrete rendering of Bombay in *Midnight’s Children*, though in this case, the lexicon is ‘coloured’ with a little more sensory detail. In any case, here, it is history of place in nearly exact and even indentifiable, though it is delightfully sensory.

Thus, Rushdie achieves his universal concept of place through stylistic means. As for him, “imaginary homelands” are the true places of the human values of tolerance, and catholicity of purpose, he creates at multiple foci, at a tangential angle from reality these “migrant metaphors”. He seeks “alternative realities” of existence in the contemporary nomadic self of the modern man. As these alternative realities create “a new heritage” of man, futuristically, Grimus’s Calf Island at one level, is a futuristic possibility of man’s eternal progress into a newer life of prophesy. This newly evolving universal and eclectic heritage of the modern writers (like Rushdie, who are “translated men”) gains in its evoking people realities, where for Rushdie, as “art is a passion of the mind, imagination works best when it is most free”. In this “cultural and political history” of seeking newer lands of one’s choice and values, his creative attitude defines itself. It is to acquire a liberation of his soul and creative art, uncluttered by the

limitations of a particular place or time. As the pangs of being unrelated to any place themselves cause enough anguish, he, on the whole, is happy in being liberated and eclectic in time and space. It is this fruitful tension of being “displaced” and dispossessed of time and space, yet related to his “sense” of place with its own self-actualising temporal and spatial contours that provides the defining focus of his fictional imagination. As this displacement (or even migration) is rendered through his stylistic imagination, ultimately, it is this essential “sense” of language that creates his “imaginary lands”. By fully exploiting language by various stylistic devices (as subversion, irony and paradox as the mainstay), he views migration as one complete metaphor to describe the metropolitan culture, be it Bombay. ‘Q’ or K. As, for the twentieth century man and writer, every act of progress involves a certain level of mobility and migration, Joyce’s Dublin or Marquez’s Macando, Rushdie’s Bombay and Amitav Ghosh’s Calcutta or Dhaka are all “shadow lines” of the memories of these poet-narrators in their fictions. Though the process of migration for Rushdie’s protagonists is by means of intellectual activity and by conscious choice of priorities, for Rushdie, the writer, a vibrant linguistic medium creates the medium of imagination (for immense “*personal*” satisfaction) for weaving wonderful (or even dark in *shame*) newer lands. If migration is the universal need for his protagonists, imagining newer lands by deconstructing language and by endlessly rich semantic variety of connotation and denotation, creates immense joy for Rushdie, the author-narrator in all his narratives, as it also fulfils his creative need. As according to D.E. Maxwell, these postcolonial writers aim to “subdue the experience to the language the exotic life to the imported tongue.”³ Thus, in the case of these postcolonial writers, it is the language which creates space. Fundamentally, their language (acquired/nativised english) is the main medium of their ‘*place*’. For this purpose, writers like Rushdie, by using their own variety of english/English, unlimited by any circumstance or setting—be it fantasy/surrealistic, create their new ‘*place*’ as their medium makes it possible. To this extent, what is ‘*place*’ in Rushdie, is nothing but as his english/English describes it! By doing so, postcolonial writers like Rushdie, not only are “writing back to the centre”, but even going further, as in the case of Soyinka, each “expression” by them creates its own “centre”, thus dismantling the idea of ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’ in the present level of debate of post-colonial theory. Rushdie’s Calf Island or Bombay is as autonomous and significant in defining our culture, as Dickens’s and Virginia Woolf’s London or Jane Austen’s Hampshire. By their essential leap, these postcolonial writers are “universal”, as their places are without

road maps or their works are not political allegories. Their language facilitates their universal entourage. It is the autonomy of the self through autonomy of language that is the achievement of Rushdie, the man and the writer.

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