

# Representation of Migrant Experience in Salman Rushdie's Imaginary Homelands

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**Abstract:** *Imaginary Homeland, a homeland that is framed out of writer's imagination. Generally homeland is perceived as a comfort zone that offers love, warmth, security. People who spent their life in homeland believe that their identity is inextricably connected to this land. But then there are millions around the world who are displaced from their homelands owing to various reasons. Being a British-Indian writer, Rushdie attempts to figure out the migrant experience in a unique way. He start off with a personal note and then takes readers to the complexities of memory, nature of reality and identity crisis. In addition to this he addresses the prominent question in the academia concerning the role of British Indian writer as far as Indian context is concerned.*

**Key Words:** *memory, imagination, nature of reality, identity.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION :

*Imaginary Homelands* is a scholarly essay by the British-Indian writer Salman Rushdie. It is taken from the collection of essays entitled *Imaginary Homelands* (1991). The essay presents the migrant experience of the writer Salman Rushdie. The pain of being an outsider dominates the entire essay. As far as Rushdie is concerned, homeland always have a particular and profound meaning for him even though he is settled in a faraway land. The migrant writer is haunted by a sense of loss and identity crisis that cannot be fixed. He considers his writings as a means to reconnect with his homeland and retrieve the things which he had lost. Rushdie relies on his memory and imagination to reconstruct the homeland, where he belonged once. Being a writer he is so much interested in the political matters concerning the nation. He proposes Inclusive attitude as a solution to the morbid symptoms of the period. He appears to be a defender of secularism, In fact his opinions and views of life are highly conditioned by the concept of secularism

## 2. ANALYSIS :

An 'old photograph' introduced at the beginning of the essay serves as a metaphor for writer's past. The metaphor reminds the poet of his ancestral home, which is a three storeyed house with triangular roof structure. The Instant memory makes him invert the opening sentence of L.P Hartley's novel *The Go-Between*, 'the past is a foreign country' as he feels his present that is foreign and the past inevitably becomes his home (Rushdie, 9).

Rushdie spent a portion of life in India before he settled in Britain, but then he carries with him the much cherished lived experience in India. Though life changed to a great extent, the writer wants himself to be called as the writer of 'Big City' (Bombay). In spite of being displaced, he attempts to reconnect with his land and expects the past to be restored in complete sense. But he soon understands that it cannot be reclaimed in full sense. Certain things in life cannot be restored if it is lost. The sense of loss, one of the dilemmas of a migrant writer is well articulated in the essay. Along with this idea, essay points out the possible threats that the writer has to face when he/she attempts to reconnect with the homeland. Rushdie then writes about his role as a British- Indian writer. In the process of writing he cannot completely rely on memory as it is partial and fragmentary in nature. Then he makes use of imagination to deal with the 'gaps'. He never claims his writings to be a cent percent true account on India instead presents it as a version among millions of possible versions. The writer employs the metaphor of 'broken mirror' to refer the fragmented nature of memory (Rushdie, 10).

Essay proposes an argument, 'broken mirror is as valuable as unflawed ones'. Writer recalls his life in Bombay during 1960's and of course he is not gifted with total recall. Then comes to a conclusion that the shards of memory are 'Remains' that are capable of constructing the past. He exemplifies it with the discipline of archaeology, where broken parts are accessed to discover and reconstruct the past. The writer affirms that the feeling of 'loss' experienced at intense form enables him to concretely speak on the migrant experience with universal significance and appeal (Rushdie, 12).

Subsequent section of the essay deals with perception and construction of meaning. Rushdie openly contradicts John Fowles concept of perception that states "Whole sight: or all the rest is desolation". According to Rushdie we human beings are 'wounded creatures' capable of fractured perception. Meaning or how we make sense of the world is both subjective and vulnerable, accordingly truth is provisional (Rushdie, 12) Rushdie tries to deconstruct the notion of equating writers with knowledge and wisdom and he claims that writers are ordinary beings and their works are primarily based on how they make sense of the world. Modernism and its principles have a profound influence on his opinions. Writer then brings in the metaphor of 'screen' to explain the change in perspectives, in the course of time. Screen stands for reality, farther you are from the screen, clearer the picture will be. If a person remains so close to reality, he/she fails to have a perspective and it takes time to develop a deep perspective on incidents. He substantiates it with a personal example, his take on the historical event, Indian emergency changed in the course of time (Rushdie, 13).

Writer shares an experience in a conference on modern writing that discussed the possibilities of literature. Literature is generally perceived as a way of describing the world. Howard Brenton made a suggestion, that is, why should it be limited to mere descriptions when it opens up endless opportunities. Rushdie stressed the point that one cannot discard politics from descriptions, when it is particular about India (Rushdie, 13). These descriptions are biased and hence subjective, citing this reason, it cannot be taken as truth. Rushdie attempts to uncover the politics behind 'State Reality'. It refers to a particular situation where State takes reality in to its own hands and alters it so as to fit its purpose. Writers can effectively deal with such situations by creatively presenting 'Alternative Reality', which in turn challenges State Reality. Re-describing the world is suggested to be the necessary step that can bring about a radical change (Rushdie, 14).

Rushdie comments on the purpose of writers, they are expected to push their limits so as to deal with the challenges and if a writer wants to write about something, he/she has to do it without fear or favour. There might be risk that can endanger their life, but then they have to get along with it and work faithfully (Rushdie, 15). Writer then opens up about the Hybrid identity of diasporic writers. The identity that they own is a shared one. Therefore they cannot be excluded from being a part of their homeland and the host nation (Rushdie, 15)

'Indian English writers' have become a scattered concept. It refers to writers from different nations but biologically and historically they all belong to India. Writer makes a prediction that in future, much of the Indian English works will come from foreign addresses. As far as Indian English writers are concerned, they have to develop a favourable attitude towards English. Only then they will be able to articulate the ideas effectively in this foreign language. Even if a writer is well versed in English, at times he/she will experience ambiguity while using this language. It is primarily because of linguistic and cultural conflict. In order to override the issue, the writer has to master the language, in Rushdie's opinion (Rushdie, 17).

The next section of the essay explores the question, "what it means to be an Indian outside India? In that context, a person becomes more conscious of his skin colour, social class and also the English accent. It is not always a desirable thing as there are chances of ending up victims of racial prejudice (Rushdie 17) Apart from that non-natives are subjected to deal with internal and external struggles (linguistic and cultural). All these can be taken as existential dilemmas addressed by migrants in general. There is no one to one solution that can be offered in such instances. Writers are blessed ones and they have their own way of dealing with the problems. By the act of writing they can carve out a world, free from chaos and crisis (Rushdie 18).

Rushdie then underlines the need for cultivating an inclusive attitude. He goes against the general trend of associating a person to a particular place. He named it as a ghetto mentality. This attitude confines a person to the pre-set boundaries and never allows the person to experience the world beyond (Rushdie, 19). Writer insists that everybody is part of the wider community, where boundaries are insignificant. The Writer's mentality remains universal and he writes without keeping in mind a target group (readers). In that way the writer reaches out to the wider community of readers irrespective of class, race and language. In addition to that a writer has to be eclectic in the selection of theme, setting

and form. Rushdie then highlights the importance of Migration. Cultural transplantation, the direct product of migration, resulted in the creation of great literature. Rushdie makes a thought provoking remark at the end of the essay, that is, even if a writer's identity is connected to a particular nation, he/she has a global influence (Rushdie, 20).

### **3. CONCLUSION:**

The essay *Imaginary Homelands* shares a cluster of novel ideas centering the writer's migrant experience. The loss, and identity crisis experienced by the writer as a result of displacement is well reflected in the work. Writer employs a rational approach to the subject matter and at times the essay takes a philosophical diversion so as to present new ideas. Migration is presented as a positive aspect of human civilization that actually prepared a fertile ground for the creation of some of the best works of literature. The author highlights the importance of hybrid identity and also the need for inculcating an inclusive attitude. Altogether the work can be considered as a source of inspiration and empowerment.

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