THE SUBVERSIVE SUB-TEXT OF SPICES IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *THE MOOR'S LAST SIGH*

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ABSTRACT

The pursuit of wealth and power has long been a bridge that unites East and West. In his 1995 novel, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Salman Rushdie employs two factors or commodities, to deconstruct political and cultural history in East-West relations. On the political plane, he lays bare the East-West power axis based on the age-old spice trade, while on the cultural plane, he unveils the more recent bilateral interchange based upon the arts and media. A Rushdie hallmark is the choice of a polyvalent concept which gives much mileage, and here we see how Rushdie mixes a hot sauce out of spices and wealth, history and politics, race and identity, art and love.

1. INTRODUCTORY

Salman Rushdie's recent writing reveals that he has not given up his continued exploration of the human desire for broad unity and a diversified wholeness. Commentators have insisted that Rushdie's work is "intensely political" (González 41), and this is so in at least two ways. It is political in that his major novels contain the political history of the Indian sub-continent from time immemorial, taking "political" to include the essential religious and mythical basis. It is political in a second sense in that it criticises, both directly and through subversion, the political regimes that are responsible for human division and disorder. Rushdie declared that *The Satanic Verses* was about the protagonists' "search for wholeness" (Rushdie 393-414). In his subsequent book of stories, *East, West* (1994), Rushdie questioned the strict dichotomy of

East and West, bringing the two together in the third and final section (Section One: "East", Section Two: "West", Section Three: "East, West"). Rushdie's reviewer, Homi Bhabha, had noted that here he explores those "most contentious fault-lines of cultural debate —metropolis/periphery, atavism/modernity, fundamentalism/ multiculturalism" (Bhabha 1994).

In his longer work, the 1995 novel *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Rushdie continues his exploration of the putative East/West divide. He shows how divides can have bridges, and how the centre shifts. In English literature, the West is central, but as Rushdie writes himself into the English canon, he shows us other centres and other peripheries. His human and political longings for unity in diversity are expressed in his creation, in this novel, of four utopias or Edens, the first three in India, which is central for the protagonists, and the last in Spain, a sort of marginalised exile. Spain's past as the crucible of Western and Eastern culture obviously interested Rushdie, especially the medieval Granadan kingdom of the three religions and the Renaissance meeting-place of the Old and the New Worlds, the "fabulous multiple culture of ancient al-Andalus" (*The Moor's Last Sigh* 398). Like true Edens, they are flawed, they have a serpent lurking at their heart, and in his novel, Rushdie explores the nature of the serpent, of atavistic evil.

His novel ends as the narrating and creating hero, the Moor (who has been locked up in a tower, reminiscent of his own author), has just written of "that most profound of our needs, [to] our need for flowing together, for putting an end to frontiers, for the dropping of the boundaries of the self" (433). The fulfillment of this desire has been and is prevented by the serpent, which is not prominent as a symbol, but is ever-present as evil. An easy answer to the identification of the source of this evil is to be found in perversity, both natural and human. It is particularly prevalent in fanaticism about owning a monopoly of the truth, and is incorporated by Rushdie into the iconic aggressive features of the game of chess: "[T]hat lozenged, particoloured Moor whose tragedy —the tragedy of multiplicity destroyed by singularity, the defeat of Many by One—" (408). An insignificant character towards the end of the novel (an anti-Nazi German, who is perversely called "the Nazi" just because he is German) says: "How to forgive the world for its beauty, which merely disguises its ugliness; for its gentleness, which merely cloaks its cruelty; for its illusion of continuing, seamlessly, as the night follows the day, so to speak —whereas in reality life is a series of brutal ruptures, falling upon our defenceless heads like theblows of a woodman's axe?" (391)

The protagonist, the Moor, is a miraculous reincarnation and also descendent of Boabdil, the last of the Nasrid kings in Granada, who went down in history, as Rushdie reminds us (315), as being chided by his (battle-axe) mother for weeping like a woman for what he could not defend as a man. The Moor ends his life in exile in Granada, by the Alhambra, unlike his forebear, who died as a mercenary, having been exiled from Granada. The Moor is in exile from Bombay, the centre of his life, at a time when, after the violence erupting upon the assassination of Indira Gandhi, India seemed set yet again, upon a course of internecine strife:

> Bombay was central, had been so from the moment of its creation: the bastard child of a Portuguese-English wedding, and yet the most Indian of Indian cities. In Bombay all Indias met and merged. [...] Bombay was central; all rivers flowed into its human sea. It was an ocean of stories; we were all its narrators, and everybody talked at once. [...] Bombay was central. In Bombay, as the old,

> founding myth of the nation faded, the new god-and-mammon India was being born. The wealth of the country flowed through its exchanges, its ports. Those who hated India, those who sought to ruin it, would need to ruin Bombay: that was one explanation for what happened. [...]
> ... And if Bombay was central [...] (350-1)

What happened in Bombay, the end of an era, is compared to the end of the Nasrid dynasty in Granada (its seriousness albeit subverted by the intertextual references like *O Calcutta!* and airline advertising):

> Bombay was central; had always been. Just as the fanatical "Catholic Kings" had beseiged Granada and awaited the Alhambra's fall, so now barbarism was standing at our gates. O Bombay! *Prima in India! Gateway to India! Star of the East with her face to the West!* Like Granada —al-Gharnatah of the Arabs— you were the glory of your time. But a darker time came upon you, and just as Boabdil, the last Nasrid Sultan, was too weak to defend his great treasure, so we, too, were proved wanting. (372)

The Moor diagnoses an internal evil, and in his condemnation of fanaticism of any kind, Rushdie shows that evil is born from the desire for wealth and for power over others:

> For the barbarians were not only at our gates but within our skins. [...] The explosions were our own evil —no need to look for foreign explanations, though there was and is evil beyond our frontiers as well as within. We have chopped away our own legs, we engineered our own fall. And now we can only weep, at the last, for what we were too enfeebled, too corrupt, too little, too contemptible to defend. (372-3)

The pursuit of wealth and power has long been a bridge that unites East and West. In this novel, which lays bare many things, there are two major factors —commodities even— which Rushdie employs to deconstruct political and cultural history. On the political plane, he lays bare the East-West power axis based on the age-old spice trade, and shows that while spices have undergone certain vicissitudes, the axis remains in place. On the cultural plane, he unveils, albeit a more recent, but equally bilateral interchange, based upon art, broadly seen as art works and the cinema and television. A Rushdie hallmark is the choice of a polyvalent concept which gives much mileage. We could say that in this novel, he gets much mileage out of spices, and we will see in turn, how he mixes a hot sauce from spices and all of the following: wealth, history and politics, race and identity, the arts and love.

2. SPICES

Spices mean different things to East and West. In the East, they are enjoyed for themselves, as part of the Oriental identity. At one point in the story, the Moor (who is half Jewish, on his father's side) becomes a cook, learning from Ezekiel, the family's

"ageless cook". From the very beginning, Rushdie exploits that metaphorical meaning of "cook up", or create, that is, applied to life itself, or history, art or identity:

> "Baba sahib, sit only and we will cook up the happy future. We will mash its spices and peel its garlic cloves, we will count out its cardamoms and chop its ginger, we will heat up the ghee of the future and fry its masala to release its flavour. [...] We will cook the past and present also, and from it tomorrow will come." So I learned to cook Meat Cutlass (spicy minced lamb inside a potato patty) and Chicken Country Captain; to me the secrets of prawn padda, ticklegummy, dhope and ding-ding were revealed. I became a master of balchow and learned to spin a mean kaju ball. I learned the art of Ezekiel's "Cochin special", a mouth-wateringly piquant red banana jam. And as I journeyed through the cook's copybooks, deeper and deeper into that private cosmos of papaya and cinnamon and spice, my spirits did indeed pick up; not least because I felt that Ezekiel had succeeded in joining me, after a long interruption, to the story of my past. (273)

The fragmented protagonist finds satisfaction in a sense of history and this is given to him through food and spices. In the West, however, the huge demand for spices was not explained by their desirability in themselves, but in their power to transform bad into good. From the Middle Ages, they were used to transform bad meat into good, edible meat. Their desirability remained high until the advent of canning and freezing. But as Rushdie shows, the trade route opened up by spices was kept open even as other valuable commodities came to replace spices.

2.1 Spices And Wealth

The Moor begins his story with reference to his lineage: "Moraes Zogoiby, called 'Moor', for most of my life the only male heir to the spice-trade-'n'-big-business crores of the da Gama-Zogoiby dynasty of Cochin" (5). His mother's family, the da Gamas, are said to trace their lineage to Vasco da Gama, who blazed the pepper trail that opened up the spice route. In an early passage, we see the versatility of the concept of pepper, as it points to the source of wealth and power, to history and to language games:

> I repeat: the pepper, if you please; for if it had not been for peppercorns, then what is ending now in East and West might never have begun. Pepper it was that brought Vasco da Gama's tall ships across the ocean, from Lisbon's Tower of Belém to the Malabar 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?— we were "not so much subcontinent as sub-condiment", as my distinguished mother had it. "From the beginning, what the world wanted from bloody mother India was daylight-clear," she'd say. "They came for the hot stuff, just like any man calling on a tart." (4-5)

From pepper, the business grew to include nuts: cashews, pistachios, and also coffee beans "and the mighty tea leaf itself", but pepper was the "coveted Black

Gold of Malabar" (6). Like their ancestor Vasco da Gama, who sought out "whatever was spicy and hot and made money" (59), the da Gamas are like alchemists, they practise "the age-old da Gama art of turning spice and nuts into gold" (17). With the Moor's father, Abraham Zogoiby, the Jews of Cochin enter the story, as his mother Aurora da Gama, heiress to the family fortune, falls in love with her Jewish duty-manager, possibly (in one version), descended from the Muslim Boabdil. As Abraham's mother dreams of "Jewish cashews and areca-nuts and jack-fruit trees [...] Jewish oilseed rape [...] Jewish cardamoms [...] the basis of the community's prosperity" (71), she considers the da Gamas as Johnny-come-latelies and bitter rivals: "(And what did Muslims and Jews fight over in the *cinquecento*? —What else? The pepper trade)" (73). The meeting of Aurora and Abraham the "Jewish Muslim" comes about because she notices that a pepper shipment has not gone off because the ships are retained in Cochin harbour on account of the outbreak of war in 1939. From here, we see the versatility of spices, how they metamorphose into other forms of currency, and how they unite the historical, mythical and purely fictional.

In one mythical version of his history, the Moor was told that the Jewish line in Cochin was founded by an exiled Jewess who had been Boabdil's mistress. She fled to India, taking with her Boabdil's emerald crown, and gave birth to a male child. The crown was hidden for centuries, and was lately found in Abraham's mother's "treasure chest." So Boabdil "*El-zogoybi*", "the Misfortunate", unwittingly bequeaths his blood, his cursed name and his emeralds to his descendants. Abraham obtains the emeralds from his mother in a *Rumplestiltskin* (111) or Abraham-Isaac arrangement, in exchange for his firstborn child. The pepper/straw-into-gold idea mixes with the Old Testament, with *Treasure Island* and even Shakespeare, as the mother is frustrated like Shylock (112). These emeralds are used to bribe ships' captains and other necessary officials after several spice-laden ships have gone to the bottom of the sea. The attempt is to "corner the British market as compensation for loss of German income" (108), and as, much later in the novel, the mad villain Vasco Miranda was to define democracy on the night of India's independence :"one man one bribe" (167), corruption was rife the world over. As a two-edged sword, it is suggested that corruption is the only answer to fanaticism.

The spices/gold having temporarily metamorphosed into emeralds, they now re-metamorphose into all kinds of commodities, given the vulnerability of spices: "The family business diversified triumphantly in a hundred and one directions, as the treasure-mountains grew from mere Gama-Ghats into Zogoiby-Himalayas" (107). A serious sub-text to this is that the Jewish-Muslim-Christian diversified union can only be to the good, while at the same time, any rapid enrichment smacks of corruption. Perhaps sleaze is the answer to the Middle East's troubles. Abraham Zogoiby builds up a "huge corporate entity, the 'Siodi Corp' from C.O.D. or Cashondeliveri, a decaying financial empire of Hindu grandees he had bought out" (240). His son, the Moor, speculates upon the new diversification of the spice trade:

> Corrupt global-scale banking schemes, stockmarket fixing at the super-epic Mogambo level, multi-billion-dollar arms deals, nuclear technology conspiracies involving stolen computers and Maldivian Mata Haris, export of antiquities including the symbol of the nation itself, the four-headed Lion of Sarnath ... (250-1)

As Moor is forced into working for his father, he finds the spices have metamorphosed yet again, this time into "rather more lucrative white powders" (332), known officially as "Baby Softo powder" (251), so the spice route has become the "talcum powder route" (333) or drugs route. Moor survives drugs and armament trafficking and money laundering, but draws the line at contributing to the build-up of "large-scale nuclear weaponry" for the Muslims (335). As Abraham's empire begins to fall apart, he is arrested, and he uses the spice trade as a front, ironically going back to the origins: "To make bail, the title-deeds to the original spice-fields of the da Gama family had to be given in surety" (361). As the end comes for Abraham, and Bombay goes up in smoke, Rushdie paints a "Towering Inferno", as in the film, with the sky-rise empire raining down not only water, but spices, and especially pepper:

> Peppercorns, whole cumin, cinnamon sticks, cardamom mingled with the imported flora and birdlife, dancing rat-a-tat on the roads and side-walks like perfumed hail. [...] Fenugreek and nigella, coriander seeds and asafoetida fell upon Bombay; but black pepper most of all, the Black Gold of Malabar [...] (375)

2.2 Spices, History And Politics

The concept "history" is never innocent in the work of Rushdie, the trained historian. His work has introduced us to a subaltern historiography of India and has foregrounded the problematization of historiography. History, in all its senses —important events, majority views, minority views, subjective and objective views, the political, the individual— comes under Rushdie's scrutiny in his novels. The history of India, indeed, of the West's relationship with India, is tied up with commodities like spices. To illustrate his ideas and to offer the reader great feats of story-telling, Rushdie incorporates views of history into the story of four generations of an Indian family, taking us from pre-Independence days down to the present. Glimpses of their forebears also take us back to the great discoveries of Vasco da Gama.

Momentous events are conveyed through their relation to the spice trade. The outbreak of the Second World War sees a temporary halt through the German menace to shipping. On the eveof Independence, Vasco Miranda holds out no hope for "blankety blank Pandit Nehru and his blankety blank protection-of-minorities Congress watch-wallahs" (166), and recommends that the family get on their spice boats and leave the country before it eats them up (167).

For six years after his banishment by his parents, Moor works for his father's enemy, the fanatical Hindu Raman Fielding, "Mainduck", a hybrid name from cricket and English literature. His new work is the perpetration of violence and terror: "O *baby*. Violence today is *hot*. It is what people *want*" (306). With his fellow-worker, the Tin-man, a Wizard-of-Oz-cum-Terminator figure, he uses his hammer-fist to put down Communist and other activism. The details of a putting down of a revolt of female workers, where "the freshly gathered hot chillies stood around the houses in low hills of colour and spice", cannot be told, as it is "such hot stuff" (308). Rushdie intermingles personal histories of fictional characters reaping "a rich harvest" with reports of true momentous events like the Sikh massacre at the Golden Temple and the assassination of Mrs Gandhi:

> And events on a greater stage also played their part in the bloody game of consequences that our history has a way of becoming. A golden temple harboured armed men, and was attacked, and the armed men were slain; and the consequence was, armed men murdered the Prime Minister; and the consequence was, mobs, armed and unarmed, roamed the capital and murdered innocent persons who had nothing in common with any of the armed men except a turban; and the consequence was, that men like Fielding who spoke of the need to tame the country's minorities, to subject one and all to the tough-loving rule of Ram, gained a certain momentum, a certain extra strength. (309)

What Aruna Srivastava wrote of *Midnight's Children* and its views of history is also true of *The Moor's Last Sigh*:

> *Midnight's Children* points to the fact that history is a method of fictionalizing experience, as is the telling of lives —biography and autobiography. For Saleem, irreality and truth are not quantifiable and not ascertainable. They are constructs of imagination and experience, and of language. For him, the truth of a story lies in its telling and is a reflection of the idiosyncratic process of selecting events from memory [...] (Srivastava 67)

The imposition of an imperialist view of India's history, inevitably repressing the Indians' own versions of their history has made "the Empire write back" as Rushdie playfully puts it. Rushdie and other post-colonial writers offer their versions, revealing how history is a construct, made up of many contributing factors. In the same article, Aruna Srivastava indicates how Rushdie sympathises with Mahatma Gandhi's transcendental view of history which is called "inner history" (Srivastava 68). Gandhi believed truth transcended history and eluded the mere chronicler of quantifiable time of dates and events. He added myths and mythologies to the realm of conventional history to aim at a truer and more complex version of historical movements. Internecine strife between the different religions and factions dividing Indias's "three hundred million people" (39) is encapsulated in the legendary internal strife seen in the history of the da Gama family. Forever tongue-in-cheek, Rushdie begins an early chapter: "What started with perfume ended with a very big stink indeed ..." (36). Carmen da Gama, née Lobo, Moor's great aunt, sends her family to the Spice Mountains, described as a fruitful paradise of rice-paddies, carpets of green and red capsicums, cashew and areca-nut orchards, cardamom and cumin, coffee and tea plantations, only to raze it to the ground:

> The unmistakable odour of burning spices, cumin coriander turmeric, red-pepper-black-pepper, red-chilli- green-chilli, a little garlic, a little ginger, some sticks of cinnamon. It was as if some mountain giant were preparing, in a monstrous pan, the largest, hottest dish of curry ever cooked. (38)

Even when the Communists infiltrate, Rushdie jokes: "with a garnish of Red Sauce" (39). In an uneasy truce between the two brothers, Carmen's husband Aires da Gama and Camoens da Gama, Moor's grandfather, spices are used yet again, this time like sand-bags: "She had sackfuls of spices piled high along her newly established frontier [...]" (42)

As India sinks into conflagration after Mrs Gandhi's assassination, this violent spice-related background is ever present. Rushdie achieves the union of the mythical, the factual, and the partial by creating a palimpsestic text. He refers explicitly to the synchronic and the diachronic, of the historical event also being its steady accumulation of factors, through the idea of layers of time or civilization. He has the Hindu Fielding say "This true nation is what we must reclaim from beneath the layers of alien empires" (299). Raman Fielding, the fanaticist, is violently against colonial power in India, but he is "intricate", he will defend "the culture of Indian Islam that lay palimpsest-fashion over the face of Mother India" (299). Religions, civilizations, even time itself, lie superimposed, revealing glimpses of the former self.

Moor's father Abraham Zogoiby finds "age had painted a palimpsest-image over the memory of the man" (241). He has become the big boss of the strongest mafia in Bombay. His spice-trade is just a front, a cover, for his other, illicit dealings. As Moor talks of the "Over World" (317), the top of his father's high-rise luxury tower, the centre of his empire, he also has had personal experience of the Underworld, or Hell (317), Bombay's prison. The palimpsest-image recurs in the novel in relation to art works, another wealth-related, identity-related commodity.

2.3 Spices, Race And Identity

In his article "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", Stuart Hall (Hall 1993), while speaking of Caribbean identity and uniqueness, articulates the general problems associated with attempts to search for, define or depict identities. He says that cultural identity is a matter of becoming as well as of being:

> It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous "play" of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in mere "recovery" of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (Hall 394)

The creation of Moor in Rushdie's novel is an excellent example of a writer attempting to lay bare the complexities of cultural identity as theorised by Hall. As Rushdie writes from within otherness, he shows how identity is constructed through non-factual factors such as memory, fantasy, narrative and myth. Moor has no unproblematic, transcendental "law of origin", but recovers with difficulty, and not much pride, a past which grounds him (!) in spice. He is positioned by the East-West axis of the spice trade, as we have seen. Then he goes on to position himself, through choices available to him or situations forced upon him, within the narratives of the past. Moor's story gives him an identity, just as Martin Luther's ninety-nine theses pinned to the church door at Wittenberg gave him identity, and Scheherazade's tales night after night gave her a place in mythical history. Moor is forced by Vasco Miranda to recount the "sinful saga" like Scheherazade under menace of death (421), and

when he escapes, he goes round the Andalusian and Alhambra woods pinning the pages of his story (*the* story of the novel) to the trees (3 & 6).

Moor can trace his history to fixed points of departure: Vasco da Gama's historically recorded travels eastwards; fantasy narratives of Boabdil's Jewish mistress escaping to India and the more historical diaspora of the Jews. But the points of arrival are in cultural flux, so the search for steady points of reference by which to make critical decisions in life is very difficult. Kinship and ethnicity function as identity markers, but there too, the ground is not solid. Kinship in the spice trade has given Moor roots: "(Great family trees from little 'corns': it is appropriate, is it not, that my personal story, the story of the creation of Moraes Zogoiby, should have its origins in a delayed pepper shipment?)" (68) His ethnicity, his alterity through the colour black is thus also associated with spices in the sense of *black* pepper, though as his mother said: "we have red chillis in our veins" (5). There is no denying Moor's black skin: "my South Indian dark skin (*so* unattractive to society matchmakers!)" (162), but he ardently believes race is only skin deep, and if only he could be peeled like certain spices, even flayed alive, a basic sameness or Oneness would be found underneath: "the naked unity of the flesh" (414). Then he would be no more black than the Anglican priest Oliver D'Aeth, who through a photophobic allergy peels all over (92), and also dreams of being flayed and finding "the oneness of mankind" (95). The matriarch Epifania, Moor's great grandmother was allergic to "the sources of her family fortune" (9), and Moor's great aunt Carmen had dreamed the same dream in her misery of "unbeauty" when rejected by her homosexual husband (47).

Thus flesh is also history and identity, and Rushdie continues the idea begun with the Pakistanis in *Shame*: "All migrants leave their pasts behind, he writes; it is the fate of migrants to be stripped of history." (*Shame* 63). Unity is a false and impossible dream. The "Moor-figure", an invention, loses his "previous metaphorical rôle as a unifier of opposites, a standard-bearer of pluralism [...] a new imagining of the idea of the hybrid" (303). He stands for many things; he is also Othello (225), involved in a reversed murder attempt by his white lover Uma. But as he pieces together his fragmented self, he finds nothing but abjection in hybridity. Being neither a Catholic nor a Jew, his parents having turned their backs on their religion, postmodern word-play is made with "cashew nuts": "I was both, and nothing: a jewholic —anonymous, a cathjew nut, a stewpot, a mongrel cut. I was— what's the word these days? —*atomised*. Yessir, a real Bombay mix." (104) Moor is a doubly hybrid character, not only racially, but in terms of literature, he is at once Boabdil himself and Othello.

As Paul Gilroy says:

> Multiple meanings have grouped around the central symbol of racial alterity —the colour black— and it is difficult to anticipate the outcome of the political struggle between the different tendencies they represent —ethnic absolutism on the one hand and a utopian democratic populism on the other. (Gilroy 416)

Rushdie rejects the former of these two ideas, especially through Moor, a symbol of nothing at all, a symbol of polyvalence created through the hybridity in Bombay stemming from the spice trade. Rushdie explores the second idea, that of multi-racial utopias, but as we said before, all the utopias are flawed. *The Moor's Last Sigh* covers most of the twentieth century:

> At the dawn of the century she came on Great-Grandfather Francisco's arm to Cabral Island, the first of my story's four sequestered, serpented, Edenic-infernal private universes. (My mother's Malabar Hill salon was the second; my father's sky-garden, the third; and Vasco Miranda's bizarre redoubt, his "Little Alhambra" in Benengeli, Spain, was, is, and will in this telling become, my last. (15)

The paradise of Cabral Island is divided into East and West, according to the division between the son who favours Home Rule for India and the one who does not, both of whom end up in prison. Rushdie has a not yet famous Le Corbusier come and build two "follies" or garden houses, one in each style. It was Belle (Isabella Souza), wife of one of the brothers, who played a Queen Isabella of Spain role in presiding over a house divided by spice bags (41). The second Eden, founded after the war in 1945, is a large bungalow on the slopes of Malabar Hill, Bombay. This Edenic-infernal private universe is more inferno than Eden. It is the place of Moor's birth and childhood. Here, over a period of forty years, his mother Aurora produced her paintings and held court in her art salon. She takes on a painter who is infatuated with her and later becomes a traitor, turning into Moor's would-be executioner as in *Alice in Wonderland*. He can create a "spiced-up re-hash of the European surrealists" (148), and creates a "Paradise" bedroom of Disney characters (150). Jawaharlal Nehru (who ends up in the novel as a stuffed dog dragged from pillar to post) is made to visit this Eden. He has to recite a poem from *Alice in Wonderland*, "The Walrus and the Carpenter", about eating children. Moor describes the begetting and consuming of her own children by their mother:

> She had four of us. Ina, Minnie, Mynah, Moor; a four-course meal with magic properties, because no matter how often and how heartily she tucked in, the food never seemed to run out. For four decades, she ate her fill. (126)

Like the turn-taking game their names allude to as well as the Disney characters, they are each eliminated. When she dies, or is killed by her own husband, as we later learn, in turn, the sea eats her: "A thin, salivating tide washed over her body, as the black jaws went to work" (126) By the time of her death, all the children had left or been thrown out of the "paradise". The first daughter, Ina, dies of cancer: "The lymphoma developed quite suddenly, and gobbled up her body like a beggar at a feast." (216). The second daughter, Minnie, becomes a nun, Sister Inamorata, "the wearer of the roughest and itchiest undergarments in the Order, which she had sewn for herself out of old jute sacks stinking of cardamoms and tea" (238-9). The third daughter, Mynah, an activist working to denounce her father's corruption is ultimately murdered by him while investigating maltreatment of the female workforce in a chemical factory. She dies of chemical poisoning, "a shortage of breath", which ties in with Moor-Boabdil's sighs and breathing problems, with their intertextual word-play:

> I am what breathes [...] *suspiro ergo sum*. I sigh, therefore I am. The Latin as usual tells the truth: *suspirare=sub*, below, + *spirare*, verb, to breathe. (53)

Moor himself is thrown out of paradise on account of a woman, his chameleon-lover Uma. His mother had warned him about her falseness:

> That little fisherwoman has her hook in you and like a stupid fish you think she only wants to play. Soon you will be out of water and she will fryofy you in ghee with ginger-garlic, mirch-masala, cumin seed, and maybe some potato chips on the side. (246)

He is rescued from the Under World of Bombay's prison by his father, who introduces him to the third Eden, his Bombay high-rise paradise. As he moves between this and the headquarters of his father's enemy, Raman Fielding, Moor is in a Wizard of Oz world with the violent Tin-man. In terms of his own identity, he is still in an Alice in Wonderland world, as, from his very conception, he has been characterised or marked by a peculiar disability. He is a freak of nature, because like Alice who eats the mushroom and grows into a giantess, he is growing at an accelerated rate. He is television's "Incredible Hulk" (188), or the grown-up man in the film with the mind of a child. He grows too fast, like the city of Bombay itself (161). He seeks his identity in his genealogy, and Moor's contribution to this has been hurried up. Thus his youth and early adulthood in this third Eden are marred by the fact that he looks as old as his father. His life-span is coming to a rapid end, as is his story. In this, he is like Saleem Sinai of *Midnight's Children*, whose bodily decay is correlated with the progress of his written novel. With both protagonists, when they finish writing, the process of decay will be complete.

Aruna Srivastava reminds us of the parallels between Foucault's thinking on history and the examples Rushdie invents in his novels:

> [...] Foucault opposes conventional history to the search for genealogy, or the analysis of descent, which he also shows to be a very disquieting alternative, for "it disturbs what was previously considered immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself" (147). (Srivastava 70)

Although descent attempts to attach itself to a body, the body is not a unity, but the site of a disassociated self, often in perpetual disintegration, as in the cases of Saleem Sinai and Moor. Left-handed because of a mutilated right hand, Moor was always "imperfect" in Eden. Identity is therefore sought by him outside his individual self and in his genealogy, with the articulation of the body and history, the result being a patchwork figure. In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Rushdie gives us the twentieth century speeded up into the reading space of the time it takes each reader to read the novel. Moor's body reflects this speeding up process, and as Foucault said, the body is imprinted by history and the process of history destroys the body (Srivastava 70).

The fourth paradise-hell sees the end of the process for Moor. In a way, he has come full circle, as in returning to the Iberian Peninsula, he returns to the point of origin of Vasco da Gama's spice route. The would-be executioner calls himself Vasco too, and he has an even shakier identity: "he was his own invention" (157), having fled from Goa when the Indian army put an end to Portuguese colonial rule. Moor comes full circle in a literary sense too, as the village is called Benengeli, reminiscent of the Moor who narrated *Don Quixote*, the father of novels.

2.4 SPICES AND THE ARTS: PAINTING, THE CINEMA, TELEVISION AND ADVERTISING

In this last paradise-hell, the theme of art comes to the fore. Abraham's vigilant and successful administration of Aurora's money in the spice trade and its later ramifications, had enabled her to dedicate herself to painting. Through her painting she became famous, but Vasco Miranda, who lacked her genius, became an "airport painter" and through the commercialisation of his art became even more rich and famous. At the end, he has had two paintings of Aurora's stolen from Bombay, both on the same subject of *The Moor's Last Sigh* (415), and both painted over another painting underneath. In the first, Aurora paints over Vasco's portrait of her, which was not to Abraham's liking, and in the second, Aurora has painted over a picture she has done of her husband as the clue to the secret identity of her future murderer. Thus in this, Rushdie continues the idea of palimpsest art (416), like the layered art of the old masters. Aurora even calls the "hybrid fortress" (227) in Benengeli "Palimpstine" and "Mooristan" (235), and the invisible varnish between the two superimposed pictures divides "two worlds" (427). The layered approach is therefore applied to the recovery of the past and of personal history, also to the creation of new art, eternally responding agonistically to that which has gone before. The spice empire can be glimpsed at all times. Moor's fellow captive in this final paradise-prison is a Japanese art expert, who is being forced by Miranda to chip away at Aurora's painting to lay bare the commissioned portrait he painted of her. As Moor looks on, it occurs to him that by this chipping away and the X-ray investigation, Vasco may be trying to discover the secrets of Aurora's artistic genius. In this novel, Rushdie, in postmodern fashion, meditates not only upon how history and cultural identity are created, but also upon how art is created, be it painting or writing.

It has already been shown that in some of Rushdie's novels there lies beneath the surface text a sub-text significant only to those in the know. Cricket, India's most popular sport, is one such sub-text, and it frequently puts in an appearance in this novel, for example, in the figure of Raman Fielding and in the "mean kaju ball" Moor spins. But the cinema is the most obvious of these sub-texts. Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge have commented on this sub-text in *The Satanic Verses* in their scrutiny of the seminal work *The Empire Writes Back (EWB)* (Ashcroft et al 1989):

> Thus if one were to read the song of Gibreel in Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* through *EWB*, its effect within the context is all that would really matter to the reader. The fact that beneath the song is an entire text of Bombay cinema which, to the bilingual reader, would recall, more specifically, Raj Kapoor's *Shree 420* (1955) is knowledge that *EWB* must either ignore or relegate [...] This supplementarity, however, even in terms of *EWB*'s own design is counter-discursive in a radically different fashion. The supplement, the anecdotal invasion or culture-specific power, is, however, a form of intervention that questions, as supplements always do, the very adequacy of a theory of the centre and its periphery. At the very moment that the narrative is invaded by an intertext from a different centre —the centre and centrality of the Bombay commercial cinema, India's pre-eminent contemporary cultural form— the focus shifts from a fixed centre and its satellite system to a multiplicity of centres in the culture itself. (Mishra & Hodge 280)

Mishra and Hodge emphasize in their article the counter-discursive nature of post-colonial literary practice as opposed to a more central, homologous one. As in *The Satanic Verses*, *The Moor's Last Sigh* makes both explicit and implicit reference

to the cinema and Rushdie shows that in a way, the cinema functions like the articulations of the spice trade, only in reverse. The source product is found in the West, with Hollywood being the model. We saw how Aurora was so fascinated by Disney characters that she named her children after them, and had Vasco paint a magic, ever-changing Disneyland children's bedroom for them. Disney's *Alice in Wonderland* has given Rushdie not only the accelerated growth of Moor, but also the pepper that makes the Duchess's baby cry. Moor turns into an "Incredible Hulk", bursting out of his clothes, his father's empire comes crashing down like "The Towering Inferno", and at the critical moment in which Vasco Miranda is about to kill Moor, he just bursts open and blood pours out, as the Ice Queen's splinter reaches his heart. *The Empire Writes Back* is also in fact a brain child of Rushdie, a cinematic image for discussing postcolonial writing. In this novel, the sinister sub-plot is Moor's father's involvement in the creation of Star Wars type armaments aimed at the destruction of the world. So even the narrative depends upon the cinema, not just special effects. Rushdie shows how the media mediate events and phenomena for us. Thus Disney's version of *Alice* is the only one most people know. The media reporting of Mrs Gandhi's death is what the vast majority believe. With spices, the home market also consumes, and with the cinema, Bombay has made itself a new centre in its own right. The West kept on importing spices, but Bombay created the home-grown product: "Bollywood".

The Indian film industry is now the world's largest, and according to Tim McGirk, it is fifty per cent controlled by organised crime. McGirk has reported from Bangalore in collaboration with Meenakshi Garguly in Bombay for an article recently appeared in *Time* magazine (McGirk 1997). They show how the top mafia dons of Bollywood, like Abraham and Raman Fielding in Rushdie's novel, find the film industry "a safe way to launder loot gained from extorsion and smuggling gold and drugs" (McGirk 46). The gangsters look upon film not as a work of art, but as yet another commodity, and in order to win wider audiences, they want more action and vulgarity. They force film directors to make dialogue and action more risqué, and in a country that is supposed to worship women, on screen women are now subjected to abuse as the criminals impose their violent tastes to the point of repulsion. McGirk and Garguly report that two years ago, an uncooperative starlet was forced to dance and sing in public, and this reminds one of Moor's mother Aurora dancing, albeit voluntarily, but in protest and in a public spectacle, and eventually dancing to her death. Even if Aurora is not a sly hint at the pressurising of the film mafia, two other factors are certainly true. Bombay is still reeling from the Hindu-Muslim clashes of 1992 and 1993 that left humdreds dead, and Rushdie has portrayed these events in the final showdown between Abraham and Raman Fielding. The Wild West, mythologised by the American cinema is a subtext here. These events have been made into a film by a leading non-mafioso film director, and his life has been threatened if he goes ahead for fear of stirring up more unrest. He has to take these threats seriously, since a few years ago, another Indian director had his house bombed for breaking the screen taboo of showing a Muslim woman marrying a Hindu. Rushdie himself suffers the consequence of breaking taboos, but he does it in the name of non-violence. The second factor is that much as Moor says that violence is "hot" and the mafia are all for it, the customers who previously were all in favour are beginning to reject it, and McGirk reports that the biggest hits over the last three years have been not violent films but romance and family dramas, which is what *The Moor's Last Sigh* purports to be, albeit in postmodern guise.

Before he became famous as a novelist, Rushdie worked in advertising. His interest in this field has not waned. He shows himself equally master of the four hundred-page saga as of the thirty-second, impact-making commercial. Towards the end of his life in Bombay, Moor discovers he has a rival, an adopted brother. Needless to say, he is identified, in a wonderful thumb-nail sketch, through spices:

> Since then the boy had been raised in a pink skyscraper at Breach Candy by two elderly Goan Christian ladies who had grown wealthy on the success of their popular range of condiments, Braganza Pickles. He had taken the name of Braganza in the old ladies' honour, and, after they passed away, had taken over the factory itself. Soon afterwards, as smartly turned out and slick-styled at seventeen as many executives twice his age, he had come to Siodicorp in search of expansion capital, hoping to put the old ladies' legendary pickles and chutneys into the world market under the snappier brand name of *Brag's*. On the modernised packaging which he brought in to show Abraham's people was the slogan, *Plenty to Brag about*. (342)

The young fellow's "sloganising touch": "*Not Ram but RAM*" (343) is Rushdie linguistic brilliance. Language itself, "modern lingo" (343), stories themselves, can all be "hot like spices". Moor compares Bombay to Cochin and shows how it is central in exciting event, incredible story:

> No matter what pepper 'n' spices goings-on there might have been or have been in Cochin, this great cosmopolis of ours was and is the Central Junction of all such tamashas, and the hottest tales, the juciest-bitchiest yarns [...] are the ones walking our streets. In Bombay you lived crushed in this crazy world [...] your own story has to shove its way through the throngs. Which was fine by Aurora Zogoiby; never one for a quiet life, she sucked in the city's hot stenches, lapped up its burning sauces, she gobbled its dishes up whole. (128)

2.5 SPICE 'N' SEX

Part of the meaning of hot and spicy comes from a sexual dimension. From the beginning of the novel, passionate love is related to spices: "Pepper love: that's how I think of it. Abraham and Aurora fell in pepper love, up there on the Malabar Gold" (90). Not puppy love (Aurora was just fifteen), but *pepper* love, and Moor's parents had first made love high up on the pepper sacks in the warehouse. Aurora said that from then on: "that stink of grinding spices, my *dears*, it makes him paw the ground" (90). When Aurora closed her bedroom door to Abraham and refused to bear a child until her mother-in-law had died, because of the Rumplestiltskin-cum-Abraham and Isaac pact, Abraham began to look elsewhere for sex. At about the same time, he began to diversify his business, moving from spices into prostitution. When the merchandise happened to be virgin, it was known as "Extra Hot Chilli Peppers: Green" (183).

Passionate love, "the thing that made you sweat beads of coriander juice and breathe hot-chilli flames", as Moor calls it (221), is one of the factors involved in the flawed nature of the different Edens. The other factors involve beauty, its opposite, "unbeauty", and revenge. Carmen Lobo, deserted nightly by her homosexual husband, is jealous of her beautiful sister-in-law belle, at once Beauty of Beauty and the Beast and Queen Isabella of Spain. Carmen burns for revenge "let [...] *the spices*

wither in the sun [...] she howled *revenge*" (47). Moor is thrown out of *Elephanta*, the second Eden, because of the treachery of Uma. He had been torn between his mother and her in a sort of Oedipal struggle taken literally. Moor meditates on the "*amours fous*" (289) within his genealogy and is disappointed that the ideal of love in all its senses, individual, bilateral, national, supranational, appears impossible:

> 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; of love as democracy, as the victory of the no-man-is-an-island, two's company Many over the clean, mean apartheiding Ones. (289)

In the third Eden, there is treachery too, as Abraham apparently murders his wife Aurora after many years of frustration, thus avenging her infidelities. Vasco Miranda's evil designs in the fourth Eden also have passion as a motive. His frustrated love for Aurora and jealousy of her husband make him seek revenge on her son, but not before the whole spicy, bloody saga has been written down by him.

3. CONCLUSIONS

In choosing the format of the family history for his novel, Rushdie has given us an action-packed story, with excitement from beginning to end. There is no slow build-up to a climax here, this wealthy family gets up to tricks which propel them from drama to drama. Larger-than-life, they have talents and opportunities within each generation that poorer families would not see in all their generations put together. They are central to their world, but also, through the source of their wealth, the spice trade, they conduct a life that moves along the axis uniting East and West. Through this axis, which manifestly explores the external world of the physical, the exchange of colourful, strong-smelling spices for Western money or other goods like film culture, Rushdie is able to suggest other submerged axes uniting East and West, also, for example, chess moving westwards and cricket eastwards. Through the image of the palimpsest, he suggests there are layers of time, of experience, of truths and lies to every aspect of our lives, be it our personal lives, our history, or commerce or art. Indian nationalists located Indian subjectivity in the spiritual domain of culture, as opposed to Western materialism. One could say that Rushdie embodies Western materialism and fortune-seeking in the original commodity of spices. Then he explores the inner truths of East-West relations. He suggests that there are always two ways of looking at the problem, as expressed by the patriarch Francisco and his rebellious wife and son:

> (Francisco): "The nation's wealth is being shipped off, madam, at home our people starve, but British Tommy is utilising our wheat, rice, jute and coconut products."
> (Epifania): "What are we but Empire's children? British have given us everything, isn't it? —Civilisation, law, order, too much. Even your spices that stink up the house they buy out of their generosity, putting clothes on backs and food on children's plates." (18)

Rushdie questions both sides, even the Indian belief in cultural superiority, embodied in the ideal of the Indian woman. The ideal of the Western-educated woman upholding traditional Indian values is seen in Aurora and her dance of protest, but she is also a mother who eats her own children.

Rushdie uses postmodern metafictive techniques to subvert not only the "myth" of the colonisers' view, but also the myths created by post-colonial writers themselves. India's political struggle is verbalised by Rushdie on an East-West axis in order for it to escape being marginalised. He subverts everything, from "Mother India" to deconstruction itself: "*Imperso-Nation and Dis/Semi/Nation: Dialogics of Eclecticism and Interrogations of Authenticity in A.Z.*" (329). But his dream of a multicoloured, spicy, hybrid Eden, described in the novel by Camoens, the brother named after the Portuguese poet, remains just a dream for a dying beautiful woman:

> [T]he *dawning of a new world, Belle, a free country, Belle, above religion because secular, above class because socialist, above caste because enlightened, above hatred because loving, above vengeance because forgiving, above tribe because unifying, above language because many-tongued, above colour because multi-coloured, above poverty because victorious over it, above ignorance because literate, above stupiditiy because brilliant, freedom, Belle, the freedom express, soon soon we will stand upon that platform and cheer the coming of the train*, and while he told her his dreams she would fall asleep and be visited by spectres of desolation and war. (51)

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