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CONTENTS

Viewpoints from California - *Jonah Raskin*
Walt Whitman & T. S. Eliot: A Personal Engagement / 7
The U.S. Supreme Court: A Primer / 10

Reconstructing and Demythologizing America's Story:
An Interview with Professor Kermit Roosevelt III on
The Nation That Never Was
Robin Lindley / 13

Not Writing in the Mother Tongue
Miho Kinnas / 25

Krishna Baldev Vaid's Hindi *Ibārat* and
My Malayalam *Pāṭhaṁ*
K. Narayana Chandran / 31

South Asia as a Literary Category
Anisur Rahman / 42

Blended Learning in Educational Technology:
Challenges and Opportunities – India's Perspective
Shanker Ashish Dutt / 47

Melody of the Blues and the American Racial Dilemma:
August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*
Nibir K. Ghosh / 54

The Cracked Mirror: An Examination of
A Streetcar Named Desire by Tennessee Williams
Shernavaz Buhariwala / 67

Re-telling (her) Stories: Sorties, Texts and
Contexts from Northeast India
Sukalpa Bhattacharjee / 75

R. K. Narayan's *The Dark Room*:
A Story of Lost Opportunities
Yashu Rai / 89

Ecology, Spirituality and Sankaradeva
Nityananda Pattanayak / 96

Decolonising the Novel: A Study of Wilson Harris'
The Palace of the Peacock
Melissa Helen / 103

Arundhati Roy's *Azadi* and My India
Pallavi Sharma Goyal / 110

Dalit Feminism and Meena Kandasamy's Writings
Ruchi Singh / 117

Debt, an Eternal Curse in Kota Neelima's
Shoes of the Dead
Vikram Singh & *Reshma Devi* / 125

Single Indian Women as the Other in Eunice de Souza's Novels
Dangerlok and *Dev & Simran*
Barsha Sahoo / 129

The Ontological Perspective of "Self" in Rushdie's
The Enchantress of Florence
Rajeev Kumar & *Sovan Chakraborty* / 136

Women and War: Redefining Historical Discourse in
Svetlana Alexievich's *The Unwomaly Face of War*
Amandeep Kaur / 143

Modes of Representation in Salman Rushdie's
The Moor's Last Sigh
Paramba Dadhich / 151

The Final Confession (Short Story)
Sin Keong Tong / 157

Announcements / 160

THE ONTOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF "SELF" IN RUSHDIE'S *THE ENCHANTRESS OF FLORENCE*

Rajeev Kumar & Sovan Chakraborty

The paper chooses for its theme two major questions which occupy the protagonist Mughal king Akbar's conscious deliberations in the novel *The Enchantress of Florence* by author Salman Rushdie. These questions are made a point of departure for analyzing the ontological premise over which the discussions of "self" are normally built. First, the paper deals with Akbar's idea of whether it is proper to address himself as "We" or "I". This question ends in non-resolution, which is taken as an evidence for the possible error in the assumption of the argument. The second concern is his yearning for the possibility of a better world where barbarian victory by force and war can be supplanted by the accommodation and refinement of multiple discourses. The experiment for accommodating multiple discourses in a city by the protagonist king is viewed as a practice of a cosmopolitan ideal. The subsequent disillusionment with such wishes is explicated in terms of the ontological-existential nature of the "self." The paper approaches above problems with Heidegger's idea of *dasein* and its "inauthenticity".

Introduction

The Enchantress of Florence is a 2008 novel by Salman Rushdie. The narrative of the novel opens with a European traveller, variously named as Sir Uccello, Mogor dell'Amore and Niccolò Vespucci, an alleged Florentine Mughal, visiting the city of Fatehpur Sikri to tell the great Mughal king Akbar an unusual story of genetic lineage he was tasked to tell for claiming kinship with the Mughals. Akbar, by this time, entering his forties, and having settled the matters of administration to his accomplished courtiers, is attending largely to the philosophical questions. "The country was at peace at last, but the king's spirit was never calm . . . his mind wrestled with philosophical and linguistic conundrums as much as military ones" (Rushdie 28).

One major question which troubles protagonist Akbar is the way he chooses to address himself. For him the proper way to address himself is the first person plural "we" instead of first person singular "I". The discreetness shown by him is not a grammatical one, neither a matter of cultural significance, but rather related to the position of power that he, as a king, has secured for himself. The "we" is more suitable and hence should be reserved for a king, whereas "I" is proper for the commoner, but the use of "we" by the common people precludes him from reaching any satisfying conclusion. The next concern that we see in the text is Akbar's wish for "a world in which he could forsake the

gloating satisfactions of conquest for the gentler yet more taxing joys of discourse. Did such a world exist? By what road could it be reached" (Rushdie 33)? With the ambition of forging an ideal inclusive society, Akbar, the grand Mughal king, at the peak of his power, establishes a city named Fatehpur Sikri, literally meaning city of victory. It is when the king was having such aspirations that the foreigner Mogor dell'Amore enters his court and offers his story of kinship with the Mughals through a long forgotten Mughal princess Qara Koz and three friends – Antonino Argalia, Niccolò "il Machia," and Ago Vespucci, from Florentine history. The history of Florence offers to Akbar the advantage of comparing his world and its contradictions with that of the far-away world of Florence, and it disillusions him about the possibility of a better world.

The two major concerns, discussed above: the nature of self as "I" or "We", and the way different worlds are alike, are the ironies or paradoxes against which Akbar succumbs, and surrenders. The paper proposes that sometimes when answer eludes us or fails to satisfy, the inadequacy may not be in the answers, but in the question itself. Can the question just mentioned above be questionable in the first instance? By a questionable question we mean a question which is based on wrong premise. If the question is based on wrong assumptions, the whole endeavour, however laborious and painstaking, will go awry. Can we suppose that a question is not a neutral thing, i.e. one question cannot be applied to all things, but is guided by the nature of the entity about which the question is raised. At the risk of obviousness we may see for example that a mathematical kind of question/answer/wisdom should not be applicable to human problems unless the nature of the mathematical entity and human entity is ensured to be commensurate. This simple attentiveness mandates us to take care of ontological perspective while analyzing the concerns of Akbar just mentioned. The paper aims to show that the conclusions which Akbar reaches to are a case of ontological perversion. His conclusions are the repercussions of the unscrupulousness that is characteristic of everyday way of reasoning and interpreting which do not differentiate between logic concerning human and non-human entities.

These laid-out concerns are important for the cosmopolitan discourse. Regarding "cosmopolitanism," Kleingeld and Brown argue that "all human beings, regardless of their political affiliation, do (or at least can) belong to a single community," but its critics, "construe it as a mask for the imposition of 'Western' values on the 'East' and 'South', or as an instrument serving the political and financial interests of the sole remaining super-power" (Fine, 20). Rashmila Maiti in her paper "Cosmopolitanism in Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence*" talks of cosmopolitan ethics with regard to different characters as to who is a true cosmopolitan and who uses it for personal benefits. Whereas her study dwells in cultural aspect, the present paper proposes the existential issues with the protagonist's cosmopolitanism.

The Question of Self: I/We

> Akbar, had never referred to himself as "I,"... . . . when he said "we," he naturally and truly meant himself as an incarnation of all his subjects, of all his cities and lands and rivers and mountains and lakes, as well as all the animals and plants and trees within his frontiers, . . . in addition, he meant himself as the apogee of his people's past and present, and the engine of their future" (Rushdie 28-29).

This is the notion that the protagonist Akbar carries within himself about himself. Being on the zenith of power and speculative in temperament, he may be right in making such assertion but this is based on a flawed ontological premise which sees "self" as something substantial and can be augmented and accumulated and hence take "we" to be more suitable for the world-encompassing stature that he assumes for himself. This kind of idea of "self" as things "present at hand" (Heidegger Being 48) is conducive to voicing the language of power, because power will definitely choose visibility and associate with them, and what could be more visible than the physical things – the frontier, the people, voices, another dead monarch's souls as a reification of their essence and so on. But man or "life of a person" is ontologically constituted at two levels – one level is the level of "occurrence" and the other is the level of "existence", and hence a care and distinction should be delicately observed while dealing with a cosmopolitan question. "The way of being of objects, understood as isolated, determinate, substances . . .[is called] 'occurrentness'" (Dreyfus 61). "Occurrentness" is simplified term for presence-at-hand, which we have further simplified to simply "occurrence." With regard to humans, the level of "occurrence" is the level of biologically functioning body, upon which "existence" as a possibility becomes possible. Thus "Occurrence" may be prior and act as an indispensable basis but it is by no means superior to "existence," rather it is "existence" and not "subject" or "substantiality," which is the essence of man (Heidegger Being 255).

But when "self" is understood as a thing, thing-like attribute is bound to follow in the ponderings. It is insightful to note that the idea of sum (addition) is only possible when we are holding to an idea of things. This is manifested in claiming "we" in place of "I" and is expressive for accumulation of victories, masses and lands. When Akbar says "we," the whole universe within his dominion asserts its presence simultaneously with the monosyllabic echo. Compared with this massive "we", the thought of "I" seems so weak, fickle, fragile, timid, uncertain and alone and hence "I" for Akbar is a "disturbing possibility" (Rushdie 28). This is to be kept in mind that both sense of "self"- "I and We", here are conceived on thingly basis, and that's why "I" proposes itself here as a possibility of inferior and impoverished "we". Now the amateurish philosopher king shifts the same focus upon his subjects, "this

"we" was what it meant to be a king—but commoners . . . no doubt occasionally thought of themselves as plural, too. Were they wrong? Or (O traitorous thought!) was he" (29)? The king briefly hits upon the idea of "self" as existence when he reasons out that "perhaps this idea of self-as-community was what it meant to be a being in the world, any being" but quickly he misses the point when he concludes that, "they saw themselves, perhaps, as plural entities made up of themselves plus their children, mothers, aunts, employers, co-worshippers, fellow workers, clans, and friends" (29). What the king misses is the phenomenal content of the self. This missing is promoted by assuming that the "self" is first pre-given as some inner pristine core which is subsequently added on by the roles and acquisition that one gathers, whereas from Heidegger's fundamental ontological perspective, it is the "disclosedness" of the world as "states-of-mind" and "understanding" which is the basis for what it means to being human (*dasein*). What is meant by "self as community" in the above quotation is that "self" is like a container which accommodates many things, persons, allegiance and so on in the "plus" relation and hence can be regarded as to be formed as community. This notion of "self" (we) to be "many as one" is just the inverted image of "one among many" which Akbar calls as being (one) among the world.

This notion anticipates that if the many selves can somehow be removed one by one as the Upanishad's prescription of *neti-neti*, a real self, if there is one, can be found. But this anticipation is purely logical, a mathematical subtraction with no phenomenal support. Other paradox is that suppose such a "self" is lying there as a core and observable there but then who is still the observer which is observing. To mount this error, one may be led to some uncritical and mystical explanations or pushing it in to spiritual obscurities. This is the point which is potentially risky and any orthodox system can exploit it with bizarre seductiveness. What we observe here is that a wrong characterization of the nature of "self" based upon the "categorical" ontology, an ontology suitable for things (Heidegger Being 79), leads us to further arbitrariness. On the converse, if the paradigm of "self" is understood with its phenomenal support of "being-in-the-world," the difficulties may seem superfluous. Simplifying Heidegger in this concern, the "self" exists in the "disclosedness" of the world and "comports" towards that world according to a basic "for-the-sake-of-which" – a way of being which our being itself has anticipated and is a recurring ever-present issue- out of this anticipation of "for-the-sake-of – which, we have come to be what we are. This conception obviates the question of "I/We" in the manner disturbing to the character Akbar in the novel. In this existential framework, the binary of "I" and "we" becomes simply a "mineness" which is associated with the "disclosedness" of the world, and this "disclosedness," this sense of existing "mineness" is beyond any quantification. The speculative king's trouble appears to him of true nature but on closer inspection comes out to be methodical error, a mistake of paradigm.

Exoticism as Myth and the Alikeness of the Worlds

Besides the king's ruminations over the idea of his "self' and those of the commoners, and weighing between "I" and "We" which we have analyzed through its ontological premise, there is another deep concern in Akbar's mind. "He longed for a different world, a world in which he could find exactly that man who was his equal . . . with whom he could speak freely, teaching and learning . . . a world in which he could forsake the gloating satisfactions of conquest for the gentler yet more taxing joys of discourse. Did such a world exist? By what road could it be reached?" (Rushdie 33)

After meeting Mogor dell'Amore, and learning through his stories the life and vicissitude of Florence, Akbar's hope for a better world sinks with the observation that, "the curse of the human race is not that we are so different from one another, but that we are so alike" (Rushdie 256). The above quotation is first used by Mogor when he learns about the fate of the artist Dashwanth while painting the irresistible beauty of dead Mughal princess Qara Köz, which is similar to the Florentine artist Filipipi when painting the first enchantress of Florence Simonetta. The second time the quotation is recalled by Akbar, while reflecting upon a range of questions, especially the secular or religious sanctions of a ruling authority.

> He thought of the faraway dukes in the foreigner's tale . . . they ascribed man's humanity to God . . . though they dispensed with the need for such a sanction in the lower matter of power . . . [mere ruler of Tuscany] how much they thought of themselves. He was the ruler of the frontierless universe and he saw more clearly than they. No, he corrected himself . . . *we are so alike* (Rushdie 256).

Akbar's aspiration for a better world and the consequent disheartening with the plunging of such hope suggests some key points. First is that the world is taken here as not as physical outer place which one can subsequently enter. Second his approach of putting worlds (here Florence and Mughal India) side by side can bring no improvement in the idea of world because it already presupposes what world is.

> If an ordering principle is genuine, it has its own content as a thing [Sachgehalt), which is never to be found by means of such ordering, but is already presupposed in it. So if one is to put various pictures of the world in order, one must have an explicit idea of the world as such. And if the 'world' itself is something constitutive for Dasein, one must have an insight into Dasein's basic structures in order to treat the world-phenomenon conceptually. (Heidegger 77)

Following Heidegger, human's existence as "being-in-the-world" suggests that all the time we are constituted as a projected possibility ("understanding") of our cultures and the way things matter to us (*befindlichkeit*), and this mode is dominantly and persistently determined by the average way of doing things

("inauthenticity"). Heidegger suggests that in the first instance and for the most part, we exist as inauthentic *dasein*. This is the human condition which Akbar asserts unwittingly. And the alikeness is accepted as curse because no stride out of it is visible to Akbar, which is to say that "inauthenticity" will always and everywhere remain a basic and most adamant challenge. Here the alikeness refers to the human existential condition and not the different modification of possibilities within the range of one's world. In this perspective what at first appears exotic appears to be myth and a mere matter of paraphernalia. Bruce Kapferer and Dimitrios propose in their eponymous essay "Against Exoticism" that "the exotic, in its countless connotations, stirs our imagination. Marvelous and mysterious, dangerous, deceptive, or corrupt, the exotic is an inherently relational term that presupposes an awareness of Otherness" (10). In this context Akbar's acknowledgement appears to challenge the notion of "exoticism" and emphasizes it to be a myth. The "exotic" as the "other", compares on the surface level of visible aspects of culture and architecture, and on the invisible though perceptible level of cultural mode of thinking. What *The Enchantress of the Florence* puts forward through its protagonist Akbar is that beneath the thin veneer of differences we are the same – a basic and simple precept of cosmopolitanism. What Akbar has in mind is the similarity at the level of our world views – in the lower matter of power and the higher matter of humanity.

Ontologically this can be seen with clarity through the notion of "occurrence" and "existence." What the king proposes is that humans are alike at the level of "existence" which resonates with Heidegger's idea that the essence of man is "existence.". The visible aspects of cultural elements may become enticing or glaring, attracting or assaulting, and thereby a major criteria for otherness is led by the confusion of a categorical and existential ontology. The tendency of an amateurish thinking is to reason out everything including humans in terms of how one understands things and is led to create categories in which the humans are also placed. This application of thingly mode of thinking on to the problems of humans has remained a habitual mistake and is a dominant myth. The objects of myth in Barthes' Mythologies are the environmental things around us, those in Levi Strauss are primarily stories, rituals and totems, but the present paper invokes the generalizing of human problems in "occurrent" mode to be the persistent object of myth, a myth which has become more urgent in the contemporary situation.

When Akbar sees the vicissitude of the three friends Antonino Argalia, Niccolò "il Machia," Ago Vespucci, more importantly of Qara Köz, the events of Pazzi plot, the envy of power by religion and state and the public way of managing things, what is made clear to him that within the superficial differences we inhabit the same worlds in terms of its "inauthenticity." The similarity between the worlds is definitely not remarked here from the point of view of world as physical attributes. It is important to note here that the existential notion of

humanity is implicit here though Akbar is not aware of its mode of thinking; neither is he expected to be so given his mode of thinking.

Conclusion

The protagonist Akbar's tries to understand the idea of "self," and that prominently in terms of a comparison between "I" and "We." The paper identifies that his analysis is based on "categorial" tendency of reasoning, the approach which is suitable for dealing with things. To think in terms of "one," "two," "many" is not helpful in understanding "self" and hence "I" haunts him as a disturbing possibility and "We" as more kingly. This problem is solved by applying existential nature of "self." Connected with the idea of "self" is that of the other, and the paper tries to explain the "exoticism" of the other as a myth in the context of Akbar's aspiration for a better world. This myth is essentially our habitual tendency of "categorial" thinking. The underlying theme throughout the paper is that a problem is not a problem in itself but rather is the problem of a paradigm over which questions first present themselves as questions.

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