

Art and the City: Salman Rushdie and His Artists

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This article undertakes an investigation of the figure of the artist in the fiction of Salman Rushdie. That most of his novels pivot around such a figure is surely significant, as is the crucial importance of the city (of Bombay) in the formulation and development of their artistic credos and personae.¹ The postcolonial urban chronotope in and of which Rushdie writes is emblematic of the deep fissures and contradictions marking a third-world terrain. A study of the artist-figure in such a setting, as, indeed, the narrative requirement for one, is deeply revelatory. An analysis of the engagement between the artist and the city can, I argue, uncover the *aporias* of seizing upon the third-world city as artistic material, and prise open questions of representation, representability, individual subject-positions, and class-divides. The modalities, aspirations, and limitations of these arguably self-reflexive engagements with the city can tell as much about the artist in question as about the city from which her/his art is inseparable.²

To a large extent, the artist becomes the prism, as well as the means, through which the city is negotiated in Rushdie's writings. As figures whose vocation allows them the artistic license to enter, probe, and represent the multifarious aspects of the life of the city, Rushdie's artists evince in their persons as well as in their art many of the contradictions that constitute the terrain of the city. Focusing on the narrator/writer Saleem in *Midnight's Children*, the photographer Rai in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, and the painter Aurora in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, this article demonstrates how the modernist (self-)conception of the artist as a somehow de-classed, detached, free-floating figure is immediately and irrevocably shattered in the fractured, conflicted terrain of the postcolonial city. I propose that the figure of the artist is the indispensable means by which Rushdie can begin to map the vastly disparate geographies

within the postcolonial city of Bombay. The strategic importance of this figure perhaps explains their appearance is all of Rushdie's. Belonging, almost without exception, to the leisured upper-class crust of society, his artist-protagonists acquire, through the exercise of their art, an alibi for entering zones of the city that they would, under ordinary circumstances, never have reason to encounter at first-hand. Rushdie's narrators pride themselves on their ability to be all-inclusive and representative of the "teeming" multitudinousness of the postcolonial city. In more than one interview, Rushdie talks of his need for adequate narrative forms that would convey the plural, multiple possibilities that the city of Bombay generates. In order for him to be able to write comprehensively about the multi-faceted, multi-layered realities of a third world metropolis, it is necessary for his protagonists to have easy and, in terms of the plot, justifiable cause for entering into them. This requirement is, however, a highly difficult one to meet for the sheltered, upper class, *babalog* protagonists of Rushdie's novels. Their class position determines their day-to-day itineraries along fixed, narrowly defined paths which would, normally speaking, never take them to slums, working class neighborhoods, lower-end suburbs, or the "underworld"; areas that nevertheless constitute the contemporary third world city as much as do its civic institutions like schools, offices, libraries and museums.

It is here that the figure of the artist, along with the narrative strategy of magic realism, comes in handy. The only reason why Aurora, and through her the reader, has access to the stifled lives of the striking dock workers is because she goes looking for images from which to paint her "*chipkali*,"³ social-realist pictures. The only reason Saleem finds even a temporary home in the magicians' ghetto is because of his earlier encounter with Parvati through his "inner ear" radio. This magical, "All-India Radio" is the *only* means by which Saleem can come to know children outside the bounds of the elite Methwold's Estate and Cathedral School. It is worth noting that Shiva, Saleem's alter-ego, was also a regular presence in the same Methwold's Estate, accompanying his father Wee Willie Winkie on his weekly singing-trips there. But even as a child, he was always perceived as an "other" and a threat; teased for "his surliness, his unstarched shorts, his knobby knees," Shiva's response

is shown to be violent in the extreme, as he “hurled a sharp flat stone, with a cutting edge like a razor, and blinded his tormentor in the right eye” (128–29). The image of the other returns to haunt Rushdie’s novels again and again. It is located in the unfamiliar, shrouded, threatening zones of the city where poverty dwells; threatening because it increasingly refuses to remain in its benighted corner and steps over into the daylight world of the protagonists. In *The Moor’s Last Sigh* this divide, as well as its precariousness, is brought out in the form of the binary depiction of the “overworld” and the “underworld”; the division between the two on the surface only conceals the dense underground network of relations between them.

The artist’s negotiations with the “teeming” city of Bombay, then, invariably and insistently take the form of a confrontation with the crowd. I use the term “confront” advisedly to highlight the sense of opposition and persecution that marks the artist’s relationship with the people of the city, a relationship that is visualized almost without exception in terms of a mass or crowd. While the crowded reality of the city in its expansiveness and inclusiveness is an inspiration to the artist, the same reality, when embodied in a collective mass of people, becomes fearful and threatening. While claiming to be representative of the multifarious elements of the city (and indeed the nation), and to derive artistic inspiration and sustenance from them, these artists are in fact in a conflicted, mistrustful, uncomfortable relationship with those very realities that beget and energize their enterprises. I propose that the metaphorical grid of fear and guilt is a useful tool in the analyzing the artist’s problematic relationship with the city; their privileged class-position within the glaring economic disparities of the postcolonial metropolis offer both the means as well as the limitations to the exercise of their art. Albeit functioning as all-important plot devices that enable the narrative to significantly widen its scope beyond the sheltered, upper-class, exclusive pockets of the city to which the narrator/artist-protagonists belong, these artists remain marked by their inherited class anxieties, in which both fear and guilt figure prominently. Their negotiations with the city are marked by simultaneous feelings of complicity and distance, attraction and revulsion, knowledge and ignorance, empathy and fear. Their

attempts to create sweeping, all-encompassing art forms are inevitably stymied by the multiple, complex, and contradictory realities they seek to encompass. I argue that this impasse reveals as much about the artists in question as about the cities that they are inseparable from.

I. Storytelling as Pickling

“Look at me,” he said before he killed himself, ‘I wanted to be a miniaturist and I’ve got elephantiasis instead!’” (Rushdie *Midnight* 48)

The character and career of Uncle Hanif in *Midnight’s Children* offers a useful point of entry into the discussion of the artist, particularly with regard to Saleem, the narrator of the novel. Despising the “myth-life of India,” Hanif as the “high-priest of reality” instead writes the story of “the Ordinary Life of a Pickle Factory,” with “long scenes describing the formation of a trade union” and “detailed descriptions of the pickling process” (242–44). Needless to say, his career as a film script writer is doomed, and he eventually commits suicide. Interestingly, the novel also makes a passing reference to *another* artist quoted in the epigraph above, whose attempt to “get the whole of life into his art” is equally doomed and also ends in suicide (48). The two artistic projects are the obverse of one another: Hanif’s minute, microscopic focus is at the opposite extreme from the expansive, all-encompassing drive of the anonymous artist. Both, however, end in failure. It is not a big leap from the artist with elephantiasis to Saleem the “pickler” of reality; even Saleem suspects he is the other’s alter ego.⁴ The narrative of *Midnight’s Children* self-reflexively holds up two alternative modes of storytelling, the narrowly mimetic realist and the inclusive, fabulous mode. It goes on to stolidly reject the former for being dull, insipid, and pedantic, and distinctly endorses the latter in its own form and structure. However, Saleem’s fate is not very different from Hanif’s. Saleem does not, admittedly, commit suicide as a failed artist, but the novel does end in his defeat and annihilation. I argue that Saleem’s defeat and annihilation can be adequately understood only within the context of his “urge to encapsulate the whole of reality” (75). Further, I argue that in his case, “the whole of re-

ality” is understood in terms of the city of Bombay—the over-crowded, bursting-at-the-seams city of Bombay.⁵ This is what constitutes the artist’s paradox: the city’s teeming realities are a vital artistic resource, at the same time as they threaten to crush the artist underfoot.

From the very outset, an atmosphere of anxiety and fear accompanies Saleem’s act of writing. He articulates a sense of urgency and persecution, though the exact cause behind this sense is left unclear. In Saleem’s words:

I must work fast, faster than Scheherazade, if I am to end up meaning—yes, meaning—something. I admit it: above all things, I fear absurdity. And there are so many stories to tell, too many, such an excess of intertwined lives events miracles places rumours, so dense a commingling of the improbable and the mundane! (9)

The invocation of Scheherazade and the thousand and one tales of the *Arabian Nights*, the indiscriminate leveling of “events” with “miracles” and “rumours,” clearly set the stage for an epic fabulist mode of narration, which the novel certainly lives up to. The sense of dread that accompanies this confession, however, remains undefined. Saleem goes on to claim that he is literally “falling apart” and will soon dissolve into nothingness, which is why he has “resolved to confide in paper, before [he] forget[s]” (37). The exact cause of this anxiety is never clear. What is worth mentioning, however, is that the terms in which this anxiety is expressed are the very same as those defining the experience of the crowded city. The “multitudes [of stories] jostling and shoving” inside Saleem are comparable to the teeming multitudes of city-crowds, the “people people people” that make up the “rainbow riot of the city” (9, 297). It is as if the book is the loose baggy monster it is *because* it is a book about the city of Bombay.⁶ The attempt to “encapsulate the whole of reality” is invariably troped as the experience of the vital, pulsating crowd in Bombay; an experience that, to an individual, particularly from the upper class, can be acutely hard-hitting and threatening.

The image of the crowd, then, imparts to the *narrative* both its energy as well as its scope. It also concurrently arouses in the *narrator* a sense

of dread and persecution. Throughout the novel, the crowd is figured in terms of a threat to him and to his upper class world: the fare-dodgers outside the compartment door in which Saleem and his family are traveling to Bombay, “these voices and these fists banging and pleading” (67),⁷ the “many-headed monster” (115), the “creature with heads and heads and heads” that a horrified Amina Sinai confronts in the lanes of Old Delhi (81). The hoarder (and friend of the Sinai family) Mustafa Kemal’s attempt to “protect” the commodities he deals in—“rice tea lentils”—from “the many-headed many-mouthed rapacious monster that is the public,” is appropriately overturned by the “Ravana” gang (71).⁸ Dr. Narlikar, friend and business-partner of Ahmad Sinai, is killed by a mob of “language marchers” (147). And finally, there is the resonant image with which the novel ends: Saleem alone in “the vastness of the numbers . . . marching one two three,” helplessly sucked into the “annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes” (462–63).

In an important essay Rushdie remarks on the tension between the form and content in *Midnight’s Children*: “The form—multitudinous, hinting at the infinite possibilities of the country—is the optimistic counterweight to Saleem’s personal tragedy” (*Imaginary* 16). Another equally prominent tension in the novel that he omits to mention is the tension between the narrator and the narrative. Saleem’s storytelling aims to be on a vast canvas, multilayered and all-inclusive, precisely what Uncle Hanif’s narrow documentary realism is not. However, Saleem himself is ultimately crushed by the multitudinous “reality” he attempts to negotiate in his writing. The fact that one of the most resonant images in which this “reality” is envisaged is that of monstrous mass of people, threatening and uncontrollable, surely says something about the narrator’s, and perhaps Rushdie’s own, class anxieties. Saleem makes much of the metaphor of pickling or “chutnification” in the novel, in order to dissociate himself from Hanif-style documentary realism and highlight the postmodernist dimension of contingency and error: “. . . I reconcile myself to the inevitable distortions of the pickling process” (460–61). The felicitous metaphor becomes a handy means to elide questions such as: *who* is doing the pickling? *Which* spices and raw materials are included and which left out? *Why* have those been excluded? The metaphor

ignores the possibility of distortions that may not be inevitable, that are dependent upon the subject-position and ideological limitations of the person telling the story. It shuts its eye to the fact that, at bottom, the process of writing is *not* the same thing as the process of pickling. It seals off a series of questions for both Rushdie and his thinly veiled alter ego, Saleem; questions such as, can the multitudinous realities of a spatially differentiated city sprawl like Bombay be adequately represented by the story of an upper class Westernized family living in Methwold's Estate? All fiction is necessarily selective; it is Saleem's claim to be comprehensive which raises issues that his narrative does not adequately confront. It is this repressed demon of the Other that rises as the "many-headed monster" time and again, finally to swamp the narrator underfoot in the last page of the novel.

II. Photographer of Surfaces

"The breakdown of boundaries, what Erwin Panofsky⁹ called decompartmentalization . . . is intimately connected to the urbanization of artistic sensibility, or, rather, to the artist's conquest of the city." (Rushdie *Ground* 386)

In *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, the narrator Rai sees in photography the means to bring about his "conquest of the city" (386). As a child growing up in the Bombay of the fifties, Rai discerns, through the respective obsessions of his parents, contrasting ways of negotiating the city. V.V., Rai's father and an indefatigable "Digger of Bombay," imparts to his son a mode of understanding (the city) that is predicated upon the idea of the palimpsest, seeking to un-layer the multiple times and spaces that underlie names, places, and the names of places (60). Not only does he know that "Chinchpokli is 'tamarind hollow' and Cumballa Hill is named after the lotus flower," but he digs down beneath the brothels on Foras Road, "dug down in time as well as earth, down through one meaning to another, and *showed me the meaning* of the 'foras dykes' which had reclaimed this old marshland from the sea" (60–61 emphasis mine). By contrast, Rai's mother Ameer is attracted to the opposite activity—"While [V.V.] dreamt of unknown depths, she brought into

being a dream of heights” (63). As one of the “developers” of an increasingly commercial post-independence Bombay, she sees the future of the city as embodied in skyscrapers. The forward-looking entrepreneur’s vision is necessarily at odds with that of the historian-excavator.

The Rai’s childhood distaste for his mother’s skyscrapers is revisited when as a young man and budding photographer, he rejects the influence of Bombay’s first great photographers, Raja Deen Dayal and A. R. Haseler, and formulates his own artistic credo in opposition to theirs. As against their panoramic shots of the city, taken from the heights of buildings or from the air, Rai yearns to be in the midst of what he calls “life”:

I yearned for the city streets, the knife grinders, the water carriers, the Chowpatty pick-pockets, the pavement moneylenders, the peremptory soldiers, the whoring dancers, the horse-drawn carriages with their fodder-thieving drivers, the railway hordes, the chess players in the Irani restaurants, the snake-buckled schoolchildren, the beggars, the fishermen, the servants, the wild throng of Crawford Market shoppers, the oiled wrestlers, the moviemakers, the dockers, the book sewers, the urchins, the cripples, the loom operators, the bully boys, the priests, the throat slitters, the frauds. (80)

As is evident from the above quotation, the young Rai is at a remove from both his parents’ modes of engaging with the city; to him, neither the view from the airy heights of skyscrapers, nor the knowledge gleaned from subterranean depths is satisfying. His artistic quest is for a more broad and inclusive method, one that will capture (and conquer) the synchronic sweep of the multifaceted city in all its simultaneity. As his densely packed catalogue above shows, it is not the vertical vision of/from heights or depths that he is interested in, but a synchronous, all-encompassing aesthetic that can do justice to the hard-hitting sensory reality of the city of Bombay. This, to Rai’s mind, opens up a way to move beyond “the surfaces of [the] world” with which he thinks V.V. is ultimately content, to show “that a camera can see *beyond the surface*, beyond the trappings of the actual, and *penetrate to its bloody flesh and heart*” (80 emphasis mine). His father’s “burrowing” into the city’s past now seems to him an

act of escapism.¹⁰ At the same time, it must be noted that the articulation of Rai's ambition as a photographer vis-à-vis the city, purportedly different from that of his father, takes a form very similar to that of V.V's. The desire in both is to somehow get at "the meaning" that is "beyond the surface" of everyday life (61, 80). Rai does not yet question the premise that surfaces always conceal depths of meaning, and that the purpose of art is to access and make visible those deeper meanings.

That is, until he comes to see the profoundly unsettling opacity of the city that he seeks to photograph. In a crucial passage, worth quoting at length, Rai voices his disquiet:

It was easy to take an interesting picture and almost impossible to take a good one. The city seethed, gathered to stare, turned its back and didn't care. By showing me everything it told me nothing. . . . The city was expressionistic, it screamed at you, but it wore a domino mask. There were whores, tight-rope walkers, trans-sexuals, movie stars, cripples, billionaires, all of them exhibitionists, all of them obscure. There was the thrilling, appalling infinity of the crowd at Churchgate Station in the morning, but that same infinity made the crowd unknowable . . . There was too much money, too much poverty, too much nakedness, too much disguise, too much anger, too much vermilion, too much purple. (211)

The city appears to be playing a game with the artist: while seeming to beckon him towards its abundant, extravagant heterogeneities, it actually disallows him entry. The multiplicity or excess that it embodies also shields it, preventing it from being anything more than sheer surface, impossible to penetrate. Whatever he deems to be a picture-worthy shot ends up being, in his words, "too colourful, too grotesque, too apt" (211). Rai's modernist belief in the epiphanic potential of the mundane is hopelessly shattered when confronted with this excessive quality of the everyday in the city of Bombay.

It would be very useful at this point to invoke Christopher Pinney's groundbreaking work on contemporary photography in India. While Pinney's particular focus is on studio photography in *mofussil* India, his

discussion of a visual aesthetic that precisely *denies* the viewer any comfortable point of entry into the picture is of much interest to our discussion. The formulaic backdrops that are a standard feature of studio photographs disallow them to be positioned and fixed by the viewer within a particular chronotope.¹¹

In such photographic practices “the surface becomes a site of the refusal of the depth that characterized colonial representational regimes”; Pinney sees them as representative of a postcolonial “vernacular modernism,” in which the determined opacity of surfaces is an assertion of “cultural singularity” (“Notes” 202–03). This analysis can provide a useful frame of reference for our discussion of Rai. The city’s own self-representation as a dense agglomerate of surfaces refuses the penetration



Gurman Singh astride a traveling studio’s motorbike, c. 1983. From Photography’s Other Histories, Ed. Christopher Pinney and Nicholar Peterson. Used with permission.

of the photographer's colonizing gaze. Rai's discomfiture (and fascination) apropos to the "too colourful, too grotesque, too apt" realities of the postcolonial city betokens his distance and separateness from them. It would not be farfetched to read in Rai's conflicting responses the anxiety of the colonizer, seeking to master worlds and lives that s/he does not fully know or understand; in the passage quoted above, Rai voices what is almost the colonizer's anxiety with regards to the imperfectly colonized. No doubt Rai is a Bombay-boy, a "native" of the city he has lived in all his life and loved. However, the third world postcolonial metropolis is comprised of deeply striated, differentiated spaces, interlinked with one another but by no means equally accessible to everyone. In this discordant terrain, Rai's privileged class-position alienates him from the "life" of the "city-streets," the "knife-grinders" and "beggars" that he seeks to capture in his photographs. It is worth noting how his catalogue of Bombay life quoted above seems insidiously to take on an all too familiar Orientalist shape and form. His self-conscious attempts at slumming appear to gain him entry into these zones and realities; however, with the "sly civility" that marks the communication between the colonizer and the colonized, these realities in effect spurn his moves while seeming to invite them.¹²

Defeated by the city's refusal of his quest to document it, Rai reinvents his artistic credo to focus on "darkness" and "illusion," "funerals" and "exits" (211–13). Instead of attempting to map "life" and thereby understand it, Rai now tries to understand life by seeing it in relation to death, to understand reality by seeing it in relation to illusion. He becomes a "photographer of exits"; a rather telling fact given his subsequent departure from Bombay, never to return. But he also learns to become "invisible," so that he is no longer the opportunistic "thief" or "murderer" of intimate moments in other people's lives, but hangs, wraith-like, in the zone of the in-between; offering no conclusive truths or meanings or certainties, but in unison with the people he photographs. This is, to him, a turning-point in his career, when his "pictures started to improve, because they were no longer about [him]self" (213). While Rai's subsequent career as photographer goes on to take several interesting twists and turns, I conclude this particular discussion by

highlighting the uncanny similarity between Saleem's metaphor of pickling and Rai's positing of his supposedly charmed "invisibility"; both can be seen as sleights of hand that elide uncomfortable questions about their own conflicted subject-positions. We shall see a similar *modus operandi* in Aurora, our third artist under discussion.

III. Lizard on the Wall

"Disembodied, she hung above us in the sky, Aurora Bombayalis in her glory . . ." (Rushdie *Moor* 352)

The figure of Aurora in *The Moor's Last Sigh* amalgamates many of the issues under discussion in this article. A fictional construct located within the very real Bombay art-scene, Aurora is by far the most complexly drawn artist in Rushdie's oeuvre. The narrative posits her as a spirited challenge to stereotypical nationalist imaginings of both art and womanhood, locating the challenge in her resolute self-identification with the city of Bombay. This identification becomes the basis for much that is innovative and liberating about her paintings. At the same time, this identification is also undeniably limited, partial, and very often exploitative. This section draws out the strengths as well as the limitations of Aurora and her art, arguing that though the diverse, heterogeneous city may enable less dogmatic and more inclusive standpoints, it is not free from its own forms of prejudice, injustice, and exclusion.

Invoking both the film as well as the nationalist myth it draws upon, "Mother India" becomes the novel's point of entry into a debate around contrasting conceptions of national identity.¹³ The hugely popular 1957 film of the same name is, in the narrator's words:

that glutinous saga of peasant heroinism, that upper-slushy ode to the uncrushability of village India . . . a piece of Hindu myth-making. . . [in which] the Indian peasant woman is idealized as bride, mother, and producer of sons; as long-suffering, stoical, loving, redemptive, and conservatively wedded to the maintenance of the status quo. (*Moor* 137–39)

The film has, to this day, a cult status in India, blending (and grossly simplifying in the process) Gandhi's vision of village-India with Nehru's

“progressive” nationalist vision, as embodied in dams. Nargis, the actor who played the lead role, went on to become a member of the Indian Parliament in the 1980s; she famously criticized the brilliant, highly-regarded *Apu*-films by Satyajit Ray for portraying a negative picture of India to the West because they did not depict “Modern India,” again as embodied in its dams (Rushdie *Imaginary* 109). *The Moor’s Last Sigh* posits Nargis and the role of “Mother India” that she interpreted against Aurora, the citified cosmopolite who smokes, drinks, swears, has affairs, is an indifferent mother, and takes pride in the fact that she has “*never seen a spade*,” making a defiant case for her as an alternative Mother India (139). Just as the “Christians, Portuguese and Jews” that make up the world of the novel are defiantly “Indian, everyone” (87), it is Aurora, subsequently described by the Mumbai Axis as “that Christian female married to a Jew” (234), who is made to embody “an alternative vision of India-as-mother, not Nargis’s sentimental village-mother but a mother of cities, as heartless and lovable, brilliant and dark, multiple and lonely, mesmeric and repugnant, pregnant and empty, truthful and deceitful as the beautiful, cruel, irresistible metropolis itself” (204).

Such a contrast, per se, would be little more than an over simplified and uninspired one, were it not for the detailed, breathtaking descriptions of Aurora’s paintings; it is through her *art* that the narrative justifies Aurora’s status as a viable, because more humane, more inclusive, more realistic, more robust, and more enabling, alternative to Nargis’s Mother India. Opposing the static, idealized, primordial version of village-Indianness with the spatially- and temporally-mixed and hybridized narratives of city life, Aurora’s art calls for a more inclusive understanding of the nation. In the “densely crowded picture[s]” on her canvas, multiple orders of reality (and imagination) co-exist cheek-by-jowl, percolating into and reshaping one another, much like the heterogeneities that constitute the postcolonial metropolis of Bombay and (provisionally) create room for different, hyphenated, plural ways of thinking and being. The crowds of the city insistently shape both form and content in Aurora’s paintings; indeed, they engender and define the vividness and energy of her artistic creations, the teeming multiplicities with which they seem to be bursting at the seams. Her crowded canvases, as much as her collage-

paintings, refuse the viewer any one authoritative point of perspective, demanding instead that s/he occupy several standpoints simultaneously as her or his eye roves over the pictorial excess. Aurora's very first mural, painted as a young girl under house arrest in her Cabral Island home, is described in terms of "the crowd itself, the dense crowd, the crowd without boundaries," thronging around the images of her family which had to fight their way through the "hyperabundance of imagery" in this "great swarm of being itself (59–60).¹⁴ In her chosen "mythic-romantic mode," distinctions between real and imaginary, past and present, self and other collapse as "history, family, politics and fantasy jostled each other like the great crowds at V.T. or Churchgate Stations" (203–04). It is the city of Bombay that constitutes the "Mooristan" or "Palimpstine" which Aurora uses to create "a romantic myth of the plural, hybrid nation," a "place where worlds collide, flow in and out of one another, and washofy away" (226–27). Yet again, in her disillusioned "dark Moors" period, the images of *mélange* and flow are replaced by "jetsam," broken, discarded objects, a "human rag-and-bone yard that took its inspiration from the jopadpatti shacks and lean-to's of the pavement dwellers and the patched-together edifices of the great slums and chawls of Bombay" (301–02). In all the manifold phases of Aurora's long and checkered career, Bombay city never ceases to be a formal and thematic preoccupation, constantly providing the creative energy of her work, as well as the tools with which to shape her evolving artistic concerns. Its "impure" heterogeneities that call into question the very notion of purity, whether linguistic, ethnic, religious, or sexual, enable her to envision and delineate a national space elastic enough to offer room to the non-mainstream, to alterity and admixture.

Along with Nargis, the other important figure against whom the character of Aurora is elaborated is the celebrated artist Amrita Sher-Gil. As Aurora's older contemporary (1913–41) and rival for the title of "Greatest Woman Painter," Sher-Gil's "determinedly village-oriented" paintings form a significant contrast to Aurora's (102); at the same time, the character of Aurora seems to be modeled, to a large extent, on Sher-Gil.¹⁵ While the narrative of *The Moor's Last Sigh* does not refer to Sher-Gil at any great length, except to highlight Aurora's distaste for her, her

paintings and painterly credo are the foils against which the character of Aurora takes shape. More positive models for Aurora from the contemporary Indian art-scene seem to be Gulam Mohammad Sheikh (1937–) and Nalini Malani (1946–), based in Baroda and Bombay respectively. Both artists, in different ways, seek in their work to destabilize boundaries between different media, artistic traditions, and conceptual frames. Ideas of fragmentation, *mélange*, crossovers and flux figure prominently in Sheikh's work, and in his essays he voices an ongoing concern with exploding the "citadels of purism" ("Several Cultures" 107), the artificial demarcations between private and public, traditional and modern, real and sur-real, in order to "construe structures in the process of being created" ("Many Worlds" 96).¹⁶ What Geeta Kapur has to say of the contemporary artist Nalini Malani in her Curator's note to the 2003 "subTerrain" exhibition would be equally valid for Aurora: "[Hers] is a politics that refuses to be restricted to a simple localism based on questions of ethnic identity or to be subsumed by the maw of globalism" (53). While this is not the place to enter into a detailed discussion of the work of these artists, it is worth mentioning that the brilliant true to life quality of Aurora's character as well as the art-world that she reigns over has much to do with the many allusions to the actual Bombay art scene that are littered through the book.¹⁷ This not only adds layers of complexity to the extended narrative descriptions of her art, but also helps to locate Aurora firmly within the terrain, artistic and otherwise, of Bombay.

The crowded, chaotic, fluid, and infinitely-metamorphosing realities of city life then impart to Aurora's paintings their intricacy, layeredness, and scope, allowing her to articulate a pluralistic and inclusive aesthetic that is unafraid of "contamination" of any kind. At the same time, Aurora's own relationship with large aspects of these crowded realities can only be described as a fraught one. The novel does not shy away from this contradiction, bringing it to a head in the hard-hitting naval strike episode. The context is the depressing news that the Congress, giving in to British demands, had forced the Central Strike Committee to call off the naval strike (133–34).¹⁸ At this time, Aurora is engaged in her quest to become a "*chipkali*," a lizard on the wall, divesting her-

self of presence or identity in order to gain unmediated access to the “truth” of the strikers’ suppressed, poverty-stricken lives; these sketches are hailed as being “clearly subversive, clearly pro-strike and therefore a challenge to British authority” (131). On hearing the news, Aurora’s sense of disappointment and anger with the Congress leadership matches the sailors’, and in a spontaneous gesture of empathy she sets out to the naval base with her sketchbook and folding stool, ensconced in her American Buick with its gold and green curtains. Driving into the midst of the frustrated, angry sailors, thickening into a “sullen, aimless . . . crowd,” she realizes her mistake, reverses her car in panic, and accidentally ends up “more or less cut[ing] a man in two” (134). The violence inadvertently unleashed by her blundering, if well-meaning, intrusion is not simply a freak case of a good intention gone horribly awry. It is a symptom of the huge economic and social divides across the third-world cityscape, divides that are too deeply entrenched to be bridged by facile acts of goodwill based upon a liberal humanist ethic of personal solidarity. Despite her best intentions, the prominent social signifiers of her difference and distance from the sailors—her curtained Buick, her fame, her “friendship” with Nehru—cannot but make her into an outsider for them, a “rich bitch in a fancy car” (133). The episode forces us to question Aurora’s assumed invisibility and ask whether the attempted erasure of her subject-position is not an admission of anxiety and alienation regarding the crowded realities that she seeks to represent in and through her art.

The irony is deepened when Aurora’s unwitting victim is subsequently enshrined as a watchman at the gate of her mansion, and made to perform the part, complete with talking parrot, of the one-legged sailor Lambajan Chandiwala.¹⁹ To make amends, Aurora not only gives him a job but, significantly, a new identity as well, showing no desire whatsoever to learn about his past life. Much later in the novel, the Moor is astonished to learn that his childhood friend even has a name—Borkar—which he has conveniently “long forgotten” (293).²⁰ There is an element of bad faith in Aurora’s attempt to get at the “truth” of life in her paintings when she cannot be bothered to interest herself in the lives that immediately touch hers. Further, in her acquiescent occupation of

“Thread-Needle Street,” she willfully blinds herself to the (under-)world of crime and corruption upon which Abraham builds his fortune, becoming, in a sense, his partner-in-crime, with “the complicity of silence, of don’t-tell-me-things-I-don’t-want-to-know, of quiet-I-am-busy-with-my-Great-Work” (107). From her sprawling bungalow on Malabar Hill, Aurora’s bird’s-eye view of the city is, both from necessity and choice, removed from its dirt and grime; she can only (bear to) access its surfaces, not the horrific underworlds they conceal, and upon which her own lavish lifestyle depends. These alien, half-understood aspects of the city’s life are then embodied as a threatening mass of people. As we saw with Saleem and Rai above, the image of the crowd represents possibility, artistic and otherwise, as well as threat. Both Saleem and Aurora are fearful of and crushed by the very realities that fascinate them, that give to their work its energy, sweep and layeredness, but that they are ultimately, by virtue of their privileged subject position, at a remove from. As Aurora dances her annual dance of protest against “human perversity” on the terrace of her bungalow, she stands “sky-high” above the crowds gathered there for the Ganapati festival (123–24).²¹ Once again, an all too familiar ominous note is struck: “the more scornfully the legendary lady danced on her high parapet, the further above it all she seemed to herself to be, the more eagerly *the crowds sucked her down towards them*” (124 emphasis mine). Though engineered by Abraham, Aurora’s death-fall into the festive crowds below becomes a vivid image of her destruction by forces she is both attracted and repulsed by.

This distance between the artist and the crowd becomes, in a sense, the very precondition of their art; it is precisely because Rushdie’s artists are not a part of the vast underclass, constantly struggling to make ends meet, that they have access to the leisure and cultivation required for their artistic pursuits. The role and function of the by and large privileged activity of art in a third world society beset with overwhelmingly high degrees of poverty and illiteracy is a highly vexed question, and one I cannot even begin to address here.²² Abraham dryly remarks on this rift when Aurora’s subversive, pro-strike “Chipkali” pictures do not lead to her expected arrest by the British authorities; in his words: “You art-wallahs, Always so certain-sure of your impact. Since when do the

masses come to such shows? And as for the Britishers, just now, kindly permit me to inform, pictures are not their problem” (131). His question raises two related issues: first, the essential irrelevance of the ivory tower, niche activity of art to the vast majority of people, who have little leisure, education, or opportunity to understand and appreciate it, and secondly, the political ineffectualness of art, “for poetry makes nothing happen.”²³ While it would be incorrect to suggest that Abraham’s words constitute the novel’s final statement on the subject, it is significant, perhaps self-reflexively so, that these concerns are raised at all in the narrative.

Rushdie’s oeuvre displays, in its portrayal of the artist-figure, a progressively greater degree of authorial self-consciousness regarding her/his ambiguous position. The only real challenge to Saleem’s class privilege in the early *Midnight’s Children* comes from Shiva, his fellow changeling, whose own credibility is so heavily compromised as the novel progresses that it dilutes much of the intended critique. In the case of Aurora in *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, on the other hand, even as the narrative goes all out to establish her magnetism and charisma, her distance from so much that she claims to represent in her art is unflinchingly brought out. In the yet later *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, Rai is forced to confront the ineffectuality of his totalizing, all-encompassing aesthetic in capturing the “too colourful” realities of Bombay. Perhaps this development can be attributed to Rushdie’s own growing self-consciousness of the ambiguous role into which he has willy-nilly fallen over the years, that of a high-profile interpreter of the “East” to the “West,” but who remains markedly Westernized, elite, and quite literally removed from the ground realities of which he writes. While this observation in itself does not constitute a criticism of the quality of Rushdie’s writing, it does underscore the uneasy anomalousness of his subject position, the anxiety of which is revisited time and again in the artist-figures of his novels.

Notes

- 1 I refer, in particular, to Saleem the writer in *Midnight’s Children*, Aurora the painter in *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, and Rai the photographer in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*. Other important artists in Rushdie’s oeuvre would be Saladin the

- “voice-artist” and Gibreel the actor in *The Satanic Verses*, Rashid the storyteller in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, Malik the doll-maker in *Fury*, and even Noman the tightrope-walker in *Shalimar the Clown*.
- 2 While a case could be made for reading these artists as fictional alter egos of Rushdie himself, I would resist such a simplistic correspondence. This is not to deny that many of the dilemmas faced by these fictional city-artists may have been Rushdie’s own.
 - 3 “Chipkali” is the Hindi word for lizard. In her “chipkali” phase of documentary, social-realist painting, Aurora strives to be an invisible onlooker to the subjects of her paintings just like “an unblinking lizard on the wall of history, watching, watching” (131–32).
 - 4 Saleem wonders, “is this an Indian disease, the urge to encapsulate the whole of reality? Worse: am I infected, too?” (75)
 - 5 As Saleem puts it, “the crowd, the dense crowd, the crowd without boundaries, *growing until it fills the world*” (462 emphasis mine).
 - 6 Echoing Saleem, as it were, Rushdie says in an interview: “One strategy that was deliberately adopted in [*Midnight’s Children*] was deliberately to tell, as it were, too many stories, so that there was a jostle of stories in the novel and that your main narration . . . had to kind of force its way through the crowd, as if you were outside Churchgate station trying to catch a train . . . There are simply so many stories going on that it would be absurd, I thought, to tell just one” (“Salman Rushdie talks to Alastair Niven” 54). Note how the experience of the city actually *defines* the narrative form of *Midnight’s Children*.
 - 7 The image recurs like a leit-motif all through the novel, until finally Saleem is the one begging the “maharaj” and “maharajin” to be let in (442).
 - 8 Ravana is the ten-headed monster that Rama slays in the epic *Ramayana*, symbolizing the victory of good over evil. Note the uncannily similar terms in which both Kemal and Saleem speak of “the people.”
 - 9 German-American art historian and essayist, (1892–1968), whose famous books include *Studies in Iconology* (1939), *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer* (1943), and *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (1955), all running into several editions.
 - 10 Rai wonders, “Can it be that his preoccupations blinded him to the momentous nature of those years, to the Navy Strike and Partition and all that followed?” (*The Ground Beneath Her Feet* 62).
 - 11 Many photography studios, especially in small-town India, use props and techniques of splicing in order to create glamorous backdrops to set off the photographs of their clients. These include anything from a cardboard cut-out of a motorcycle, on which the client is shown to be seated, to pictures of the Manhattan skyline or the Taj Mahal, against which background the client is artfully shown to be posing. Such pictures do not aim at verisimilitude and do not achieve it. Rather, the props and backdrops are used for symbolic purposes; the Taj Mahal is usually used in photographs of newly married couples, symbolizing eternal

- love, while the motorcycle and skyscrapers impart the attributes of ambition, glamour, and success to the person posing against them.
- 12 I borrow the term from Bhabha, who discusses how “both colonizer and colonized are in a process of misrecognition where each point of identification is always a partial and double repetition of the *otherness* of the self” (“Sly Civility” 97 emphasis in original).
 - 13 It is difficult to pinpoint exactly when the Indian nation began to be conceptualized as a mother (and as a nation), but it is without doubt closely tied to pre-independence (Hindu) nationalist imagining. Its most influential invocation was by Bankim Chandra Chatterji in the song “Vande Mataram” (“Mother, I bow to thee!”), first published in 1882 in his novel *Anandamath* and crucial in shaping the ideology of early nationalism. In 1950, it was adopted as the official “national song” of India, its references to Hindu goddesses rendering it unsuitable as the national anthem for a country with a large Muslim population. An early visual portrayal of “Mother India” was Abanindranath Tagore’s 1905 water-colour, “Bharat Mata”; in painting it, Abanindranath was conscious of creating, for the first time, an icon for the Indian nation. He rendered her as an idealized combination of Lakshmi and Saraswati, goddesses of prosperity and wisdom, clad in the apparel of a Vaishnava nun, radiating a divine calm. To Sister Nivedita, the painting was the supreme example of the way “the abstract ideal of nationalism could be metamorphosed into form, and cast into an image that was both human and divine” (qtd. in Guha-Thakurta 255). This image was subsequently adapted and popularized by poster and kitsch art all over the country.
 - 14 The narrator reiterates later, “In Bombay you live crushed in this crazy crowd, you are deafened by its blaring horns of plenty, and—like the figures of family members in Aurora’s Cabral Island mural—your own story has to shove its way through the throngs” (128).
 - 15 At the same time, it is worth mentioning that Aurora’s inaugural Cabral Island mural, painted on the walls and ceiling of her room, may be a reference to Raja Ravi Varma (1848–1906). An early part of the legend recounted by his biographers retells how “he filled the walls of his home with pictures of animals and vignettes of everyday life” (Pinney “Indian Magical Realism” 204).
 - 16 Many of Sheikh’s paintings of the eighties like the companion pieces “About Waiting and Wandering” (1981) and “Revolving Routes” (1981), as well as “City for Sale” (1981–84) are based on the ideas of “impurity” and admixture that is such an important theme in Aurora’s art, and may well have inspired Rushdie.
 - 17 Rushdie was personally acquainted with many members of the Bombay-Baroda art-scenario, and had frequent interactions with them in the course of writing *The Moor’s Last Sigh*. The Parsi gallery owner Kekoo Mody in the novel is a thinly disguised reference to the octogenarian Kekoo Gandhy, owner of the Chemould

Gallery in Bombay. Vasco Miranda seems to refer to the Goan cartoonist Mario Miranda; Vasco starts his career as a painter of cartoons on the Moor's nursery walls, though he moves on to other forms of art. The "Radiologist" is Sudhir Patwardhan (1949–), known for his careful, empathetic portrayals of everyday life in Bombay; the "Doctor" is Gieve Patel (1940–), also Bombay-based and a writer as well as an artist, and the "Professor" is Gulam Mohammad Sheikh, who taught art at the MS University at Baroda for over thirty years. The "Accountant" is Bhupen Khakhar (1934–2003), a controversial (because homosexual) Baroda-based artist whose famous painting, "You can't please them all" (1982) appears in *The Moor's Last Sigh* as "You Can't Always Get Your Wish" (202). Khakhar has been recognized, in his paintings, to "mould the spaces of the city, to make us feel the possibility of moving about"; this may to some extent have inspired Rushdie's imagining of Aurora's art (Hyman 61). Khakhar also painted a portrait of Rushdie titled "Salman Rushdie: The Moor" (1995), which includes narrative scenes from the novel and is on display at the National Portrait Gallery, London. The Moor's final quest in the novel is to find a lost portrait of his mother that has been painted over by Vasco Miranda. This can be traced to a biographical anecdote: a portrait of Rushdie's mother had been painted around the time of Indian Independence by the then young artist, Krishen Khanna. Rushdie's father was displeased with the picture and refused to buy it. Some years later, the rejected canvas was re-used by another impoverished painter, M. F. Husain. Khanna and Husain have both gone on to become leading figures in the Indian art establishment. Khakhar, Patwardhan, and Patel have, since the 1960s, persistently sought to explore the nature of big-city-life in its various dimensions, whether through an engagement with the working classes in a changing industrial landscape in the work of Patwardhan (who remarked, in a personal interview in August 2004, that the primary project of his paintings was to try and understand the "mainstream"), or the examination of social and sexual marginalization in Khakhar's portraits of "mofussil loneliness." See Sardesai, "Imaging the City" 39.

- 18 In January and February 1946, there were mass demonstrations in major cities all over India to protest against the British colonial government's arrest and imprisonment of the Indian National Army, who were charged with "war crimes." When Royal Indian Navy sailors in Bombay, made up of Indian troops under British command, tried to join public demonstrations on February 17, the British ordered them confined to barracks and posted armed guards. The sailors struck and tried to force their way out. During the standoff the seamen organized a Central Naval Strike Committee representing several thousand sailors and issued appeals to the Indian Congress and the Communist Party to come to their aid. They took up the slogan "Long Live the Revolution." However, disappointingly for them, Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian Congress leaders pressed the seamen to call off their strike.

- 19 Literal Hindi translation of "Long John Silverfellow."

- 20 It is worth mentioning that Borkar turns out to be two-timing the Zogoibys, secretly working as a spy for Abraham's rival Mainduck. Aurora's reification of him as a literary character fails to reduce and dehumanize him completely; he retains, within limits, his autonomy and freedom of choice. As does his parrot, introduced in order to give the finishing touches Borkar's transformation into Lambajan Chandiwala, who turns out to be a recalcitrant, "stubborn old Bombay bird" (126). After staunchly resisting the pirate-speak that Aurora tries to teach it—"Pieces of eight! Me hearties!"—the parrot eventually gives in and agrees to utter an Indianized version of the same—"Peesay—safed—haathi!" Or, "mashed white elephants," which is said to be the oath on the dying Aurora's lips as she falls down from her terrace (127).
- 21 The annual festival in honor of Ganesh or Ganapati, the elephant-headed deity who is worshipped as the god of auspiciousness, involves ten days of collective, high-spirited celebration, concluding with massive processions that accompany the often-gigantic idol for immersion. It was first given a distinctly public, political, nationalist slant by Bal Gangadhar Tilak in the late nineteenth-century, involving a glorification of the martial traditions associated with the Marathas. It has subsequently been taken over by right-wing Hindu fundamentalist groups in Maharashtra, and particularly in Bombay, as a boisterous assertion of both Maratha and Hindu group pride.
- 22 At least one group of artists actively seeking to make art more widely accessible and have a direct political relevance is the Open Circle initiative in Bombay, started in 1999 by the young artists Tushar Joag, Sharmila Samant, Shilpa Gupta, and Archana Hande. See <http://www.opencirclearts.org/>.
- 23 W. H. Auden, "In memory of William Butler Yeats," although the poem as a whole qualifies this statement.

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