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Formative Influences on Sir Salman Rushdie

Prabha Parmar, Ph.D.

Salman Rushdie, A Renowned Novelist

Sir Salman Rushdie has earned widespread reputation both in India and abroad as a novelist, essayist and discussant. He has a significant place in world literature. He has achieved a prestigious position in the Indo-English literature through his brilliant works.

Salman Rushdie, a Bombay born and London based novelist, was born in a Muslim family on 19 June 1947 in Bombay. He has written ten novels, two collections of short stories, many literature reviews and essays and two documentary films. He is a recipient of many awards along with 'Booker of Bookers'. Salman Rushdie is called "The demon-king of Indian English literature."¹ Rushdie is part of the bumper crop of Indian Writing in English: "One could hardly disagree with Rushdie that 'on the map of world literature', too, India has been undersized for too long, but a bumper crop of writing in English has emerged from the non-imperial postcolonial cultures, especially from India."²

Novels of Rushdie

Rushdie's novels deal with many themes like history, politics, love, shame, religion, exile and rootlessness. "Rushdie's work is so particular, in terms of subject matter, themes, setting, story-telling devices and formal literary method that no one but he can speak in his tongue."³

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Prabha Parmar, Ph.D.

Formative Influences on Sir Salman Rushdie

Rushdie has been influenced by some writers from English literature. This is not unusual, since influence on one writer by other is not a new thing in the world of English literature. Father of English and English poem Chaucer was also influenced by Boccaccio. The great dramatist Shakespeare took several of his ideas from others. “But much of the writing is evidently not his and as it seems probable that the conception and construction of the whole tragedy should also be attributed to some writer.”⁴

So, in the same way, Salman Rushdie is much influenced by some other writers along with Shakespeare. He was influenced by G.V. Desani, Gunter Grass and Shakespeare, most of all. His themes are also influenced by these writers. “Rushdie combines realism and fantasy, and, like South American novelists Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Jorge Luis Borges, he roundly satirizes the politics and society of the country in which each novel is set.”⁵ About the involvement of some famous books and writers in Rushdie’s fiction Damian Grant writes, “These influences include, it must be said, the Bible and the Koran, the Indian epics, Sufi texts, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Black,Dickens, Bulgokov, Beckett, and, of course, Joyce himself.”⁶

Salman Rushdie’s Background

Salman Rushdie is an Indian and a Muslim also, so he knows a lot of things about India and Pakistan. He uses Muslim religion and both these countries in his novels. Rushdie himself writes in his third novel *Shame* – “I, too, know something of this immigrant business. I am an emigrant from one country (India) and a newcomer in two (England, where I lived and Pakistan, to which my family moved against my will).”⁷ These lines show his love for India and in an interview he accepts himself, “If you have to choose a nationality as a writer, I’d call myself an Indian writer.”⁸

His only novel *Fury* can be said an American novel, but it is also influenced by the Indian city Mumbai (Bombay), because the hero of this novel is born in Bombay. But, due to his direct writing about Islam, he had to face many problems and comments, such as, “I said, Hai Ram, our Salman has lost touch with his native land and with the religion of his fathers.”⁹

Gunter Grass and Salman Rushdie

There is a similarity between Gunter Grass and Salman Rushdie. Like Rushdie, Grass also had to face a ban. Rushdie’s novel *Shame, The Satanic Verses, and The Moor’s Last Sigh* had to face proscription. About the ban of Grass’ novel it is right that his *The Call of the Toad*, a depiction of the post-wall disenchantment and march of the Neo-Nazi also faced ban in Germany. Rushdie’s second novel *Midnight’s Children* is compared with Grass’ *The Tin Drum*, apart from being compared with other works of other writers, “As a growing-up novel with allegorical dimensions, it will remind readers of ‘Augie March’ “and may be of Gunter Grass’ ‘The Tin Drum’, Laurence Strene’s ‘Tristram Shandy’, and Celine’s ‘Death on the Installment Plan’ as well as the less portentous portions of V.S.Naipaul.”¹⁰

If we say Gunter Grass as the teacher of Sir Salman Rushdie, it is not a wrong statement because Salman adopts many ideas and themes from his works. Rushdie's main themes such as history, politics, and realism are also influenced by Grass. It is true to say that he has been taught by Gunter Grass.

Valentine Cunningham writes about Rushdie's second novel and tells, "It's a remarkable dexterous performance. But, if the granting of the Indian text so high a degree of self-consciousness were all, *Midnight's Children* might be as dismissible ... as a smart refurbishing of bits of Sterne and James, of *Heart of Darkness* and *Finnegan's Wake*, by courtesy of Deconstructionism out of Wolfgang Iser."¹¹

Rushdie's themes are affected by Gunter Grass as well as his language and his techniques – "His relationship with Gunter Grass, in his use of language and narrative technique. As for Gunter Grass, for Rushdie also the esthetic medium is an aspect of 'exploration' of the narrative world itself."³⁰

Indian Influence

Rushdie is influenced by the Indian writer and philosopher G.V.Desani. Desani's influence on Rushdie's work, especially in the novel *Midnight's Children* is easily perceived. Catherine Cundy wrote in an article in a newspaper in 1982 that Rushdie himself accepted the influence of the Indian writer and philosopher G.V.Desani on his work. Further Catherine Cundy wrote about the similarities and influences on Rushdie: "Desani's own background - born in Nairobi and subsequently residing in both Britain and the United States- presents another common factor with Rushdie through his migrancy. Similarly the links between *All about H.Hatterr* and, for example, *Midnight's Children*, are clear. Published in the year following Indian independence, Desani's novel is a world away from the ponderous, overtly politicized work of Rao and Anand."¹²

These lines of Catherine Cundy show the influence of Desani on Rushdie. About Desani's influence on himself, Rushdie confesses - "My own writing too, learned a trick or two from him."¹³

According to Rushdie, G.V. Desani stands with R. K. Narayan. Though Desani is the writer of a single work of fiction, *All About H.Hatterr*, yet Rushdie keeps him on the side of Narayan, who is a very famous Indian writer of world stature. Rushdie writes about G.V.Desani that he placed this writer along with Narayan because Dasani has fallen so far from favour that the extra-ordinary *All About H.Hatterr* is presently out of point everywhere, even in India.

Themes of Desani and Rushdie are well affected by each other. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is well reflected in the works of Desani. Although there are many other writers also, who are influenced by Desani, Rushdie is the best among them. K.D. Verma writes in *Indian Writing in English: Structure of consciousness, literary history and critical theory*, that

Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* seems to resemble Desani and he also writes that a serious reading of both shows that they are hardly apolitical.

Other Influences

The effect of Grass, Kundera, Garcia Marquez and Desani on Rushdie can be seen in his second and third novels. The tragedy and the destiny of both these novels are matched with the techniques of those writers: - "In a post script to his story, the author acknowledges having quoted Milan Kundera, Franz Kafka, Nikolai Erdmann and Georg Buchner. Here and there in the text, one can't help thinking of Gabriel Garcia Marquez. These are extraordinary writers with whom to be associated, but it's company that Salman Rushdie deserves."¹⁴

Rushdie, in his novel *Fury*, writes about one of his favorite writers: Gunter Grass. "It was so great to see my dad finally with his like peers and getting so much respect, and besides, here were all these names walking around attached to the real people they belonged to, Donald Barthelme, Gunter Grass, Czeslaw Milosz, Grace Paley, John Updike, everyone."¹⁵

About Grass' influence on him, Rushdie himself said that he is a great admirer of Gunter Grass, and about his novel *The Tin Drum* on his writing, Rushdie writes - "This is what Grass's great novel said to me in its drumbeats: Go for broke. Always try and do too much. Dispense with safety nets. Take a deep breath before you begin talking. Aim for the stars. Keep grinning. Be bloody minded. Argue with the world. And never forget that writing is as close as we get to keeping a hold on the thousand and one things childhood, certainties, cities, doubts, dreams, instants, phrases, parents, loves-that go on slipping, like sand, through our fingers."¹⁶

In an interview, when Rushdie was asked about the comparison of his work to Sterne, Joyce, Marquez, Naipaul, Kundera, Grass, then he said- "I won't deny that it's flattering. It's very pleasant to be mentioned in the same company as those people... And there are other writers in that tradition that weren't mentioned as direct influences on the book but whom I admire very much, like Gogol and Kafka and Calvino."¹⁷

Rushdie's First Novel

Rushdie's first novel was *Grimus*, for which he devoted five years of his life. This was just a gamble for him because this is a novel of a different theme. According to Salman Rushdie, it was very dangerous to write a novel like this. Rushdie adopts the theme of the novel from a religious/spiritual source. He told in his interview that he adopted the theme of this novel from Sufi poetry, and used them in the context of a Western fantasy novel. It was a poem by a 12th century Persian Sufi called *Attar*, Farid-ul-din Attar, who wrote a poem which is a kind of Persian equivalent to *Pilgrim's Progress*. It was a poem about birds. They were in search of a bird God. But, in the novel of Rushdie, a bird, Flapping, is in search of his sister. Rushdie himself accepted that he was interested in science fiction.

Rushdie's Second Novel

About the influence of his second novel, Rushdie said that his hero is not influenced by the protagonists of *Candide* or *The Tin Drum* – “But Saleem is not innocent as Candide. Candide is a kind of blank slate on whom the world writes. Saleem is also compared to little Oskar in *The Tin Drum*. And I think he falls somewhere between Candide and Oskar.”¹⁸

Influence of Gabriel Garcia Marquez

After these writers, Rushdie also accepts that he is too much influenced by Gabriel Garcia Marquez - “I admire all his writings very much. I think, though, there isn't a very close relationship other than they are both books which have a political content. What I think is that the way of writing – which you find all over the world. Garcia Marquez is not the only one - is still relatively rare in the novel, and what tends to happen is that all the people who write like that get put in the same basket.”¹⁹

Influence of Shakespeare

Rushdie was also too much influenced by very famous dramatist Shakespeare.

In all his novels, Rushdie talks about Shakespeare's plays or the characters of his plays. In his third novel *Shame*, Rushdie talks about the famous tragedy of Shakespeare - *Julius Caesar*. As *Shame* is a novel with tragic end, so, it may be the reason that Rushdie recalls the tragic and famous play written by the great dramatist of English literature. In the same way, in his next novel *The Satanic Verses*, he recalls Shakespeare. This time he recalls the disguise of his heroines – “Or the true story of the white actress playing a black woman in Shakespeare.”²⁰

Salman Rushdie also recalls the famous Indian writer Rabindra Nath Tagore with Shakespeare – “His Gitanjali, Eclogues or the play Othello that he explained was really Attallah or Attaullah expect the writer couldn't spell, what sort of writer was that, anyway?”²¹ He, in these lines accepts, that Tagore and Shakespeare were great writers and he further compares the heroine of *The Satanic Verses*, Pamela Chamcha to Shylock – “Pamela, of course, made incessant efforts to betray her class and race, and so, predictably, professed herself horrified, bracketing Othello with Shylock and beating the racist Shakespeare over the head with the brace of them.”²² After that, Rushdie compares his characters to the characters of the plays of Shakespeare – “My Chamcha may be no ancient of Venice, my Allie no smothered Desdemona, Farishta no match for the Moor, but they will, at least, be costumed in such explanations as my understanding will allow.”²³ Through these lines, Rushdie confesses the greatness of Shakespeare's characters over his characters. Although Rushdie associates his characters with Shakespeare's he also accepts the greatness of that old dramatist over himself.

In the sixth novel of Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, the influence of Shakespeare can be seen easily. Othello was a moor and in the same way the hero of the novel *The Moor's Last Sigh*, is also called Moor. So, it is the reason that Rushdie calls his hero as the fellow of Othello. In the

same novel he again recalls the great dramatist; he talks about the great comedy *The Merchant of Venice* – “Portia, a rich girl, supposedly intelligent, who acquiesces in her late father’s will- that she must marry any other man who solves the riddle of the three caskets, gold, silver, lead- is presented to us by Shakespeare as the very archetype of justice.”²⁴

Next novel of Rushdie *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* is also influenced by Shakespeare. This is a love story of Ormus Cama and Vina Apsara. In the novel, a father, John Poe, tells his daughter about the benefit of the milk of goat in comparison with the milk of cow – “Nissy Poe grew up without knowing the taste of cow milk. John Poe told her that goat milk was easier to digest, and even encouraged her to wash her face in it as a beauty treatment, as Queen Cleopatra used to do.”²⁵ Queen Cleopatra from Shakespeare’s plays *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. Further, Rushdie recalls the famous play of Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*. He writes – “Twelfth Night at Middle Temple on Twelfth Night, Middle Temple being the place where Twelfth Night had first been staged on an earlier Twelfth Night.”²⁶

In the novel, Rushdie declares Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* as the best play – “Just as *Hamlet* is the best play...”²⁷ It is the habit of Rushdie that he compares his characters to Shakespeare’s or uses the names and the names of the plays of Shakespeare as a simile in his novels. He compares his character Yul Singh with Macbeth – “Like the laughter dying on Macbeth’s lips at the appearance of what Yul Singh once memorably called Banquo’s ghost.”²⁸

Next novel written by Rushdie is *Fury*. In this novel also the influence of Shakespeare’s work can be seen. In the novel he writes about the love of different kinds amongst the characters of different plays of Shakespeare – “Why did Hamlet, loving his dead father, interminably delay his revenge while, loved by Ophelia, he destroyed her instead? Why did Lear, loving Cordelia best of his daughters, fails to hear the love in her opening-scene honesty and so fall prey to her sister’s unlovingness; and why was Macbeth, a man’s man by the erotic but loveless Lady M. towards an evil throne of blood?”²⁹ Further in the novel, Rushdie compares his hero’s mentality with Othello. Malik, like Othello, wants to kill his wife, as in the play of *Othello*. Othello killed his wife Desdemona.

The next novel of Salman Rushdie is *Shalimar The Clown*. This is a story of love and revenge of a husband. *Hamlet* is also a story of revenge. So, both the works, *Shalimar The Clown* and *Hamlet* have similar themes. Therefore, we come to the conclusion that Rushdie’s work is influenced by Gunter Grass, G. V. Desani and Shakespeare as well.

Although Rushdie’s mother tongue is Urdu but he adopts English for his literary writings and for his works. Now Rushdie is a bright star of English literature. He himself writes about his language – “But my own mother- tongue, Urdu, the camp- argot of the country’s earlier Muslim conquerors, became naturalized sub-continental language long ago; and by now that has happened to English, too. English has become an Indian language. Its colonial origins mean that, like Urdu and unlike all other Indian languages, it has no regional base; but in all other ways, it has emphatically come to stay.”³¹

Influence of Other Writers

Rushdie also accepts that there are some writers who contributed to the growth of standard of English in India. According to Rushdie, due to those writers – “The map of the world, in the standard Mercator projection, is not kind of India, making it look substantially smaller than, say, Greenland. On the map of world literature, too, India has been undersized for too long. This anthology celebrates the writers who are ensuring that, fifty years after India’s independence, which age of absurdity is coming to an end.”³²

Rushdie’s English

Although Rushdie himself accepts that Urdu is his mother-tongue, his works in English are so perfect in terms of language use and his power of story-telling that it is hard to guess that English is not his own mother-tongue. O.P. Bhatnagar writes, “The magnificent use which the writers like Chinua Achebe, Ngugi, Wole Soyinka, V.S. Naipaul, Nirad Chaudhari, Raja Rao, G.V.Desani and Salman Rushdie have made of English has not only outwitted the mother language but has renovated it to experiences it might not have undergone in its mother country.”³³

Rushdie’s themes may not be new, but his ability to present his creative writing in English is superb. Rushdie presents English in some novel ways in his novels - a distinct spoken language or dialect which has been branded Indian English – “Rushdie included this brand of Indian English or ‘Chutneyfied English’ as he calls it in his novel *Midnight’s Children* and started a trend which his contemporaries have enthusiastically perpetrated.”³⁴ He has claimed that in his use of Chutneyfied English in his novels he has been greatly influenced by Desani. Moreover, “Lovely Lassi, Funtabulous Falooda, and more of that bhel-purified English from an ex-copy writer was a necessary medium for paraphrasing a Chutneyfied history.”³⁵

So, we can say that Rushdie’s themes as well as his language are influenced by other writers. It is true that he has a good command of his themes and language as well. In spite of all the influences that he received and exploited, Rushdie has made a niche for himself in the literary world as an original writer with his own peculiarities. In this regard we can quote Compton A. Rickett – “The supreme question after all is, not where does the top-root of genius draw its nourishment, but what is the eliminating expression of that nourishment? What blossom is forth-coming? Genius has an alchemy of its own that can transmute the base metals; it may steal on occasion, into pure gold.”³⁶ It is completely true in the case of Salman Rushdie and his writings.

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