

# Salman Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*: A Study of Distinct Annihilations through Hermeneutics

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## Abstract

The binaries of Self and Other, Identity and Alterity can be seen as organizing the very existence of individual subjects in the coeval multicultural domain. Selfhood as a concept is viable in the concurrent continental philosophy and is highly contested especially in the field of deconstruction and postmodernism. Otherness has always been defined by permission from the dominant social group who barely allow the marginalized people to speak or define themselves. Emmanuel Levinas argues that self cannot exist, or can have a concept of itself as self, without the other. Even Paul Ricœur's understanding of selfhood taken in the context of Levinasian trend, is a residue of the ego-centered claim to responsibility towards the Other. Otherness in geographical and spatial sense is heightened due to liberal migratory pursuits that lead to a new aspect of its perceptiveness where there is neither complete identity nor complete otherness. Salman Rushdie's novel *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999), celebrates this aesthetic possibility created by globalization, wherein people migrating to different cultures and identities come in contact, celebrating heterogeneity and polarization - enmeshing with the processes that increasingly draw diverse places and peoples into the hegemonic and homogenizing frame of the foreign economy and culture - and further entangling them to be in a contradictory state of being in the postmodern state of affairs, defined by others.

**Keywords:** Dasein; Identity; Katabasis; Myth; Otherness; Self.

Otherness could be simply defined as anything that constitutes the self. In social science it is understood as the process by which the societies and different communities exclude 'others', to subordinate them or to deny

their relevance in their society. Othering distinguishes between home and away, the uncertain and certain. However, in the context of literary theory, particularly feminist, postcolonial discourses and continental philosophies, otherness is defined by difference, typically differences marked by outward signs like race, gender, language, ethnicity, and space. In literature we often articulate difference as either weakness or superior strength or even brainpower depending on the dominant cultural voice. For instance, colonial literature often portrays the marginalized native as the 'noble savage' or the 'barbaric cannibal', robbing them of their voice, their identity, their sense of value and their sense of self. Yet, continental philosophers argue that the notion of selfhood cannot exist, cannot have a concept of itself without the other or otherness. They implicate that the difference forms the foundation of ethics, since the 'self' requires the 'other' to bring meaning to its existence.

The 'other', then becomes a challenging site, a source of apprehension between various epistemological and ethical commitments discussed in philosophy. The question of the 'other' has been a perpetual preoccupation of European philosophical discourses, which, in many ways, has been evocative of our transition into modernity. It is simply not enough to know the truths of the 'other', to define it correct or otherwise, because it requires our empathy and understanding that we are open to the 'other' in its alterity. In *Truth and Method*, Hans Georg Gadamer points out that:

In human relations the important thing is, as we have seen, to experience the Thou truly as Thou i.e., not to overlook his claim but to let him really say something to us. Here is where openness belongs. [. . .] Openness to the other, involves recognizing that I myself must accept some things that are against me, even though no one else forces me to do so. (361)

As an ambiguous term, Otherness originated in the writings of G.W.F Hegel and was later developed in the psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan. In my view, Hegel argues that the historical-logical evolvment of 'spirit' (*Geist*) involves the necessary conquering of the difference that separates the 'self' and the 'other', and thus the advancing establishment of higher orders of identification. In phenomenological accounts, the attempt to identify with the 'other' marks the functioning of the 'same' in the moment that is isolated in abstraction. The same, may not be inferred as a specific *ontic* category, but any such economy of force that struggles to restore the identity by processes that either exude or marginalize alterity. In imperialistic tendencies, the restrains, and limited dimensions of the

'same', toil to truthfully comprehend the alterity of the 'other'. Hence the assertion of this self-seeking mode of being comes to recognize the reality of its limitations and begins to resign itself to the *radical* alterity of the Other. This results into an interruption between the 'self' and the 'other' as the homogeneity falls away and the same manages to achieve a new-found candor in its mode of Otherness. Emmanuel Levinas consents this understanding of the same as a process of re-creation and stabilization in *Totality and Infinity*: "The I is not a being that always remains the same, but is the being whose existing consists in identifying itself, in recovering its identity throughout all that happens to it. It is the primal identity, the primordial work of identification" (36). The resistance therefore comes in, as an effort to avoid appropriation that opposes the Same, the Other then establishes and holds its place against the agencies of assimilation and displacement by the Same. As Levinas comprehends:

Other with an alterity that does not limit the same, for in limiting the same the other would not be rigorously other: by virtue of the common frontier, the other, within the system, would yet be the same. The absolutely other is the Other.

[His premise then is,] [t]he alterity, the radical heterogeneity of the other, is possible only if the other is other with the respect to a term whose essence is to remain at the point of departure, to serve as *entry* into the relation, to be the same not relatively but absolutely. (*Totality and Infinity* 39, 36)

Framed in this specific history and critique, Paul Ricœur, the pioneer for hermeneutics can be understood strongly as one who attempts to employ hermeneutics in awakening a self that is not a subject. "To say *self* is not to say I" (Ricœur, *Oneself as Another* 18). In his famous hermeneutics of suspicion, Ricœur discusses how internal alterity shapes the hermeneutics of the "I am". Although, Descartes' notion of ego, "I think, therefore I am", stands out in modernity, Ricœur explains rightly that it is nevertheless a recurring theme in the reflexive tradition and is always challenged. Moreover, the "humiliated subject" is Ricœur's general expression on the effect of hermeneutics of suspicion to phenomenology itself, or the idealism it contains. Ricœur in his recourses is more poised to give an account to this being called Self. After the dispossession of the ego (as by Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche, with whom the idealism of the cogito is believed to be shattered) and the surpassing of the gulf between the "world" and "I" and "I" and "I", there happens the repossession in the form of selfhood. By way of hermeneutics, the self is to be interpreted along with linguistic

and symbolic world on which it is immersed in. The turn from "I am" to "I can" is a shift from subjectivity to selfhood and the demystification process has taken a comprehensive scope as the cogito is now made to be immersed in false consciousness of the libidinal desires, corrupted by the control, and lied upon by the institution of morality.

Ricœur in his book *Oneself as Another* goes through this test of suspicion and the question then resonates stronger, "what sort of being is the self?" (297). He provides the reason for his shift to hermeneutics of the "I am"; the "I" can now be understood as text on which hidden meanings can be uncovered. In *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, Ricœur infers that:

. . . understanding the world of signs is the means of understanding oneself; the symbolic universe is the milieu of self-explanation; in fact, there would no longer be any meaning if signs were not the means, the milieu, the medium by grace of which a human being seeks to situate himself, to project himself, to protect himself, to understand himself. . . (264)

Ricœur then proceeds to an evaluation of two models of identity, namely, *idem* and *ipse*. In *idem*, that which is identified is that which belongs to a same category, whether it be numerical identification, qualitative resemblance, or that which has uninterrupted temporal continuity (Ricœur, *Oneself and Another* 116-7). On the other hand, *Ipse* identity, breaks from the *idem* identity's subjugated meaning of permanence by claiming its range without being reduced to sameness. This insight, Ricœur admits, is a counterpart to Martin Heidegger's *Dasein* who stands up against the they-identity to claim its very existentiality. In *Oneself and Another*, Ricœur specifies:

In this sense, selfhood is one of the existentials which belong to the mode of being of *Dasein*, just as the categories in the Kantian sense, belong to the mode of being of entities which Heidegger characterizes as ready-to-hand and present-at-hand. The break between self (*ipse*) and same (*idem*) ultimately expresses the more fundamental break between *Dasein* and ready-to-hand/present-at-hand. Only *Dasein* is *mine*, and more generally self. Things, all given and manipulable, can be said to be the same, in the sense of sameness-identity. (191-92)

Ricœur says that *ipseity* then means that, "even if my desire were to

change, even if I were to change my opinion or my inclination, 'I will hold firm'" (*Oneself and Another* 124). To hold firm consent is to maintain a selfhood. Ricœur even contends that potentially *ipse* identity completely breaks away from *idem* identity. Character, which is a "set of lasting dispositions by which a person is recognized," is where both the *ipse* and the *idem* meet (121). Thus, to proclaim apparently, *ipseity* understood as character is sedimentation of identity, which transforms the "who" to the "what," further flapping the question from "'Who am I?' . . . to . . . 'What am I?'" (122).

To admit that the politics of representation, of defining oneself away from the sense of 'Otherness' is a long withstanding feature of immigration that provides a motivating zeal to migrants and thus paves way for new concerns that are produced by globalization, Salman Rushdie's novel *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, focuses on the condition of the outcast, the emigrant, the dislocated being leading us to question, if it is possible to lead a life not just without roots, but also without any strong attachment or ties. The novel explicitly incorporates affinity to Heidegger's expression of the experience of being through *Dasein*, that though, it is quite aware of his form of being but resumes to confront issues of personhood, mortality and lingers through the dilemma or paradox of living in relationships with other being while being completely and ultimately alone with oneself. *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* is thus one of the katabasis novels, a narrative of a journey to look inward, outward, and back. Since the novel is foreshadowed by the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, it is embedded by this myth in all forms. The protagonists Ormus and Vina, testimonise to the mythical characters Orpheus and Eurydice, trying to escape the danger of spectral identities, which fragments the selves, through the continuous recollections ensured by the mythical valences of the myth.

The novel explores a Mexican legend of music where Vina identifies herself with Quetzalcoatl, the winged serpent deity, while Ormus, her lover, is the embodiment of music. They are entwined in the mirage of music and love and the forbidden processes of looking back continually takes place with each of them attempting to recover the other through the means of music. Rushdie has blended this mythical story by grafting over it the contemporary mythology of rock and roll stardom, and his choice of the popular genre of rock music is not accidental. In his essay "Rock Music" from *Step across This Line*, he dwells on the liberating force that rock music and different other musical influences, R & B, country, bluegrass etc., have evolved in time due to the potential for resistance that they offered many artists and to the glamour attached to certain rock bands as anti-establish-

ments and calls it “a third globalized phenomenon after the two world wars” (Rushdie 301). Creativity thus gets construed as a hybrid practice of transgressing the narrow boundaries of a single culture, allowing the artist to make his own rules, dispense with the old and cross boundaries.

As the characters in the novel move across the globe from Mumbai to London and then to New York, their horizontal movement towards the West (as a metaphor for the westernization of culture that globalization presupposes) is compared to a vertical descent into capitalist Hell. Rushdie uses his own experience of katabasis during the long years spent in the hiding to comment on the condition of the diasporic artist. Since the combined effects of modernization, globalization and migrancy render the postcolonial subject incapable to orient himself, katabasis as a literary trope opens the way for the protagonist’s healing process to deal with the debilitating effects of globalization on the human psyche. In *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* Rushdie appropriates the etymology of the term to define the situation of the postcolonial migrant going West: “Disorientation is loss of the East. Ask any navigator: the East is what you sail by. Lose the east and you lose your bearings, your certainties, your knowledge of what is and what may be, perhaps even your life” (176).

As Ormus and Rai, the narrator, go West they suffer from disorientation. Their inner sense of uncertainty is mirrored by external instability of the ground beneath their feet - the earthquakes that snake the fictional world and finally swallow Vina. Ormus’ disorientation is both literal and metaphorical: a physical loss of the east, of his native place and a spiritual loss of his roots that renounces his artistic imperative “Life is elsewhere. Cross frontiers. Fly away” (Rushdie, *Ground Beneath Her Feet* 377). Vina’s semi-detachment is perhaps due to her accepting nature that allows her to recognize that life is transient, and it is best to embrace certain ideologies and discard others as required. “Whereas the most obvious lesson of travelling ... was that reality shifted” (246). She finally even crosses the color-line, as she recognizes how much a color definition reduces a being and perhaps entails all sorts of discriminations. “She was a ragbag of selves, torn fragments of people she might have become . . . and when she jerked into life you would never know who would be there, in her skin ... ” (128). Rai, the narrator too does not resist this change but welcomes it. “Yet I myself am a discontinuous being, not what I was meant to be, no longer what I was ... inventing myself anew to make a new world in the company of other altered lives - that there is thrilling pain in this metamorphic destiny, as well as aching loss” (456). He makes his ideology apparent in these words:

For a long time I have believed . . . that in every generation there are a few souls, call them lucky or cursed, who are simply *born not belonging*, who come into the world semi-detached . . . without strong affiliation to family or location or nation or race; [. . .] that [. . .] the phenomenon may be as “natural” a manifestation of human nature as its opposite, but one that has been mostly frustrated, throughout human history, by lack of opportunity. (Rushdie, *Ground Beneath Her Feet* 72-73)

This metamorphosis thus becomes the condition of the migrant and the katabasis, the mark of the artist. As mentioned earlier the myth that overpowers the backdrop of the novel influences the characters to undertake the journey into the underworld not just once, but several times, as when Ormus lies comatose after a car accident, gets awakened only by Vina’s voice and when Vina dies in the earthquake, Ormus tries to keep her alive in songs, in what Rai calls his “alternative reality”, bringing back the Orpheus-Eurydice myth back to music and life.

The three protagonists of the novel, Vina, Ormus, and Rai embrace and acknowledge the world’s complexity or preferably their very own mythical illusionary conception of the outer world by disclosing their own complex natures to the world. They seem to dwell in what Sir Darius calls the “fourth function of out sidedness” (74), implying the deprivation of belonging anywhere, of not being wholly attached to a place, its culture, and people. They seem to be conciliating between the dichotomies that characterize human nature. Moving between different worlds, they try to reconcile with themselves and that which surrounds them. The purpose of these constructs then seems to be that of defending themselves from the disruptive forces of fear, uncertainty, and doubt, of an attempt to acquire an “authorized version” of the world in which they are asked to believe (for conformity’s sake). Beliefs (which frequently go against evidence) become the solid ground beneath their feet - a source of certainty providing a feeling of stability and safety. Rai, the narrator seeks to confirm:

Those who value stability, who fear transience, uncertainty, change, have erected a powerful system of stigmas and taboos against rootlessness, that disruptive, anti-social force, so that we mostly confirm, [. . .] we hide our secret identities beneath the false skins of those identities which bear the belongers’ seal of approval. But the truth leaks out in our dreams [. . .] and in the waking dreams our societies permit, in our myths, our arts, our songs, we celebrate the non-belongers, the different ones, the out-

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laws, the freaks. (Rushdie, *Ground Beneath Her Feet* 73)

Rushdie is particularly keen to emphasize the important dominant aspects of myths' appropriateness for the topic of globalization in the narrative, that is, its potential status not only as a comprehensive, globalizing force, but as a representative voice of the outsider. Rushdie seems to suggest indeed that myth is the *product* of out-sidedness, and that via myth we can 'step across' because, ironically, myth provides a 'frame' within which multiple perspectives can be expressed. This multiplicity and its embrace, accumulates strength in Ormus and Vina and enables them to transform their many selves to be "a song, a single multitude, not a cacophony, but an orchestra, a choir, a dazzling plural voice" for their first album VTO. This is how they declare, "Our creations can go the distance with Creations; more than that, our imagining—our image making—is an indispensable part of the great work of *making real*" (Rushdie, *Ground Beneath Her Feet* 466).

The novel celebrates the aesthetic possibilities created by globalization and trans nationalization, bringing diverse cultures in contact and mutual transformation enow. Rushdie sketches his characters as 'cultural hybrids', caught between two cultural influences, feeling dislocated yet looking for some sort of cultural equilibrium. Conducive to the idea we can observe Heidegger's analysis of solipsism in *Being and Time*, that constructs Dasein as an all-pervasive socially founded intermediary. So then the problem is no longer to transform from the spheres of oneness to establish an interposed world, but to escape the immersion that will wash away the solidarity and the possibility of his very own being-in-the-world. The subjective experience of Nothing is twofold, it uncovers the dependency of the being, as it also particularizes it, bringing the Dasein familiar with its own nullity, de-structuring it, leaving it homeless in an alien world, yet still allowing the Dasein to discover the possibilities of demoral and appropriation for its own. Ergo alterity of the Nothing provokes wakefulness and offers a choice of self-responsibility and ownership for possibilities of being-in-the-world present and *committing* to already existing values and not *creating* in choosing his own way. "We find *ground* on which to *make our stand*" (Rushdie, *Ground Beneath Her Feet* 55).

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