

Cultural Dislocation and Decentering: Reading Salman Rushdie's *Knife: Meditations After an Attempted Murder*

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Abstract

The paper aims to probe into a cultural dislocation and decentering of people across the globe and how the streak of the phenomenon can be traced in the works of Rushdie right from *Midnight's Children* to *Knife*. The characters encounter various forms of hatred and oppression, whether it be societal prejudice, political persecution, or personal animosity. Art becomes a vehicle for resistance, it allows the writer to delve into surreal simulation while exploring the aforementioned themes; it invites the readers to confront the nature of reality, celebrate diversity, embrace curiosity and defend the principles of individual liberty and expression.

Keywords: Culture; Dislocation; Encounter; Persecution; Prejudice.

In the 1980s, Jean-Luc Nancy and Maurice Blanchot problematised the notion of community and along with, post-phenomenological critics have sought to indicate an ideological and revisionary perception of communitarianism. This paper attempts to understand Rushdie's latest exploration of contemporary society and the culture of violence that provides the raw material for Rushdie's *Knife: Meditations After an Attempted Murder*¹; (hereafter cited as *Knife*). Throughout the sequence of events, the characters in *Knife* encounter various forms of hatred and oppression, whether societal prejudice political persecution, or personal animosity. However, they channel their experiences into artistic expression rather than succumbing to despair or retaliation. This paper investigates the tension between two types of community 'operative' and 'inoperative' in Rushdie's *Knife*. There is a cultural dislocation and decentering of people across the globe and how the streak of the phenomenon can be traced in the works of Rushdie right from *Midnight's Children* to *Knife*. The starting point is a

revision of the geographical ontology involved in the fictionalisation of America. Like Benedict Anderson's *'Imagined Communities'* and Edward Said's *'Geographies'*, Rushdie grants legitimacy to local geography and the metaphor of the Promised Land in his fictional writings. Alex Calder, an eminent professor of English, at the University of Auckland, offers a concept of "looming" as a model of formal complexity, it is the sequel of global rather than local conditions.

Salman Rushdie exhibits several points of coming together as well as sharp differences with his contemporary writers such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez (Columbia) and Gunter Grass (Germany). The uniqueness of their styles distinguishes them from one another but they do have common themes and influences. Each writer often uses allegory and metaphor to comment on contemporary issues. From *Midnight's Children* to *Knife* Rushdie focuses on the themes of 'politics', 'community', 'religion' and 'identity', Marquez's *The Autumn of the Patriarch* (1975) explores the nature of power and dictatorship, and Grass' *Cat and Mouse* (1961) examines the rise of fascism in Germany. Their characters are round, complex and diverse, whose lives intersect unanticipatedly. They challenge the existing structures and anticipate what are known as post-truth^c and posthuman^d conditions. They offer a critique of societal and community norms, institutions and power structures, and compel the readers to reconsider their assumptions and question the status quo. As Rushdie points out:

Something strange has happened to the idea of privacy in our surreal time. Instead of being cherished, it appears to have become, a valueless quality—actually undesirable. If a thing is not made public, it doesn't really exist. Your dog, your wedding, your beach, your baby, your dinner, the interesting meme you recently saw—these things need, on a daily basis, to be shared. Where *attention* has become the thing most hungered for, where the quest for *followers* and *likes* is the new gluttony, privacy has become unnecessary, unwanted, even absurd. (*Knife*, 67)

Marquez on the other hand highlights the plight of the common man under the yoke of a dictator:

...an old man with no destiny with our never knowing who he was, or what he was like, or even if he was only a figment of the imagination, a comic tyrant who never knew where the reverse side was and where the right of this life which we loved with an insatiable passion that you never dared even to imagine out of

the fear of knowing what we knew only too well that it was arduous and ephemeral but there wasn't any other, general, because we knew who we were while he was left never knowing it forever with the soft whistle of his rupture of a dead old man cut off at the roots by the slash of death, flying through the dark sound of the last frozen leaves of his autumn toward the homeland of shadows of the truth of oblivion, clinging to his fear of the rotting cloth of death's hooded cassock and alien to the clamour of the frantic crowds who took to the streets singing hymns of joy at the jubilant news of his death and alien forevermore to the music of liberation and the rockets of jubilation and the bells of glory that announced to the world the good news that the uncountable time of eternity had come to an end.

(*The Autumn of the Patriarch*, 120)

Grass' *Cat and Mouse* focuses on preserving humanity in an age of war and political violence through ordinary people. It's narrative has a philosophical texture:

It was the old story of the spot that found no takers, kind of grisly-moral and transcendent; for the empty patch of wood with its fresh fibers spoke more eloquently than the chipped inscription. Besides, your message must have spread with the shavings, for in the barracks, between kitchen, guardroom, and dressing room, stories as tall as a house began to go around, especially on Sundays when boredom took to counting flies. The stories were always the same, varying only in minor detail. (*Cat and Mouse*, 78)

The preceding samples drawn from Rushdie, Marquez and Grass corroborate the dialogue between Nancy and Blanchot that started in the 1980's. Georges Bataille, the third truant participant sets the basis for two types of communities: 'operative' and 'inoperative'. The 'operative's community' or what Joseph Hillis Miller calls the 'commonsense' model, in its inextricable link to totalitarianism^b. For they are self-enclosed individuals hemmed in subjectivities, who crave the immanence of a shared communion and thus create a contract, society or community based on myths or what Nancy calls substances: 'homeland, native soil, nation family or mystical body' (Miller, 14-15).

In *Knife*, it is true for Rushdie who is closely associated with the city of Asylum, Pittsburgh project and his perpetrator, Hadi Matar, referred to as

Mr A. The narrator says, "I have found myself thinking of him, perhaps forgivably as an Ass", thus, Mr A belongs to the 'inoperative community' (the fanatical community), and rejects essential and communal immanence, since for Blanchot, the disbanding of its members into unity leads to the invalidation of that very community. Blanchot replaces pre-existing individuality with singularity which is not self-enclosed but "...exposed, at its limit, to a limitless abyssal outside that it shares with other singularities from the beginning, by their common mortality". (Miller, 91)

Rushdie reiterates:

Children going to school, a congregation in a synagogue, shoppers in a supermarket, a man on the stage of an amphitheatre are all, so to speak, inhabiting a stable picture of the world. A school is a place of education. A synagogue is a place of worship. A supermarket is a place to shop. A stage is a performance space. That's the frame in which they see themselves. Violence smashes that picture. Suddenly they don't know the rules – what to say, how to behave, what choices to make. They no longer know the shape of things. Reality dissolves and is replaced by the incomprehensible.

(*Knife*,88)

Thus, the 'inoperative community', needs a relationship among its members, which replaces immanence and communion with 'being together' and communication.

II

Rushdie's *Knife* can be interpreted from the point of view of 'place' and 'displacement'. Rufus Cook, an eminent critic from Taiwan, has reasons to believe that Rushdie is one of the most persuasive spokesmen we have for the "...benefits of increased tolerance and moral understanding of cultural displacement. Because he has been forced to find 'new' ways of describing himself, 'new' ways of being human." (23). Throughout his writings, one can locate his appreciation for the pluralistic, contradictory nature of contemporary experience. Rushdie considers that "reality is an 'artefact' therefore in his *Imaginary Homelands*, he emphasises that "... meaning is a shaky edifice we built out of scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries, newspaper articles, chance remarks, old films, small victories, people hated, people loved" (12). The immigrant or expatriate writers can better apprehend what he calls, "...the mingling of fantasy and naturalism" (19).

They largely depend on their memory. *Knife* is no exception to the claim. Though in several of his works, Rushdie has looked into the kaleidoscopic dimensions and effects of cultural displacement in *Knife* another dimension is discussed, that is the benefits of an alienated “off-centred” perpetrator and “a persuasive” and “immigrant” writer. Not only does the book narrate a “peripheral” or repressed or rejected Hadi Matar (Mr A). In *Shame* Rushdie reiterates the cultural dislocation of the characters which develops a sense of “a world turned upside down”; “...the fear that one is living at the edge of the world, so close that it might fall off at any moment” (*Shame*,15), The contemporary world has turned into a place where it is impossible to counter violence.

He says:

Reality dissolves and is replaced by the incomprehensible. Fear, panic, paralysis take over from rational thought. They - we - become destabilized even derived. Our minds no longer know how to work.

... ..

This is who we are as a species: We contain within ourselves both the possibility of murdering an old stamper for almost no reason- The capacity in Shakespeare’s Iago which Coleridge called “motiveless Malignity “ - and we also contain the antidote to that disease courage selfless ness the willingness to risk oneself to help that old stamper lying on the ground. (*Knife*, 12-13)

Such like behaviour is conceivable in the 21st-century global society which has people though culturally dislocated are nourished in two or at times many different ways. Rushdie feels that he is performing an ethical and intellectual service. In his article on *The Satanic Verses*, Mark Edmundson points out that ‘homelessness’ in Rushdie is a condition, “...to be affirmed because it allows for more metamorphosis, change the ability to be other than one was”. Both Rushdie and Matar were not on their ‘home’ turf (i.e. culturally dislocated) Rushdie says:

My eyes follow the running man as he leaps out of the audience and approaches me, I raise my left hand in self-defence. He plunges a Knife into it. After that, there are many blows to my neck, to my chest to my eye everywhere. I feel my legs give way, and I fall

Knife, 3-4).

Rushdie's main concern in *Knife* is to highlight the social and psychological dangers of cultural dislocation or what we may call the *loss* of more meaning and the lapse of cultural continuity. He recounts that for long he had been imagining a public assassination ever since *Satanic Verses* came out. "...So my first thought, when I saw murderous shape rushing toward, was: "So it's you. Here you are", he writes. The irony of the episode is he was at the Chautauqua Institution, "to talk about the importance of keeping writers safe from harm" (italics are mine) and celebrate the City of Asylum Pittsburgh Project. The moment the audience could gauge the seriousness of the murderous attack the audience dragged the man off him, in the state of precarity Rushdie thinks:

As I lay on the floor...what occupied my thoughts and was hard to bear, was the idea that I would die far away from the people I loved, in the company of strangers. What I felt most strongly was a profound loneliness. I would never see Eliza again. I would never see my sons again, or my sister, or her daughters (*Knife*, 16)

Again when he was in the hospital and treatment had started he heard somebody calling out:

"...cut his clothes off so we can see where the wounds are"

Oh, I thought my nice Ralph Lauren Suit "My credit cards are in that pocket, I mumbled.....

"My house keys are in the other pocket"

I heard a man's voice saying, 'What does it matter?' (*Knife*, 17)

Rushdie's desire to live on did not bend his spirit even on the verge of death. Urge and hope for life kept him going when the doctor instructed his team to raise his legs so that blood could flow to his heart he is reminded of King Lear who was "not in his perfect mind, but he had enough consciousness to feel humiliated. (*Knife*,19)

Rushdie unlike Wendell Berry does not want to concede to the idea of freedom often attributed to alienated modernists and romantics like Shelley- the belief that "the human place is any place "that we can fulfil high human destiny. Anywhere, anyway". The narrator in *Knife* (that is Rushdie) and Mr A have been uprooted from their natural locale and are driven by the conditions of modern society. Such conditions offer an opportunity for change and transformation and also, it is a process of cultural dispos-

session and degradation. It is even palpable in *Shame* and *Midnight's Children* as Rushdie reiterates in the *Midnight's Children*: "... it is the fate of the migrants to be stripped of history, to stand naked amidst the sworn of strangers upon whom they see the rich clothing, the brocades of continuity and the eyebrows of blessing." (*Midnight's Children*, 64). Saleem Sinai's grandmother is not unusual at all among Rushdie's characters in feeling that, "... for all her presence and bulk, she was adrift in the universe" (*Midnight's Children*, 42)

It is evident from the forgoing discussion that though cultural displacement is the major concern in Rushdie's works he seems to endorse the post-modern belief that the literary work is an "autonomous self-sufficient world' or law unto itself, independent of the external world pointed out by Gerald Graff. In *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie says: "The migrant intellect roots itself in itself in its capacity for imagining and re-imagining the world" (*Imaginary Homelands*,280). This may be true for him too in *Knife*:

Language, too, was a Knife. It could cut open the world and reveal its meaning, its inner workings, its secrets, its truths... Language was my Knife. If I had unexpectedly been caught in an unwanted Knife fight, maybe this was the Knife, I could use to fight back. It could be the tool I would use to remake and reclaim my world to rebuild the frame in which my picture of the work could once more have on the wall, to take charge of what had happened to me, to own it, make it time (*Knife*, 85).

Rushdie often likes to accentuate the extent to which real people and places have been imaginatively "off-centred" in his work to create persuasive art, that he masters in. He also calls attention to the fallibility of human intellect or memory, describing it as a "broken mirror" or "cracked lens" capable only of "fractured perception" (*Imaginary Homelands*, 10-12). In *Knife* as in *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie depends on memory: "...selects eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimises, glorifies and vilifies"; in the end, these processes create the reality which is: "...a heterogeneous but usually coherent version of event". (*Midnight's Children*, 253). Like a postmodernist, he believes that "reality" also is a 'construct' or 'fiction', "... that it does not exist until it is made like any other artefact it can be made well or badly" (*Imaginary Homelands*, 280). He succumbed to Salim Sinai's notion, "...the temptation of every auto-biographer to the illusion that since the past exists only in one's memories and words which strive vainly to encapsulate them, it is possible to create past events simply by saying they

occurred.” (*Midnight’s Children*, 528). In *Knife*, he says:

When Death comes very close to you, the rest of the world goes far away and you can feel a great loneliness. At such a time kind words are comforting and strengthening (54)

And again:

I understood that the strangeness of my life had put me at the heart of a battle between what President Macron called “hastened and barbarism and healing uniting, in spring power of love.

.....

For new their room was the world and the world was a deadly game. To escape the game and return to a wider, more familiar reality. I would have to pass a number of tests, both physical and moral, like the heroes in all the world’s mythologies. (*Knife*, 56)

Rushdie, at times, like W.B. Yeats seems to believe:

“Things fall apart: the centre cannot hold
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The ceremony of innocence is drowned
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity”

But unlike Yeats, he does not think that:

Surely some revelation is at hand,
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.

He survives the murderous attack due to his desire to live. His motif to narrate such stories is to draw attention to the distinction between art and reality. He depends on ‘decentring’, ‘off-centring’ or ‘defamiliarizing’ for which the device employed is “illusion shattering” that gives rise to the fictive nature of reality, what Gerald Graff refers to as the ‘fictionality of everything’ (15). However, it is unusual with Rushdie. There are moments of peripatetic (reversal of circumstances or turning points) and the char-

acter undergoes ‘anagnorises’ (recognition or discovery). Rushdie often returns to the question: ‘How are we to live in this world’ (*Imaginary Homelands*,18) He does not believe that the world around us is mimetic, it is anti-mimetic and keeps warning against the breakdown of reality in contemporary society. Most of his fictional works like *The Satanic Verses*, *The Moors Last Sigh*, *Midnight’s Children*, *Quichotte*, *Victory City* and even *Knife* expose the promotions of violence that have a single motive to subvert—history. Rushdie cannot be bracketed with writers inclined towards epistemological or semiotic issues, his concerns are political, social, ethical or moral because they have real-life consequences. Rushdie’s creative oeuvre is a testimony to what he refers to in *Shame* as “peeling, fragmenting palimpsest” or as “a picture full of conflicting elements” (92). His characters are constantly in a state of “self-reflection, conflicts and their parallel universes of quantum theory” (*Satanic Verses*,523). Thus, seeking one-dimensionality in them will drive the reader into the abyss. In *Knife* there is an imaginary conversation between the narrator and Mr. A :

Your mother says that at first, you didn’t like it there and wanted to come back right away. But you stayed a month and came back changed. So it seemed that travel did affect your mind.

My mother can say whatever she wants.

Your former stepfather was very surprised by what you had done. He wept and said you were smart and had a very good heart and wouldn’t touch anybody. So it seems you did change. Something happened to you there altered your whole personality.

Silence(Knife,154)

.....

The enemy is all around, and we must learn to fight . Two billion against six billion. We must learn to overcome such odds.

.....

And the idea of enemy justifies violence against such persons.

The enemy is violence of human form. Violence walking and talking and acting. In a certain way, the enemy is not human. It is a devil. How should one proceed against such entities?

You know the answer. Because the entity is you.

You believe I am violence in human form. You spent four years learning this.

You are unimportant. I have learnt many things. Finally, I asked myself, what was I personally prepared to do against the enemy? Only then did I begin to think about people like you. (*Knife*, 156)

.....

I have learnt a lot about demonisation, that's true. I know that it is possible to construct an image of a man, a second self, that bears very little resemblance to the first self, but the second self gains credibility because it is repeated over and over again until it begins to feel real, more real than the first self. I believe it's this second self that you have gotten to know, against whom your sense of an enemy is aimed. To answer your question, I know I am not that second self. I am myself, and I turn away from hatred, and toward love

(*Knife*, 156)

Like Milan Kundera, Rushdie seems to believe that life is a "one-shot affair", it cannot be revised, he also remembers Raymond Carver, a poet and his poem 'Gravy'. Once, Carver was told by the doctors that due to his lung cancer, he could live only for six months more, but he lived for ten years after that and wrote:

...Don't weep for me,

He said to his friends, "I am a lucky man.

I have had ten years longer than I or anyone expected,

Pure gravy.

And don't forget it" (*NYT*, 171)

Rushdie seems to conclude that there was no point in long-term planning in life what is important is:

“How are we today? Where do things stand right now?...”

Short-termism became our philosophy (*Knife*, 171).

For Rushdie revisiting Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain* and Kafka’s *The Castle* were mysterious and imaginative works but he (Rushdie) was trapped by “mastodon” (free and open source software running social networking; it also means mammoth, sloth, bison etc) that was unavailable elephant-in-the room. Though Rushdie had lost his right eye forever. He reclaims his role as a master storyteller rather than being a story told by others. Readers often notice the author’s humility in *Knife* during his musings on death.

He says:

We are engaged in a world war of stories a war between incompatible versions of reality and we need to learn how to fight it.

But we are not helpless. Even after Orpheus was torn to pieces his severed head, floating down the river Hebrus, went on singing, reminding us that the song is stronger than death. We can sing the truth and name the liars, we can join in solidarity with our fellows on the front line and magnify their voices by adding our own to them. (*Knife*, 179-180)

In *The Sense of Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*, Frank Kermode points out “Literature must always represent a battle between real people and images”. Rushdie also confronts the dilemma of fiction and reality in *Knife*. The memoir intricately weaves together the themes of free expression, individual identity, irony and humour, creating a thought provoking narrative that challenges societal norms and conventions. The characters encounter various forms of hatred and oppression, whether it be societal prejudice, political persecution, or personal animosity. Art becomes a vehicle for resistance, it allows the writer to delve into surreal simulation while exploring the aforementioned themes; it invites the readers to confront the nature of reality, celebrate diversity, embrace curiosity and defend the principles of individual liberty and expression.

In the contemporary global scenario media, avant-garde and mass arts have fertilised one another. Eric Hobsbawm in his *The Age of Extremes* concludes and perhaps Rushdie would agree:

We do not know where we are going. We only know history has

brought us to this point ...and why. However, one thing is plain. If humanity is to have a recognizable future, it cannot be by prolonging the past or the present. If we try to build the third millennium on that basis, we shall fail. And the price of failure, that is to say, the alternative to a changed society, is darkness

(*The Age of Extremes*, 585)

Notes:

- a. Maurice Blanchot acknowledges the need for communication revision at a “time when the ability to understand community seems to have been lost “(1), and Robert Esposito categorically concludes that “nothing seems more appropriate today than thinking community nothing more necessary demanded, and heralded by a situation that joins in a unique epochal knot the failure of all communisms with the misery of new individualism “ (*Communitas*, 1) The post phenomenological critics will follow Bentham’s idea that “community is a fiction” (of Etzioni, 156).
- b. Totalitarianism: **When** a form of government that theoretically permits no individual freedom and that seeks to subordinate all aspects of individual life to the authority of the state. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/totalitarianism>
- c. Post-truth is a term that refers to the widespread documentation of, and concern about, disputes over public truth claims in the 21st century. The term’s academic development refers to the theories and research that explain the specific causes historically, and the effects of the phenomenon. Post-truth and literature have a complex relationship. Literature, with its narratives and emotional engagement, is an effective tool for conveying truth.
- d. Posthumanism: A contribution of posthumanist thought has been to decenter the human and to demonstrate how all matter is inter-linked, mutually dependent and co-evolved, whether this is the animal forms on Earth or the impact humans have on technology and vice versa. Gender, sexuality, social relations, and families and communities have all been reconfigured through the arrival and incorporation of technology. Posthumanism demolishes the Nature/Culture binary as it has been enshrined in the Euro-American tradition. Technologies and humans, it argues, co-evolve, just as humans and nonhumans do. It also examines the prospects of

human enhancement, the expansion of artificial intelligence (AI), and the ethics of these developments as they affect humans, the law, concepts of “personhood,” and the social order.

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