

Science Fiction : An Enquiry into the Destabilized Settled Uncertainties (with reference to the novels of Salman Rushdie)

Abhibunnisha Begum

Science fiction is a genre which is used as a specific form with which we can experience 'new worlds' which are used as a means of investigating and destabilizing settled certainties concerning our own world and craving for an ultimate truth. It is the blend of the scientific and the fictional aspects which is described as the fabulous act in the works to depict the realistic aspects in an unrealistic mode which is meant for a 'social change'.

Science fiction is a genre of fiction dealing with ingenious content such as ultra - modern settings, futuristic science and technology, space travel, time travel, parallel universes, and celestial life. Exploring the consequences of scientific innovations is one purpose of science fiction, making it a "literature of ideas". Science fiction has been used by authors as a device to discuss truth-seeking questions of identity, desire, morality, and social structure. It is largely based on writing sensibly about alternative possible worlds or futures. It is similar to, but differs from flight of the imagination in that, within the context of the story, its imaginary elements are largely possible within methodically established or scientifically postulated laws of physical aspects.

Science fiction might read realistic supposition about possible future events, based sturdily on adequate knowledge of the real world, past and present, and on a thorough understanding of the nature and significance of the scientific method. Science fiction is the major non-realistic mode of imaginative creation of our epoch.

Fantasy is closely associated with other magical elements and hence is considered science fantasy. Science Fantasy is a genre where science fiction and fantasy co-exist. Stories and franchise that display fictional science as well as magical elements, sorcery or/and other magical elements are considered science fantasy. Science fiction in India has had quite a history. Thus, to my knowledge that the first Indian science fiction story (as far as we know currently) was published in 1879, in Bengali. This was followed closely by a work published in 1876 by the brilliant scientist

and polymath Jagdish Chandra Bose. Later there were Rokeya Sukhawat Husain publishing the feminist utopian story in 1905, and Premendra Mitra penning his inimitable Ghanada tales in the 1940s. The eminent filmmaker Satyajit Ray wrote science fiction for children. Manjula Padmanabhan, Kalpana Swaminathan, Samit Basu, Payal Dhar, Priya Sarukkai Chabria, are among the names that immediately come to mind when we deal with science fiction as a genre in the Indian writing in English. Salman Rushdie, the writer who entered the literary career with a science-fiction manuscript is born on June 19, 1947, to an affluent family in Bombay. He is one of the best known writers of science fiction.

Rushdie's use of science fiction devices not only challenges readers' assumptions about the genres available to postcolonial writers, but also subverts the cultural norms often perpetuated by mainstream works in that genre. Rushdie uses the two incompatible versions of the universe as a metaphor for the differences between cultural worlds, and the movements between them as a metaphor for cross-cultural encounters between colonizers and colonized. The multiple selves and worlds in Rushdie's science fiction point to the multiple, constructed, and unstable nature of cultural worlds. The title, "The Ground Beneath Her Feet", points to the uncertainty of the reality that holds us up. Rushdie demonstrates the ways in which different characters create different ground on which to stand, but at the same time points to the instability of that ground, which can give way to earthquakes of both the literal and the figurative type. Science fiction, according to Salman Rushdie, is a genre which adopts fantasy as a technique and hence,

[fantasy] is not interesting when you
separate it from actuality. It's only
interesting as a mode of dealing with
actuality. (Interview 52)

Rushdie published his first novel, *Grimus* (1975) which is a blend of science and literary fiction. Rushdie incorporated myth, magic and fantasy into his narrative *Grimus*. Scenarios borrowed from science fiction like fantasy, magic realism, mostly appear in Rushdie's novel :

Rushdie was a devourer of 'science
fiction novels of ...the form's golden
age.' (*Fury* 169)

Back then I was partial to science fiction novels. (*The Ground Beneath Her Feet* 205)

Rushdie uses science fiction as a genre and also uses as an allegory and fantasy, not as a means of facilitating his socio-political argument but as a means of camouflaging it :

Rushdie, sees science fiction not as an end in itself, however, but as a springboard for the exploration of philosophical and political concepts. (Teverson 111)

Rushdie represents the migrant condition by employing science fictional tropes like the alien, the strange in a strange land and the creation of imaginary cosmopolitan site. These sites of alterity create an alternative to the conflicted history of self and nation. Science fiction is a mode that engages with otherness in various ways and that creates alternate fictional worlds. Rushdie is a magic realist and poses his work in both form and theme as science fiction. His oeuvre evolved out of a science fictional framework and continues to reach it both formally and thematically. Rushdie narrates personal and national histories in a science fictional setting and mode.

The Science fiction imagery of Salman Rushdie goes back to the first novel he wrote, *The Antagonist* (never published). This particular novel imagines a post imperial England in the 'year of the Reverse'. (1974) Although Rushdie chose to publish this work, his most successful novel *Midnight's Children* re-invents the main characters and some of the themes of the earlier piece. *Grimus* is the debut novel of Salman Rushdie and one of the notable creations. *Grimus* is his entry for a Literary Competition by Victor Gollancz in the genre of fantasy and science-fiction. He is recognised as a science-fiction writer in *Encyclopedia of Science-Fiction*. He is recognised as a science-fiction writer immediately after the publication of *Grimus*. The competition of fantasy and science-fiction made him to enter the field of literary field and this made him convert the manuscript into a novel form. *Grimus* is a science fictional meditation on the migrant condition. His worlds depicted in the novel are seen as a postcolonial science fictional imagery.

Grimus shows the ability of Rushdie to build pluralistic worlds by fantasy which permits the readers' entrance into alternative universe. In

Grimus Rushdie uses the intervention of fiction to make the impossible - possible. The alternative realities created in *Grimus*, are by fabulation and fantasy to oppose the imposed rational reality and serve as a technique to escape the particular social restriction and conformities in their sad cities on the wings of fantastic imagination. *Grimus* tells the story of Flapping Eagle, a migrant figure who leaves his place of origin and travels through the world in search of a new homeland. In *Grimus*, for example, Rushdie posits a world that consists of an infinite number of different dimensions, both inner and outer, in which humans can visit different planets and versions of reality with the aid of a stone rose. *East, West* includes several stories that make use of science fiction.

Such science fiction elements are also central to *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*. Here the otherworld is "not paradise" and is "not so very unlike" the world in which the characters live. (GBHF 349) Rushdie uses the techniques of the popular genre to approach these issues from the point of view of the colonized world, and to unsettle the norms of the dominant culture. The complexities of the cross-cultural and cross-dimensional encounters which he presents in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* are played out in a manner that evokes the complex issues of identity and difference that are the mainstay of much postcolonial theory.

In the other works of Salman Rushdie like *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, *Luka and the Fire of Life* and *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* a number of marvellous devices can be located by the readers. And we find an ideal society, an imagined society which is innovative. Rushdie used the device science fiction as a tool to reconsider and re-read the novel in the light of critical engagement with science fiction as a vehicle for re-imagining national histories and as a potentially subversive tool for social and political engagement in a fictional realm. Rushdie uses science fiction mode and aims at depicting the painful realities, employing a non-realistic generic form.

Simultaneously, in *Midnight's Children* (1981) the 'Midnight Children Conference' (MCC) and the telepathic powers which the Midnight's Children possesses are the products of an imagination fed upon science fiction. It is an implausible novel, a partially fictionalised version of India's recent history. It is postcolonial in its ambition to deconstruct the myth of freedom, and problematise the relationship between illusion and reality and attempting to revive the tradition of story telling device.

The amalgamation of the modes of fantasy and realism stands as an effective strategy which discloses India's social and political reality. Magic realism can be an officious means of apprehending reality in all its social, historical and ideological dimensions. As Rushdie aptly asserts :

Unreality is the only weapon with which reality can be smashed, so that it can subsequently be constructed. (*Imaginary Homelands* 122)

Similarly, in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1991) there is a mention of the journey of Haroun Khalifa to a magical moon on an automaton bird called Hoopoe, the Butt. Hence, the ultimate truth behind using the technique /genre 'science fiction' is an exposure of the rotten state of society and the depiction of the state of the society to be there. So, there forms a clear image in the minds of the readers to reach the ultimate truth of their lives.

Rushdie's work has often had elements of sci-fi or fantasy, and he's one of the first names that come to my mind when confronted with the genre handle "magic realism". According to the report, *The Next People* will feature not only "factual science" but also "elements of the supernatural or extra-terrestrial", while Rushdie is quoted as saying:

It's a sort of paranoid science-fiction series, people disappearing and being replaced by other people. It's not exactly sci-fi, in that there is not an awful lot of science behind it, but there are certainly elements which are not naturalistic. (web source)

Rushdie himself has suggested a connection between the concerns of fantasy and those of postcolonial fiction in his assertion :

Fantasy, or the mingling of fantasy and naturalism, is one way of dealing with the problems of incompatible views of the world through which we all move (*Imaginary Homelands* 19)

His creation of fantastic worlds in his fiction mirrors the different "worlds" that exist on this planet: the Eastern World and the Western World; the Old World and the New World; the Third World and the Industrialised World. Rushdie's preoccupation with alternate worlds is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in his novel *The Ground Beneath*

Her Feet. In this novel, he creates a fictional world though it seems at first to be identical to our own, it differs significantly from his readers' version of reality in many matters of history.

Rushdie, however, uses these exploratory fiction techniques for postcolonial as well as postmodern purposes. Rushdie uses the meeting of these two cosmic worlds to emphasise both the creative possibilities and the dangers inherent in all cross-cultural encounters. Hence, these literary devices are labeled as magic realism.

Magic realism conveys the reality of one or several worldviews that actually exist, or have existed. Magical realism is a kind of realism, but one different from the realism that most of our culture now experiences. Magical realist fiction depicts the real world of people whose reality is different from ours. It's not a thought experiment. It's not speculation. Magical realism endeavours to show us the world through other eyes. The two dimensions of the novel, and the third in which it is read, are all culturally constructed, but these screen incomprehensibly some larger realities.

By insisting on a solid ground which the science fiction elements of the novel deny, Rushdie is pointing to a strategy for living in an unsettled postmodern, postcolonial world: stand what ground you have, even as you acknowledge that it might melt away at any moment; and while you respect the validity of other people's realities, never let anyone else tell you that your world is not the real one. Rushdie creates numerous speculative worlds to prove that realistic worlds are just as socially constructed, and that the only truths are outside of those constructions.

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**Research Scholar, Dept. of English, Andhra University, Vishakhapatnam
(Andhra Pradesh)**