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## Narrative Techniques in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*

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**Abstract:** Salman Rushdie, the author of the novel *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, is considered to be one of the most controversial, but also one of the most influential writers of contemporary literature. He was born in India, but spent most of his life in Great Britain which gave him an insight into both of these worlds and cultures. He is a writer of colorful cultural background which gives him double perspective but also influences his writing in many ways. For example, some of the themes that are usually present in his works are themes of home, roots, rootlessness, identity, history, as well as the theme of East and West. Being a migrant also influences the language he uses in his novels. He writes in English, which is the language of India's former colonizer, but in his writing English becomes English because Rushdie changes the language and makes it his own. He uses language as a weapon and thus conquers the former colonizer. History also plays important role in his writing. Not only does he use history as one of the major themes in his works, but he also plays with history, he questions it and rewrites it.

**Index Terms - Postcolonial, Narration, Eurocentrism, Culture, Diaspora**

As a result of being part of both Eastern and Western culture his works are perceived differently. In East his works are widely read, but also widely criticized and even considered an imitation. This response could be explained by the fact that he writes in English, but writes mostly about his past in India, about the people and country he left behind. In West, on the other hand, his works are praised. He is very respected and even admired by fellow writers and as a result he won numerous awards for most of his books. He is even regarded as a celebrity because his name is frequently found in tabloids.

*The Ground Beneath Her Feet* is a novel set in the 20th century. Vina Apsara and Ormus Cama are seen as modern Gods, while Rai is "the back-door man" (*GBT*,253) who tells the story of his larger than life love – Vina and the love of her life - Ormus.

They come from Bombay – India but they all have a dream of reaching the coast of America in order to achieve something greater. They move between different cultures, between East and West, as Rushdie does, so they can "step outside the frame and see the whole picture." (*GBT*,53) However, this is also what makes them rootless and they do not belong anywhere.

For the narration of his novel *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, among others, Rushdie uses the technique of katabasis. "Katabasis is the ancient Greek term for journeying down into the underworld. A katabasist, one who writes about underworld descents, also characteristically employs the narrative structure of a journey to look inward, downward and back." (*Falconer, 467*) "It is characteristic not only of Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* but also of many katabatic narratives that the two perspectives of the mythic and the historical are never comfortably reconciled. Myth and history exist in tension, even at war, with each other. Rai sees the real, material world as derailed and out of control, 'like a runaway freight train' (*Rushdie, 200*) and he wonders whether Ormus's otherworldiness might be kind of 'revenge of the spirit' (*Rushdie, 200*) against the chaotic nature of material reality." (*Falconer, 471*)

Rai's real name is Umeed Merchant and he decides to tell a story of Vina in order to let her go and move on with his life, in the same way Rushdie wanted to bid farewell to India with this novel.

I am writing here about the end of something, not just the end of a phase of my life but the end of my connection with a country, my country of origin as we say now, my home country I was brought up to say, India. I am trying to say goodbye, goodbye again, goodbye a quarter century after I physically left (*GBT,219*).

Rai leaves Bombay because he has to leave his parents. Their love towards him is excessive. He also leaves India in order to reinvent himself. He describes Ormus and Vina as godlike figures by presenting them from the start as Orpheus and Eurydice as well as other numerous mythological figures. " Rai himself compares his role in the love history of Vina and Ormus with a character in the famous Orpheus and Eurydice myth, namely the snake. In the Orpheus myth the snake is the one who brings death and takes Eurydice away from the lyre player Orpheus. However, in the novel Rai more than once stresses the fact that Vina was the one that kept coming back, searching for him." (*Buelens&Craps,76*)

The love of Ormus and Vina cannot be compared with the relationship Rai has with her. He is a mortal among them, so he is constantly in the background behind Ormus Cama. After Vina dies, Ormus refuses to live and Vina comes back from the dead and drags him into the underworld. Rai is the only one who can expect some kind of hope at the end. He remains standing on his solid ground and finds "ordinary human love" (*Rushdie,606*) He finds stability in his love with Mira. He realizes that this greater than life love for Vina cannot exist in this world.

In the novel, Rai is associated with Aristaeus, the bees keeper in Vergil's poem. "His nickname, 'Rai', is the anagram of 'Ari' in Aristaeus" and "Rai, like Aristaeus, is the only one who is able to save himself and to save his photographs – the bees - which are his main source of sustenance." (*Concilio,134*) Also, the first chapter of the novel named 'The Keeper of Bees' ends with Rai's quote about Aristaeus:

The real hero of the poem is the keeper of bees, the "Arcadian master," the maker of a miracle far greater than that wretched Thracian singer's art, which could not even raise his lover from the dead. This is what Aristaeus could do: he could spontaneously generate new bees from the rotting carcass of a cow. His was "the heavenly gift of honey from the air. And I, Umeed Merchant, photographer, can spontaneously generate new meaning from the putrefying carcass of what is the case. Mine is the hellish gift of conjuring response, feeling, perhaps even comprehension, from uncaring eyes, by placing before them the silent faces of the real (*GBT,31*)

Rai is a photographer, but photography is more than just a profession to him, it also influences his private life. He takes pictures of his dead parents in order to show respect. He deals with their death in this way.

When my father died I took his picture before they cut him down. I asked to be left alone with him and used a roll of film. Most of the shots avoided his face. I was more interested in the way the shadows fell across his dangling body, and the shadow he himself cast in the early light, a long shadow for a smallish man. I thought of these acts as respectful (*GBT*,226).

This profession puts him in dangerous situations, such as earthquakes or wars, which reminds him constantly of his own mortality. Also, because of his profession, he found himself in such danger that he had to leave India, his homeland. Photography is his way of seeing and understanding the world. It also influences his narration. He uses cinematique techniques and pays a lot of attention to details, especially in the situations he considers important.

Narrators in Rushdie's novels tell private stories in order to seduce readers and Rai does the same. He tells us something nobody else knows. "There. Now I've removed my mask, and you can see what I really am. In this quaking, unreliable time, I have built my house morally speaking upon shifting Indian sands. Terra infirma. Pilo Doodhwala had his scam; and as you see, I had mine. He made four billion dollars. I just made my name" (*GBT*, 262)

He tells us that in order to win our affection and to make us believe him. Also, he reveals to us his intimate secrets, such as his relationship with Vina. He does so in order to establish intimate relation with the reader. Rai tells us this story because he wants to rewrite himself in it, since he is not in the official version, only Ormus and Vina are. Also, this story is his way of dealing with Vina's death. "As the memory of the famous singer is seized upon and mythicized, Rai decides to set the record straight about Vina. His narration therefore aims to raise Vina from the dead, in the sense of creating a truthful image of the woman he once loved." (*Falconer*,479)

The version of the story that Rai gives us can not be regarded as objective because he is very emotionally involved in it, and he is connected with the characters which blurs his image of them. His tone is sometimes nostalgic especially when he talks about India. He has mixed emotions but he is not afraid to show them. When he talks about other characters and their faults he sometimes criticizes them, but he never judges. Maybe he preserves his judgment so that readers wouldn't judge him when he reveals to them his faults.

We cannot really regard him as reliable narrator. He seems to be omniscient narrator but he is highly subjective because he is participant. Another thing that makes him unreliable is the fact that he describes situations in which he was not present, such as Ormus's time spent in England or Vina's childhood. We can not be sure that everything Rai says is true and sometimes he actually warns us not to trust him completely. "Honesty is not the best policy in life. Only, perhaps, in art." (*GBT*,229) Another Rai's warning can be found in the first pages of the novel:

I, too, am compromised, no man knows better than I how irredeemably. Nor are there any sacrifices I can perform, or gods I can propitiate. Yet my names mean "hope" and "will," and that counts for something, right? (*GBT*,31)

Also, chronology of this novel seem so be fragmented. The plot starts on Valentine's Day in 1989, and this is no coincidence, since the fatwa was pronounced against Rushdie on this very day. However, the " narrative then moves back to Bombay of the 1950s, to Britain of the 1960s, and on to America in the 70s and 80s, to make a brief stop in Mexico in 1989 where the earthquake tragedy occurs. The narrative then goes beyond the ill-fated opening to finally close in America of the 90s." (Rocha,106)

Although Rai can be regarded as an unreliable narrator because of his participation in the story plot, his absence in certain situations and his involvement with the characters, there are much more reasons as to why Rai is a valid and reliable narrator. Not only does he make the story more appealing to the readers by being honest and sharing everything, but he also uses his art, photography, and emphasizes the important details in order to help reader understand certain situations. Intertwining of different tones, different myths and allusions, and also the use of several narrative styles and techniques is what makes *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* an exceptional novel, and although some parts of it may be a bit difficult to understand, it is all worth it in the end. Rai proved to be the right choice for the narrator of this novel, and it is almost impossible to imagine what would the novel look like if this role was assigned to any other character.

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