

# Salman Rushdie's "The Free Radio"

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# Textual reading & analysis of:

- The symbolism of the radio
- The title of the story

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# The radio

- *The Free Radio*, as the title suggests, focuses on a transistor radio as the central object in the story. Ramani, the main protagonist in this story, anticipates a reward from the government in the form of a radio in lieu of his compliance with the state's population policy. He represents the typical interpellated subject who subscribes to the postcolonial imaginary of nation-building and shares the democratic rationality that the state formulates and propagates to control its citizen-subjects. The story depicts the tyranny of the state and its institutions vis-à-vis the citizen's participation in democratic processes and the obliteration of his autonomy at the cost of exercising governmental authority.



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# The radio

- This story is set in the time of the national emergency in India that was imposed by the Congress government between 1975 and 1977 on grounds of perceived “internal disturbances” and that led to severe human rights violation and the implementation of a forced mass sterilization programme as a means to address the population question. Mass sterilization drives in developing countries had been a serious concern and were implemented in many regions in Africa and Asia under pressure from international financial institutions and pharmaceutical giants to secure loans and foreign funds to bail out the economies and to facilitate multinational takeovers within globalized structures.

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- In India it was the chiefly the male population that was targeted to execute the sterilization policy and that resulted in conducting compulsory vasectomy procedures or *nasbandi* under the pretext of introducing welfare measures and family planning regulations. The radio was used as a technological aid to broadcast the government's directives on family planning and population control in urban and rural India and thus emerged as a symbol of coloniality and coercion. The effect of regimentation and social disciplining becomes evident in the way Ramani engages in the vasectomy procedure voluntarily and does not bother to question the legitimacy of the state's policy intervention that was placed in complete disregard of the individual's freedom over his own reproductive choices.



# The radio

- The initial reference to the radio is made by Ramani himself:  
*'Yes, remember, teacher sahib,' Ram said confidentially, 'some years back, in my kiddie days, when Laxman the tailor had this operation? In no time the radio came and from all over town people gathered to listen to it. It is how the Government says thank you. It will be excellent to have.'*

The narrator reacts to Ramani's naïve articulation by dismissing him nonchalantly and by thinking to himself about how "the free radio scheme was a dead duck, long gone, long forgotten". The free radio is thus instantly transformed into a symbol of elusive desire and idle wish-fulfillment and would come to represent a breach of trust between the citizen and the state.



# The radio

- Ramani's imitation of the radio broadcast by announcing to the people on the streets "*Ye Akashvani hai*" marks his attempt to conjure up the 'voice from the sky' or to reiterate the governmental diktat and becomes an enactment of his loyalty to the state. It also expresses his lack of guile and scepticism in approaching the manipulations of the state. As the narrator puts it:

*"Ram always had the rare quality of total belief in his dreams, and there were times when his faith in the imaginary radio almost took us in, so that we half believed it was really on its way, or even that it was already there, cupped invisibly against his ear as he rode his rickshaw around the streets of the town".*



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# The radio

- His disillusionment with the actuality of the promises that the government had inspired in him is aptly communicated through his “phenomenal effort” to contain his spirit within “the fictional space between his ear and his hand” and his desperation in “trying to bring the radio into existence by a mighty, and possibly fatal, act of will”. The final blow to his hopes of reward and recognition from the state comes in the manner of the physical abuse and humiliation that he has to endure in the hands of the pro-government youth squad and the medical staff inside the white caravan stationed for conducting sterilization procedures in the locality.

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# Conclusion

- This “fictional space” thus stands for the void that the citizen encounters as part of his democratic contract with the modern state and the lack that he succumbs to unawares at the moment of formalizing an inequitable exchange upon his own reproductive function and bodily assets. The epithet ‘free’ also has ironic undertones because it refers to the idea of value, both tangible and metaphorical, that is attached to the citizen’s exercise of will.

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# Conclusion

- **Within the commodified vision of the world, nothing can come at free of cost but in Ramani's case the cost that he had to bear in view of his conformity to the attributions of the state was unfair and disproportionate. The lack of value that he is subjected to thus comes in terms of his own misplaced aspirations and his relinquishment of selfhood and agency.**

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# Thank You

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