

Salman Rushdie's "The Free Radio"

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Textual reading & analysis of:

- The idea of 'theft'
- The narrative technique/
the narrator's role



The 'theft'

- *The Free Radio* was envisioned by Salman Rushdie as a political allegory and as a commentary on the atrocious population policy that the government had forced on its people in the 1970s in India. The widow, who happens to be the love interest of Ramani in the story and for whose sake the latter undertakes a voluntary sterilization procedure even before fathering a child, is thus assumed to be a direct reference to the then Prime Minister of India – Mrs. Indira Gandhi. She is the 'Widow' that Ramani tries to appease by undergoing the vasectomy so that he fulfills the necessary precondition to solemnize their marriage. The thief's widow, as she is constantly referred to by the narrator, is already



a mother to five kids and does not wish to bear further children. This poses a hindrance to her union with Ramani in marriage because he is just a youth with a full life ahead of him and fatherhood, in terms of begetting children, ought to be a significant part of his experiences. The prospect of this marriage would, however, deprive him of this joy and would effect a truncation of his spirits and his possibilities. But Ramani is very determined to realize his love for the woman and constructs the tale of the fictional radio to convince himself about the profitability of this trade-off that he allows by signing up for an irrevocable medical procedure. This eventually leads him to accept life-long infertility as a matter of prioritizing the “national interest” over individual welfare.



The 'theft'

- The imagery of 'theft' was introduced by the narrator as an expression to his own sense of desperation over Ramani's predicament:

*"I felt most helpless, I can tell you, because I had divined that Ram had poured into the idea of the radio all his worries and regrets about what he had done, and that if the dream were to die **he would be forced to face the full gravity of his crime against his own body**, to understand that the thief's widow had turned him, before she married him, into a thief of a stupid and terrible kind, because she had made him rob himself."*



The 'theft'

- So how does the idea of the 'theft' resonate here in Ramani's context? The 'crime' committed against one's own body refers to the loss of bodily integrity and to the violation of one's reproductive autonomy that the state policy has generated in the individual's life and that Ramani himself has induced by deliberately falling a victim to a distorted nationalist grand narrative. It is the state that has stolen the reproductive right and the biological potential of its citizens without investing them with adequate knowledge about the implications of this medical procedure in terms of an individual's choice or his scope for informed decision-making. The critique that Rushdie builds up



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The 'theft'

here is not to overtly engage in the scientific discourse on sterilization or its viability as a method of population control, but to assess the individual's ordeal in dealing with the socio-political dimensions of a policy that has been thrust upon the people from a radical top-down approach. The fictional space that Ramani conjures up by cupping his hand against his ear is a symbolic extension of the democratic space that has been constrained and made invisible by the aggressive authoritarianism of the state. The common man can therefore only lament the loss of empathy, rationality and justice in the face of a moral violence that the state commits against its citizens.



The 'theft'

It is significant how at the end of the story we see Ramani shifting from one dream to the other, pursuing one desire in place of another. The narrator informs the readers about the letters that Ramani had sent him with exuberant descriptions of his new-found success at the Hindi film industry in Bombay. The narrator almost exercises a willing suspension of disbelief to acknowledge these fantastic tales about Ramani's world of luxury, glitter and glory. But he takes his stories with a pinch of salt and expresses his clarity and pragmatism when he visualizes Ramani the rickshawalla as a conjurer of illusions, as a person searching for symbols of hope amid the web of self-deceit and willful beguilement.



Narrative technique

- The narrative technique used by the author is focused on the first-person narration that the old teacher makes but the style is more or less conversational with recurrent references to a listener/s in the form of 'you'. Examples are: "...you can't teach such people" or "I saw it happen, you know..." in the beginning of the story, and "Don't ask me why he wrote to me, but he did. I have the letters and can give you proof positive..." at the end. The narrator offers a different worldview on issues and represents the intergenerational conflict that the story somewhat dramatizes throughout. The narration also shifts to a slightly third-person point-of-view when the episodes concerning Ramani's romantic liaison with the



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Narrative technique

widow or his qualms over the arrival of his reward in the form of a radio are depicted. The narrator feels affectionate toward Ramani and tries to rescue him from an impending disaster by confronting the widow and causing her public humiliation; but his intervention goes in vain and he fails to prevent their marriage. The narrator also has two more functions in the story: he serves as an active commentator in the narrative, infusing the tale with his moral judgment and his reflections on a loss or theft that is hardly realized by the young character and that forms the crux of the story; he also acts as a vehicle of linguistic experimentation for Rushdie giving him a scope to incorporate some authentic ghettoized expressions in the narrative.



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Thank You