



NARAJOLE RAJ COLLEGE
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SELF LEARNING MATERIALS
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
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The Free Radio

Semester: VI Paper: C14T

Outline of the module:

- **Author's biography**
- **The significance of the radio**
- **The symbolism of 'theft'**
- **Narrative technique**

Biography of the author

Salman Rushdie, in full **Sir Ahmed Salman Rushdie**, (born June 19, 1947, Bombay [now Mumbai], India), Indian-born British writer whose allegorical novels examine historical and philosophical issues by means of surreal characters, brooding humour, and an effusive and

melodramatic prose style. His treatment of sensitive religious and political subjects made him a controversial figure.

Rushdie was the son of a prosperous Muslim businessman in India. He was educated at Rugby School and the University of Cambridge, where he received an M.A. degree in history in 1968. Throughout most of the 1970s he worked in London as an advertising copywriter. His first published novel, *Grimus*, appeared in 1975. Rushdie's next novel, *Midnight's Children* (1981), a fable about modern India, was an unexpected critical and popular success that won him international recognition. A film adaptation, for which he drafted the screenplay, was released in 2012.

The novel *Shame* (1983), based on contemporary politics in Pakistan, was also popular, but Rushdie's fourth novel, *The Satanic Verses*, encountered a different reception. Some of the adventures in this book depict a character modeled on the Prophet Muhammad and portray both him and his transcription of the Qur'ān in a manner that, after the novel's publication in the summer of 1988, drew criticism from Muslim community leaders in Britain, who denounced the novel as blasphemous. Public demonstrations against the book spread to Pakistan in January 1989. On February 14 the spiritual leader of revolutionary Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, publicly condemned the book and issued a fatwa (legal opinion) against Rushdie; a bounty was offered to anyone who would execute him. He went into hiding under the protection of Scotland Yard, and—although he occasionally emerged unexpectedly, sometimes in other countries—he was compelled to restrict his movements.

Despite the standing death threat, Rushdie continued to write, producing *Imaginary Homelands* (1991), a collection of essays and criticism; the children's novel *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990); the short-story collection *East, West* (1994); and the novel *The Moor's Last*

Sigh (1995). In 1998, after nearly a decade, the Iranian government announced that it would no longer seek to enforce its fatwa against Rushdie. He recounted his experience in the third-person memoir *Joseph Anton* (2012); its title refers to an alias he adopted while in seclusion.

Following his return to public life, Rushdie published the novels *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999) and *Fury* (2001). *Step Across This Line*, a collection of essays he wrote between 1992 and 2002 on subjects ranging from the September 11 attacks to *The Wizard of Oz*, was issued in 2002. Rushdie's subsequent novels include *Shalimar the Clown* (2005), an examination of terrorism that was set primarily in the disputed Kashmir region of the Indian subcontinent, and *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008), based on a fictionalized account of the Mughal emperor Akbar. The children's book *Luka and the Fire of Life* (2010) centres on the efforts of Luka—younger brother to the protagonist of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*—to locate the titular fire and revive his ailing father. *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* (2015) depicts the chaos ensuing from a rent in the fabric separating the world of humans from that of the Arabic mythological figures known as jinn. Reveling in folkloric allusion—the title references *The Thousand and One Nights*—the novel unfurls a tapestry of connected stories celebrating the human imagination.

In *The Golden House* (2017), Rushdie explored the immigrant experience in the United States through a wealthy Indian family that settles in New York City in the early 21st century. His next novel, *Quichotte* (2019), was inspired by Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. *Languages of Truth: Essays 2003–2020* appeared in 2021.

Rushdie received the Booker Prize in 1981 for *Midnight's Children*. The novel subsequently won the Booker of Bookers (1993) and the Best of the Booker (2008). These special prizes were voted on by

the public in honour of the prize's 25th and 40th anniversaries, respectively. Rushdie was knighted in 2007, an honour criticized by the Iranian government and Pakistan's parliament.

The significance of 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.

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.

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 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.

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”.

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.

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. 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.

The symbolism of '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 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."

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 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.

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.

The 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 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.