

Transvestite Condition and Cosmopolitan Myth: A Study of Salman Rushdie's The Golden House

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ABSTRACT

Transvestite condition is one of the major markers in Salman Rushdie's "The Golden House" set in the City of New York. As a genuine hub of cosmopolitan culture, there is myth that the City accommodates easy living for people irrespective of where they hail from or what class and gender they belong to. People coming from different parts of the globe forming a mixed set up in the socio-cultural pattern seem to have greater assimilative and accommodative space in cosmopolitan culture. However, such naïve expectation meets a serious jolt as the members of the Golden family arrive at the city to undo their traumatic past experiences relating to the deadly 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks, but in vain. The situation turns out worst as D Golden's transvestite condition comes up. This paper strives to study the cosmopolitan myth of accommodative behaviourism and find out whether the cosmopolitan society is still languishing under gender stereotyping that Rushdie strives to deconstruct in the novel.

Keywords: Transvestite condition, Golden House, cosmopolitan culture and Myth

Introduction

Transvestite condition inks up an identity distinct from the dominant gender stereotyping of the male and the female. There is no doubt that it rules out the binary underpinning in the male/female categorisation and posits people inculcating both the sexes. With the sense of being different from biologically defined identity, the transvestites always carry out the notion that they would be recognized as individuals of the opposite sex (Kinsey 1953). Be it in the form of dress habits or manners, they try to undo their dissatisfaction at the typical gender role in the society.

As the transvestites are seen as different from the "officially sanctioned lifestyles" (Marrero, 2018, p. 7), their reception in the society is not at all satisfactory. In fact, strict adherence to norms and standards pertaining to typical gender roles accords the least space to the condition of the transvestites. Usually the society or a nation prefers heterosexuality on the basis of executing certain structural arrangements that include citizenship, marriage law, and immigration regulation (Munoz 1999), and the people who deviate

from such structurally studded developments face utmost difficulty in sustaining life. Unlike the rest of the members, they have to carry out marginal and peripheral stance despite being an inseparable part of the society. The underprivileged condition stands as a bar in realizing their individuality and basic tenets of humanity. That they are different from others is what characterizes their condition and the sense of being rooted out remains dormant.

Transvestism and Transsexuality

Most often, general perception seeks to situate transvestism and transsexuality at the same level on the basis of transcending the bounds of stereotypically defined gender roles. That the people subject to these developments can never be like the rest prompts the people to regard both the developments in identical connotations. Given the far-reaching impact exerted upon these discourses, there is greater variety of views pertaining to transsexuality and associated values. Critics as well as theoreticians tend to place transsexuality among the psychoses (Socarides, 1970), others consider it a precursor of transvestism or homosexuality (Limentani, 1979), a narcissistic disorder (Oppenheimer, 1991; Chiland, 2000) or a borderline disorder (Green, 1986). Although the observations are varied in nature, what is common is the non-conformity to the conventionally held perceptions of gender roles. It is the peripheral or borderline set up characterizing transsexuality for the concerned individuals.

There is no denial of the fact that transsexuality and transvestism contrast the stereotypical way of defining gender roles in the society, but with a difference. In simple parlance, transsexuality is more radical than transvestism in marking its existence. One's subjection to transsexuality is devoid of socio-cultural concerns or the pros and cons in its identification. On the other hand, transvestism is very much associated with socio-cultural and political norms and standards. Throwing light on this idea, Argentieri (2009) states: "A clear distinction was made between *transvestism* (men who had a compulsive urge to dress in women's clothes but who wanted to preserve their psychophysical masculinity) and *transsexualism* (men who hated their own anatomy and desperately wanted to change it into that of a female, whatever the cost)" (p. 2).

Cosmopolitan Culture and Myth

The idea of having a singular or monolithic cultural pattern in the cosmopolitan set up does not hold logic provided the free play of diversified cultural norms and practices. There is greater facilitation of heterogeneous, plural and multi-faceted socio-cultural practices that form easy access and mobility among the inhabitants. The open-ended dynamics of cosmopolitan culture also conditions assimilation and acculturation for which the citizens reduce the degree of anxiety pertaining to their originary concerns. In fact, "cosmopolitanism is the dialectical interplay between singularity and universality, placedness and displacement, rootedness and rootlessness, home and homelessness, stationariness and mobility" (Mendieta, 2011, p. 242). For this, the strict binary oppositions including that of gender roles do not have postulations the way they do in the unitary or monologic cultural settings.

Going by the general assumption regarding cosmopolitan culture being based on three elements "First, *individualism*...Second, *universality*... Third, *generality*" (Pogge, 1992, p. 48), the myth states that all

inhabitants irrespective of caste, creed, religion and gender would be treated equally. Liberal outlook, non-interference into personal life and liberty are assumed to be the basic tenets in the pretext of cosmopolitan culture. If “Nothing human would be stranger to the cosmopolitan citizen of the world” (Mendieta, 2011, p. 242), there is hardly any question regarding non-reception of the people bearing distinct gender roles. The accommodative and receptive approach of the cosmopolitan culture is believed to be the potent principle conditioning easy living for the people. The subversion of binary opposition in the male/female sexes seems to be within the bounds of cosmopolitan culture for which discriminatory practices in respect of gender roles are seen far beyond escalations.

Rushdie's Approach to Transvestism

Rushdie has been a strong campaigner in regard to multiplicity, plurality and heterogeneity in judging the socio-cultural body of the times. The conventionally held views and belief system bearing the unitary character do not have space in his approach, which, on the contrary, is inclusive in nature and spirit. The exclusive way of dealing with issues has never been an area of major thrust in his deliberations. In this connection, Blair Mahoney observes, in his study on “Rushdie and His World: The Carnavalesque, Masquerade, and Grotesque Realism in His Fiction”, as such: “In his novels, Rushdie constructs versions of postcolonial subjectivity and the nation which break free of essentialist and monolithic thinking and which are based instead on ideas of hybridity and multiplicity” (Mahoney, 2003, p. 171).

As “Rushdie's fiction consistently embraces contradiction, privileging the plural over the singular, the polyphonic over the monologic. One of the clearest ways in which it does so is through the construction of dual oppositions [...] only to deconstruct those oppositions by demonstrating that the apparent polar opposites are in fact interchangeable and mutually interdependent” (Booker, 199, p. 238), his primary goal is to achieve a socio-cultural conditioning free of unitary and stereotypical way of perceiving things. It is true that Rushdie's fiction does not entail the condition of a transvestite as a major development, which, interestingly, comes into view in connection with the problems being faced by the migrants. In fact, Rushdie's approach to transvestism is an added postcolonial trajectory that deconstructs the accommodative myth of the cosmopolitan culture of the west.

Migrancy and Transvestism in *The Golden House*

Salman Rushdie's *The Golden House* is based on the issue of migrancy that the Goldens experience in the city of New York following the carnage of the 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks in which Nero Golden lost his wife. Nero Golden along with his three sons, Petya, Apu and D Golden have arrived in the city to undo the traumatic phase of life bearing the romantic notion of being recognized as the rest of the inhabitants. For this, they have adopted Graeco-Roman identity changing their previous names and cultural affiliations. As migrancy “offers professional opportunity and financial betterment but also insists on assimilation and acculturation, a rejection of old habits, traditions and conditioning, and a merging with the culture of the new context” (Joshi, 2004, p. 84), the Goldens seem to have been on the track. Their assimilation into the

larger spectrum of cosmopolitan society is a noble attempt at finding a way out in view of sustenance and continuity in the life of a migrant.

Although assimilation is a significant requirement for the sustenance of migrancy and this is what the Goldenes have done, there are certain reservations on the part of the host culture in receiving the migrants. Ranging from adopting Graeco-Roman identity to the constant effort in leading life as the people in New York do, the Goldenes' assimilation is very much prominent. But similar treatment especially in respect of receiving them seems to be missing to some extent from the end of the host culture. The casualty suffered by the Golden brothers does not speak high of the receptive coloring of the culture in New York. There is no denial of the fact that the Golden brothers, Petya, Apu and D Golden succumb to the circumstances that are different from one another. Petya's introvert nature, Apu's too much involvement in public life, and D Golden's transvestite condition are some of the potent forces that have led to their catastrophic end. The unfriendly and inhospitable attitude carried out in the cosmopolitan set up in New York stands as an impregnable barrier in the life of D Golden. Despite his constant effort in getting recognised of the transvestite condition, he is rejected outright. Finding out no palpable alternative as such, he commits suicide. In the suicide note, he states: "It isn't because of the difficulties of my own life that I do this. It's because there's something wrong with the world which makes it unbearable to me. I can't put my finger on it, but the world of human beings doesn't function well. The indifference of people to one another. The unkindness of people. It is disenchanting. I am a passionate human being but I don't know how to reach out to anyone anymore" (Rushdie, 2017, p. 267).

The helpless condition that D Golden feels validates the utter insecurity in the life of a migrant. Indeed the migrant position is not as easy as it seems provided the inhospitality of the host culture and the impossibility of going back as the long absence from homeland makes everything strange and unfamiliar. If migrancy is not simply an "interval between fixed points of departure and arrival, but a mode of being in the world ... The migrant voice tells us what it is like to feel a stranger and yet at home, to live simultaneously inside and outside one's immediate situation, to be permanently on the run, to think of returning but to realize at the same time the impossibility of doing so, since the past is not only another country but also another time, out of the present" (King et al. 1995, p. xv), the Goldenes' stay in New York is simply stultifying and suffocating. This is more redundant in the case of D Golden as he cannot get the space aspired for in having the identity and recognition of being a transvestite.

Cosmopolitan Myth and Reality in *The Golden House*

The general assumption persists that cosmopolitan culture does have greater assimilative and accommodative spirit in which equal treatment is said to be meted out to people irrespective of socio-cultural status and gender roles. Unlike the cultural set up in which unified controlling mechanism takes the upper hand, the cosmopolitan culture facilitates easy living for people without much accountability. What matters a lot is the idea of world order involving people from different geographical and socio-cultural backgrounds. In this context, Mendieta (2009) states that "to be cosmopolitan was to think oneself citizen of the entire world" (p. 242), and such thoughts would do away with cultural constraints people usually face

other than that of cosmopolitanism. The petty concerns of divisive developments are said to be absent from cosmopolitan culture.

Given the rich mosaic of socio-cultural variety, cosmopolitan culture inks up greater hybridity at the expense of hierarchical structure. The binary oppositions in the cultural components are assumed to be missing for which all cultural bodies remain at similar treatment and reception. Hence Homi K. Bhabha states that the “interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 5). In fact, dominance of a particular cultural body sidelining the rest causes all sorts of problems for the inhabitants. The idea of a composite or a unified society might not be a reality provided the privileged position a given culture enjoys. However, this loses its edge in cosmopolitan culture in which cultural associations bear less possibility of having divisive developments.

The associative and acculturative myth of cosmopolitan culture does not augur well given the stereotypical attitude of categorizing gender in the society. For this, the myth regarding the merging of binary oppositions is seen to be missing and the space remains studded with discriminatory ideologies. Taking this proposition into account, Salman Rushdie, in *The Golden House*, represents the transvestite condition of D Golden with the problems being faced in respect of retaining the changing identity. As his manners and attitudes exhibit “feminine traits rather than the libidinal relationships between persons of the same sex” (Epps, 1995, pp. 242-243), his identity becomes at once plural and multiple. Though he is born as man, he fails to stick to that tag as he starts taking interest in the manners of the opposite sex. To the eye of people, he is a man; but his inclination towards the feminine mannerism affects the sustenance of male identity. The narrator states: “[He]—no!—Now it had become appropriate to change her pronouns and say simply she, her, herself!” (Rushdie, 2017, p. 266).

When Riya receives a “call from the 2-Bridge girls’ club telling her, not unkindly, that they had had to ask [him] to stop coming in, because [he] had begun to importune the girls with intensely personal questions and they were no longer comfortable with having [him] around” (Rushdie, 2017, p. 254), the plight of D Golden becomes uncertain. The Golden cross the bounds of the past and also the country of origin, and embrace New York as the ultimatum for the rest of life. Of course they succeed largely in getting assimilated into the socio-cultural life of the city. Most often the feeling that they have come from another country, i.e., India does not distract their psyche as the requisite space for the continuation of life is readily accessible in the host country. But this does not speak of the entire picture as the culture of adoption is not responsive enough to the gender related question as observed in case of D Golden.

While dealing with the outright rejection of the transvestite condition of D Golden, Salman Rushdie puts a big question mark on the spirit of cosmopolitanism that is assumed to be a reigning aspect in the culture of New York. As a true cosmopolitan set up largely champions the cause of plurality and facilitates a decent platform for different people irrespective of their class and gender, the New York City fails miserably in this respect, especially as far as the issue of gender is concerned. By not recognizing the transvestite condition of D Golden, the tall claim of cosmopolitanism being accommodative and receptive loses its ground. Here the

myth is dismantled or deconstructed by showing the resentful attitude towards D Golden in view of his transvestite condition.

It is with the idea of dismantling the cosmopolitan myth of being accommodative and receptive that Rushdie's dissent at the originary, unitary, monologic and essentialist conditioning of discourse comes into effect. That nothing is exclusive and everything is relative is what Rushdie firmly believes in, and this makes his stand clear in regard to the postcolonial subject position. When cosmopolitan culture is assumed to have greater flexibility and non-interference with the life of people, it is a kind of essentialist and exclusive claim that Rushdie does not take for granted.

D Golden's failure in coming into terms with the mainstream society points out the remnants of conservatism that the culture in New York cannot get rid of. It is true that the New York City largely inhabits people from different parts of the globe and they lead comparatively a decent life. For instance, Rene (the narrator), Suchitra, to mention a few, are from different countries, and they do not have any problem in passing days as the fellow New Yorkers do. Even Nero Golden and his two elder sons, Petya and Apu do have assimilation and acculturation and with this they just have their living. However, this is what comes to a standstill as the gender issue comes up, particularly D Golden's transvestite condition. By ruling out D Golden's condition as such, the culture of New York directs more towards polarization and monologism than a purely cosmopolitan setting.

Conclusion

As Rushdie dismantles the accommodative and receptive myth of cosmopolitan culture in the novel, his uncompromising stance against everything self-assuring and essential becomes very much clear. Indeed Rushdie's is a stance that may have its fruition in the cultural set up of cosmopolitanism of which New York is a living testament in the novel. Most often, the city sustains the spirit of cosmopolitan culture, but it equally sticks to the brunt of conservatism as soon as the transvestite condition of D Golden arises. Such a coloring rules out what the narrator in Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown* states as such: "Everywhere was now a part of everywhere else. Russia, America, London, Kashmir. Our lives, our stories, flowed into one another's, were no longer our own, individual, discrete. This unsettled people. There were collisions and explosions. The world was no longer calm" (Rushdie, 2006, p. 37). In such a global conditioning, all people, it does not matter what class and gender they hail from, should get equal treatment and recognition. There should not be any discrimination in the name of caste, gender or the colour of skin. Unfortunately, the continuing myth of an all-friendly environment in the cosmopolitan set up is missing from Rushdie's *The Golden House* as the issue of transvestite condition of D Golden arises. The treatment he receives in the society does not represent the tall claim of cosmopolitanism as a decent platform for people in terms of equal treatment and recognition.

It may be stated that the transvestite condition hardly has its space in society in spite of the constant effort being made by the concerned individuals or groups to be recognised as such. Showing stark indifference to one's transvestite condition is so strong that even the cosmopolitan socio-cultural set up cannot get over such discriminatory practices. The reigning myth of being accommodative and receptive that

cosmopolitanism champions seem to have some sort of lacuna as the outright rejection of transvestite condition comes into a reality. That a cosmopolitan socio-cultural setting is all responsive and receptive to people irrespective of the class and gender they belong to is also an essentialist and monologic discourse, in which Rushdie does not have faith and conviction. As usual, he deconstructs and dismantles the myth in presenting the pathetic and fatal end of D Golden as a consequence of the outright rejection of his transvestite condition in the City of New York, one of the major hubs of cosmopolitan culture.

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