

RUSHDIE'S THE MOOR'S LAST SIGH AS A FAMILY CHRONICLE

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Abstract:

The Moor's Last Sigh is Rushdie's second Post-Fatwa novel and one that he considers to be his best literary effort yet. "The Moor's Last Sigh is a picaresque recounting of the rise, decline and plunge to extinction of a Portuguese merchant family anciently established in southern India, focusing on the period from 1900 to the present." (Rushdie)

The novel's narrator Moraes Zogoiby, writing, like Rushdie himself, under a death warrant, is the descendant of Catholics and Jews born in Bombay. The "Moor" traces his ancestry back to Boabdil, the Moorish leader who surrendered the Alhambra to Ferdinand and Isabella in 1492, the year that saw both the Reconquista from the Moors and the expulsion of Jews from Spain.

Full Paper:

The Moor's Last Sigh is a family chronicle. The novel pictures the Jewish and Goan-Christian ancestry of Abraham Zogoiby, a billionaire Bombayite and his artist-wife Aurora Zogoiby. It deals with the oedipal mix-up involving Aurora Zogoiby, her son Moraes Zogoiby and his lover Uma Sarasvati.

The novel is prefaced with a family tree. The three-fourths of the novel is set in India and the last part in Spain. The backdrop of the Zogoibys' family saga is the Spanish history, the Portuguese colonial history and the Jewish diaspora from Spain to south-western India. Rushdie gathers the story of Moraes Zogoiby from historical bits and pieces from Malabar Coast to Malabar Hill; from Bombay to Benengeli in Spain and reassembles them.

The Moor's retrospective narration recovers as well as re-covers four generations of family history. Moor's narrative covers a time-span of over hundred years - from 1876 to 1988- from the birth of his grandfather Francisco da Gama to the end of the story, unfolding the family's history. He is an offspring of Abraham Zogoiby and Aurora da Gama. Abraham has descended from Boabdil, the last Muslim Sultan

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of Granada. Aurora has inherited the blood of a Portuguese navigator, Vasco da Gama, who brought European trade and colonialism to India. The historical links of the characters are brought out by showing Moraes Zogoiby, known as 'the Moor', to be the last survivor of a family descended from the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama (ca.1469-1524), who sailed to India in search of spice and whose offspring grew rich in shipping it to the West.

Among his ancestors, Moraes also numbers Boabdil (Abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad XI, ca. 1460-1527), the last Muslim king in Spain, forced in 1492 to surrender his city to Ferdinand and Isabella, the reconquering catholic monarchs. The spot from which Boabdil gazed and sighed at Granada for the last time, today a tourist attraction, is known as 'The Last Sigh of the Moor'. His descendents, who made their way to southern India, took his nickname, 'Zogoiby' – 'The Unfortunate' – as their family name. The title in fact is a translation of the phrase in Spanish, el ultimo suspiro del Moor, which is the tag attached to the story of the fall of Granada at the end of the Arab period in Spain. In the same year the Jews of Spain were offered the choice of baptism or expulsion and Columbus, financed by the royal conquerors Ferdinand and Isabella, sailed forth to discover a new route to the east.

Another branch of the family descended from Black Jews, who immigrated to Cochin in India, had built a synagogue in 1568. Moraes concentrates on the last four generations of his ancestors, spanning the first eight decades of the twentieth century.

The story begins in Spain at the last stage of Moor's life when he is imprisoned and forced to write his narrative by the painter Vasco Miranda – his mother's former lover and a jealous rival in art. He writes his story, nailing them in scraps and pieces to trunks of trees and fences:

"I have used the last of my strength to make this pilgrimage...The world is full of sleepers waiting for their moment of return...I'll lay me down upon this graven stone, lay my head beneath these letters RIP, and close my eyes, according to our family's old practice of falling asleep in times of trouble, and hope to awaken, renewed and joyful, into a better time" (432-434).

Moor's family saga and personal afflictions portray the tortured history of twentieth century India. Rushdie portrays the life in late, colonial India- an era of growing change- through the characters of Moraes' maternal relatives, 'the battling da Gamas of Cochin' - great grandmother Epifania, and her husband Francisco, grandmother Belle, and her husband Camoens, great aunt Carmen, and her husband Aires. Moor says:

“Mine is the story of the fall from grace of a high-born cross-breed: me, Moraes Zogoiby, called ‘Moor’, for most of my life the only male heir to the spice-trade-‘n’-big-business crores of the da Gama-Zogoiby dynasty of Cochin, and of my banishment from what I have every right to think of as my natural life by my mother Aurora, nee da Gama, most illustrious of our modern artists, a great beauty who was also the most-tongued woman of her generation.”(5)

Abraham Zogoiby, Moraes’ father, as has been mentioned earlier, is a south-Indian Jew. Moraes gives less detail about his paternal line. His father, Abraham Zogoiby, is introduced as a manager in the Gama Trading Company warehouse. Aurora falls in love with him and seduces him away from his Jewish heritage. But his conniving mother Flory Zogoiby disagrees with his decision. Abraham takes control of the business and returns it to prosperity even during the dangerous, early days of World War II, with financial help from Flory. Her condition for giving the loan is that he turns his first-born son over to her, to be raised as a Jew. When Aurora comes to know of this, she decides that she would not have children till her mother-in-law died. Only after Flory's death do Abraham and Aurora reunite. They have four children Ina, Minnie, Mynah, and Moor. They shift to Bombay and achieve great success in the worlds of art and politics. Abraham becomes India's most powerful and corrupt businessman, lord of an empire that extends from international banking to prostitution and drug smuggling. Aurora becomes India's greatest living artist, ‘Aurora Bombayalis’, the charismatic, viper-tongued queen of Bombay's secular elite. They rise to dazzling, hyperbolic heights of fame and power. Logically their fall is equally far and hard – their fall-out of love and also their fall from their semi-divine perches. There is rivalry between Abraham, nestled atop Bombay's tallest skyscraper, and Raman Fielding, a Hindu political demagogue heading an underground army of ruffians and hooligans.

Moor falls in love with Uma Sarasvati, who teaches him love’s transcendental value. It is with her that he learns the fact that love overbalances truth and it is only here that his belief systems are fundamentally challenged. Having gained his love and trust, Uma betrays him in the cruellest possible way. Uma causes such a violent rift between Aurora and her son .

Moraes is arrested for Uma's murder and involvement in his father's black marketing narcotics. He is rescued by Raman Fielding, who is cautiously approaching his goal of political mastery of Bombay. Moor, as a member of Fielding's elite goon squad, terrorizes and intimidates anyone who opposes the interests of the Hindu majority.

Following Aurora's death, Moor leaves Fielding's camp and allies with him to bring peace to his mother's still tormented soul. Through a private investigator, he learns that both his parents had had multiple sexual partners and harboured a multitude of secrets. While these unravel, it appears that Aurora's death was not an accident. Moor once more goes into action, murdering Fielding, the presumed perpetrator. It is only later that he knows his father, Abraham, to be the murderer. Simultaneously, Abraham's commercial empire collapses when its illegal underpinnings are uncovered. In a rapid denouement, all of the main characters, except Moraes, perish in fire bombings that level much of Bombay.

Moreas flies to Spain, to search for four of his mother's paintings that survived the conflagration. Three, he was certain, had been stolen by Vasco Miranda, the artist whom Aurora had dismissed from her household fourteen years earlier. Vasco Miranda burns up from inside due to his jealousy of Aurora's talent. He betrays the family, in spite of having stayed with them for a couple of years. His betrayal also has an important part to play in the degradation of Abraham Zogoiby. His definition of democracy is 'one man one bribe' (167). Abraham takes the words of Vasco seriously and becomes one of the most corrupt businessmen of the country. Vasco plays a major role in the annihilation of the Zogoiby family. Miranda's painting, which Aurora had mocked as commercial fluff, had earned him a vast fortune and international fame. He used his riches to construct a hideous fortress on a hillside in Benengeli.

As Moraes is wandering in the city, he is taken prisoner and locked up in the tower with a Japanese art conservator, Aoi Ué. She is kidnapped to remove Miranda's pedestrian over-painting of *The Moor's Last Sigh* in order to reveal the original portrait of a bare-breasted, young Aurora Zogoiby. Miranda orders Moor to record his life story in full detail. He also promises that, like Scheherazade, he will be allowed to live so long as his tales amused his master. When both tasks are complete, Miranda turns his gun on them. Aoi Ué perishes, but Moor is spared. Moor flees, nailing sheets of his story to trees and fences across the countryside.

The most complete and gratifying work to emerge from Salman Rushdie's imagination.... *The Moor's Last Sigh* is an exotic story, in its setting, in its characters, in its punning extravagance, and in its deeply human core. It is an extraordinary family saga...full of wonderful characters, and the insight born of genuine reflection.... A remarkable spell of creativity.

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