

Reflections on Identity Crisis in the Twenty-First Century: Salman Rushdie's *Fury*

Dr Reena Singh

Assistant Professor-III, Amity University, Noida

Abstract

In this paper, I would like to emphatically draw the attention on the spheres of inevitable discrepancies of highly ambitious world, especially to the obsessed appreciator of technical advancement, who undermines its adverse impact on the cultural and social outlook. To clearly state that, though we have made such a great development, but somewhere we have forgotten or bereft of ourselves due to quenching of apparent or external 'I' rather taking heed of inner self. With this line of thought, the whole paper on the novel *Fury* would be analyzed. The male protagonist Mallik Solanka who procrastinates from the real questions of its conscious, through him are projected multifarious problems- Social perversions, moral digression, racism and women portrayal. As these are issues that, deals with the identity crisis of the different characters in the novel. Though *Fury* depicts the American life and attitude but to great extent it's an epitome for all the developed or developing nations. Thus Rushdie in *Fury* tries to depict that, America in the highest hour of its hybrid, was in truth a place of half-truths, half-knowledge, classical mishmash and of course technology. This is symbolic to all those nations of global exposure and influence reverberating the theme of American dream.

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Fury is an intellectual drama set in New York depicting the scenario of American dream. Not an Indian in India but an uprooted Indian or Indians in the same society which offers them all the intellectual stimuli and on which they apply these very theories back in panic and apprehension. In *Fury*, while Professor Solanka, the key construct, lives in an English society, he is keenly conscious of his descent and ruminates over the ways in which the difference between him-the immigrated Indian, in England and the English show up without necessarily making any difference to life. Being English is almost like a disguise in Solanka's part. He surprises himself when he uses a nickname in order not to disclose his Indian origin. And while the story goes on to reveal that his friend Jack Reinhart, a black American has been murdering young American girls, Solanka had already identified himself with this friend and seen to possibility of having committed the same murders himself-unconsciously. This 'identification' and the 'merging of identities' are the mainstay of the novel's intellectual play in New York.

Rushdie has transcended that position which is usual about Indo-Anglican writers-that of a window to the East. In *Fury* he has become an eye opener to the West. The back cover reads:

"Malik Solanka, historian of ideas and dollmaker extraordinaire, steps out of his life one day, abandons his family without a word of explanation, and flees to New York. There's a *Fury* within him, and he fears he has become dangerous to those he loves. He arrives in New York at a time of unprecedented plenty, in the highest hour of America's wealth and power, seeking to 'erase' himself. But *Fury* is all

around him. Cab drivers spout invective. A serial killer is murdering women with a lump of concrete. The petty spats and bone-deep resentments of the metropolis engulf him. Meanwhile, his own thoughts, emotions and desires are also running wild. A young woman in a D'Angelo baseball cap is in store. Also another woman, with whom he will fall in love and be drawn towards a different fury, whose roots lie on the far side of the world?"¹

Amongst the mass of erudite, web-like writing, only the following lines refer to Solanka's past in India. Even the genre of magical realism does not afford Rushdie the possibility of a place of origin other than his biographical one. Naturally, this is a hint that Rushdie's thoughts echo in Solanka's way of thinking except that the events that are shown to have given rise to them are unreal.

The text informs us about Solanka that 'neither of his own parents had been fit to travel from Bombay to attend his graduation' from Cambridge. Two paragraphs away Rushdie writes, 'Solanka's links with his family were badly eroded-the past was a broken pot'. (p. 19-20)²

The slight hint of a 'past' in Bombay is all that is Indian in the book. It is told as a passing reference that Bombay was his home before he left for, Cambridge and he dumped his past then and there, never wishing to be confronted with it again in his future. This appalling fear of the memory of his past is one of the sources of his *Fury*.

As the narrative unfolds, it exposes a deep emotional involvement with the place of his birth and a buried sorrow about having severed his ties with it. Reading through the adventures of the uprooted Malik Solanka, one comes across innumerable comments on America: What people think, what they find and what perhaps America really is. Among these I have chosen to discuss a few important points. I see these points as an Indian's (Rushdie's) intellectual apprehension of the unconscious attraction towards the West. Malik Solanka's history or 'back-story' is traced in reverse gear. Two friends, one in Lomion, the other in New York, and two women, one in London and the other in New York are Solanka's only real relationships: Relationships that leave deep impressions on Solanka; relationships that he cannot shrug off, cannot forgive himself for breaking or for being unfaithful to.

The source of Solanka's *Fury* is that secret identity which he carries around. He is an Indian born of a father who abandoned him and his mother soon after his birth. Secondly, his stepfather was a sexual pervert. Young Solanka wanted to forget both these facts. He settled in England with an English wife and a respectable job and acquired a disguised identity - a mask - which he bears throughout the novel. The metaphor of the masks - if we see what the dolls ultimately become - ring throughout the novel as a necessary camouflage for self-advertisement. One becomes 'important' by virtue of the masks.

The exile, above what his family has decreed on him is not offered by Bombay. It is offered to Solanka by his education at Cambridge. His profession as a philosopher and a historian, a professorship in England has sentenced him to this personal and. intellectual exile. What is left for Solanka is now flight to the other hemisphere. Once he has examined the drama he has triggered in the creation of Little Brain, a doll which soon becomes a mask, he goes to New York. He does not return to India. I think he cannot return to India because of his lack of confidence in his Indianness. He cannot go back to the obscurity which India implies to him. Instead he has to go to New York and find himself being 'recognised' at every turn on the road. This is a reflection on the Indian author's choice of destination. The need for an Indian author for espousing pluralism on the one hand and the inevitable exposure of his sense of alienation on the other hand in his novels.

But the text repeats that Solanka expected obscurity in New York. To him New York promises a life of oblivion. He goes there to 'erase' himself but at the same time, we find that he 'rewrites' his identity all

over again. This is his Second flight from his real identity rather than from only his little Brain identity. This rewritten identity or this new mask that he creates is Akasz Kronos. So from being an Indian to being the mind behind Little Brain to being the fictional revolutionist Akasz, the real Solanka is removed three steps in the eyes of the world. Even after all his attempts at flight, the *Fury* still rages in Malik Solanka. It shows up in his fictional selves and shows up in his personal self so that he is always dissatisfied with the process of his 'erasure'. Although he has adopted a mask, his real self is not hidden from him. And this is the point where Solanka's actual intellectual qualities show up-not in controlling his rage but in intellectual appraisal of situations in and around him.

Solanka is fully aware of racist problems in America. The question of racist discriminations is raised subtly from time to time in the narrative. Solanka refrains himself from telling Skywalker, an adman who thinks he is from England, that he is not British but a postcolonial who has migrated to England. With 'similar aims at disguise, he observes that his son does not know his history and he would prefer not to ever let him know it. And again we can see that his *Fury* arises from this gap or the tear between his present self and his inherited identity.

The Miami people's demonstrations about anti-racism as shown on television enrages Solanka and he phrases the perfect irony of such manoeuvres thus: 'Their flight from bigotry had turned them into bigots.'(p.38)³

The racist problems that Rushdie attacks in this book have global relevance. He is not asking the question of a Muslim's (Solanka is a Muslim) identity here. His text disguises his problem in the feat of storytelling and echoes authors of several generations before him, who have from time to time questioned the justification of isolating members of one race from the other.

We come across another, observation of present culture through professor Solanka's intellectual powers in the form of nostalgia. His first wife has become a well-known figure in advertising. The fifty-five year old Solanka observes that the society of the seventies saw advertising as "frivolous ... slightly shameful...a confidence trick, a neat, the notorious enemy of promise" (p.33)⁴. Linked with capitalism advertising was seen as horrible; the job of selling was considered dishonourable in that era while - and this is the main point of his remarks - now "Everybody, as well as everything, was for sale."(p.33)⁴

Advertisements contributed to "presenting the dream of an ideally beautiful America," which Solanka found untrue. This is again a reference to thinly masking the real, since "beyond money management" and networking:

"the commercials soothed America's pain, its head pain, its gas pain, its heartache, its loneliness, the pain of babyhood and old age, of being a parent and of being a child, the pain of manhood and women's pain, the pain of success and that of failure, the good pain of the athlete and the bad pain of the guilty, the anguish of loneliness and of ignorance, the needlesharp torment of the cities and the dull, mad ache of the empty plains, the pain of wanting without knowing what was wanted the agony of the howling void within each watching, semi-conscious self. No wonder advertising was popular. It made things better. It showed you the road. It wasn't a part of the problem. It solved things." (p.34)⁵

The text swerves from the topic of the ailments of American customers to the not very different headaches of the advertising agents. Which means that first of all there are 'pains' in America. Thus, the masks cannot conceal the real. In close association follow the comments about Americans' tendency to be informal and forthright. "This was the country of the diminutive. Even the stores and the eating places got friendly fast." (p.35)⁶ But the surprise lies in its opposite. While Solanka muses about the

forwardness of the next-door neighbour, a copywriter by the name Skywalker, he is confronted with the latter's hidden fear of saying an "unsayable" thing by mistake. .

‘Yes, this was the other side of the coin of the other side of the coin of his new hi-how-you-doin', up-front, in-your-face ... environment, this new cultural hypersensitivity, this almost pathological fear of giving offence.’ (p.35)⁶

We can see how the informal and forthright tendencies of Americans sooner or later give way to the real sense of insecurity in them. Thus, the metaphor of the mask applies here too. Informal behaviour is a mask to hide the personal touchiness of individuals in America. The real self is never lost under veil, intellectual or comic. Apart from hiding one's identity, there is yet another question which the text of *Fury* addresses. This time more poignantly, the problem we face is whether racist boundaries have really merged with the help of intellectual masks.

Jack Reinhart is a journalist. Well-known for his work, he believes that he has crossed the threshold in some way. That is, he believes that no one looks upon him as different from the White Americans because he has made his mark in his profession. Again this subject brings up the question of all black writers in general. Rushdie has again not been original here. But he adds an Indian's perspective to it. The ensuing events show in the text that this black man makes one silly mistake. He believes he can afford to forget his colour but the others haven't forgotten it. And the others trap him into a sinful deed and also kill Jack Reinhart and put all the blame on him for the murders they had committed and top it all with a racist suicide note. They write a fake suicide note saying that Jack murdered the girls because they would not 'fuck' him because he is 'black'.

While Reinhart has no sense of low self-esteem because of his colour, the American boys assume it as a possible grudge he might hold against the girls who were, therefore, murdered. This is what Solanka observes. Solanka's intellectual powers steer him to the implications this suicide note has for all the black and coloured people in America. Solanka's extreme sense of disgust and humiliation at what Reinhart was involved in exposes his displeasure at the coloured man's 'image' in a predominantly white man's society. That is why Solanka does not feel so ashamed of the boys' actions. He analyses the subject of perversion in the relationship of rich girls with rich boys but he cannot bring himself to calm at the thought of what Jack Reinhart has done and what has been done to him. So beyond intellectual grasp of the situation, as far as his friend is concerned Solanka has more feeling for him by way of identification.

Thus, the Americans sense of insecurity, the "timorousness" of Americans in the face of the unknown" (p.85)⁷ is again observed in the way the Americans spray the city with the pesticide Anvil because birds had died of West Nile virus from the Staten Island wetlands. This time Solanka views America as a British observer. In Eleanor's eyes this is the American's "overcompensation" for unknown dangers (p.85)⁷. Unknown dangers for America lurk even in foreign lands. Americans label it 'envy', says Milo quoting her father who believed that he was the same Old Russians, rooted in thought to his motherland but dead tired of and maddened by the Russian life. So he came to America as the only route of escape from worldly realities. In America he only had "women and cigarettes and booze and mountains and work work work" (p.113)⁸. He had no other liabilities whereas beyond America was the *Fury* of the world. This *Fury* perhaps refers to the forces of American dream the risk that the world endangers if these movements spread across the globe.

References

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