



Research Paper

A Parable on Disagreement: Salman Rushdie's the Old Man in the Piazza

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Abstract: This paper discusses Salman Rushdie's *The Old Man in the Piazza* as almost a parable on disagreement. Critically comprehending the unnamed central character of the story, the old man, the paper traces the yes times and the no times. From absolute conformism to abject rejection of arguments, the Piazza, is looked upon as a locale which stands testimony to not only the shift from forceful subjugation to frivolous misuse of language, but also how the opposites melt into each other and mediatization of truth leads to pseudo-hero worshipping.

KEYWORDS: suppression, noise, fourth wall, free will, disagreement,

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Reading Salman Rushdie, especially from an Indian perspective, one usually expects a crafty blend of historical fiction and magic realism, but, *The Old Man in the Piazza* surprises with its stylistic, structural and thematic features. This short story, almost a parable on disagreement, has no formal sections, yet, is divided into three narrative units, each dealing with some random events which end abruptly, but are knit together with a clandestine unity.

The story begins with the introduction of an old man who comes to a piazza everyday and sits there observing events unfolding before him. The narrator describes him as mostly wearing a 'blue jacket buttoned all the way up to the neck, and navy pants that fasten with drawstring at the waist'[1]. Minute details such as the time at which he orders a beer and a sandwich and the time at which he 'wipes his lips'[1] and moves out of the piazza, is described in order to reassure the reader about the regularity of the things with the old man. But, the reader's curiosity to know more about the biographical details of the old man is abruptly brushed aside as an injunction is immediately put forward stating that 'We do not need to know where he lives. Everything of any significance in his life has happened and will happen right here, in this little piazza'[1]. This however, suggests that the man is an individual who has lived an indisputable life but there is an imminent chance of a transformation and that the piazza is to represent the whole world of the story. There is a scope for the narrative to move from its static beginning to a kinesthetic middle. The narrator sets the stage as a theatre director: 'He takes his seat. He is the audience, an audience of one. The show is about to begin.' [1]

The narrator moves forward with detailing the present life around the piazza. In place of being a 'sleepy provincial square', it is infested with 'loud sounds of people quarreling, six days a week'[1]. One can note the use of contrasts in the narrative which accelerates the story. The piazza is described as the epicenter of all chaos, emphasized with the repetition of the opposite, 'peaceful': 'It's as if people came here, to this peaceful little square in this peaceful little town, to get into fights'[1]. The quarrels are described as if being performed: 'they raise their voices; they pound their right fists into palms of their left hands; they stamp their feet'. [1]

We are eventually introduced to the main theme of the story - disagreement. People in the piazza quarrel and disagree over matters as important as the likelihood of hurricanes, flatness of earth, efficacy of vaccines as trivial as the flavors of ice cream and the beauty of the film actresses. Quarrel is the common love that unites people in the piazza. As day melts into evening and evening grows into night, the disagreements go even higher, suggesting a sense of uncontrollability that characterizes quarrels in general. The old man seems to be a passive observer to all these. In an interview to Deborah Treisman, Rushdie says that the character of the old man has its origin in the last scene of the movie 'Pink Panther' where a man idly sits and watches cars zooming past all around. [2] The passivity of the old man is taken further to relate to the passivity of the people

on Sundays: 'On Sunday, everyone stays home and eats ...' [1] It is as if a whole range of sounds, noises are abruptly brought to a standstill with Sunday and its silence. This proclaims the end of this 'section'.

The next section takes us forty years back and introduces the 'yes' times, where disagreements were prohibited, and the word 'no' was stigmatized. Using the flashback technique, the reader is made aware that the story began in the middle and there is a context behind the present chaos. In the 'yes' times, the use of language was altered – 'no' was forbidden and 'yes' was reasserted with various synonyms. To say 'no' is to be branded as a radical. Alive to the politics and governance throughout the world, the narrator makes the history of the people in and around piazza, a strong allegorical narrative of the politics of jingoistic pseudo-nationalism of the day.

The 'yes' times has rendered the native language ineffectual. Personifying the language as a woman, a narrative is built around its forceful suppression. 'Her' sordid condition is exemplified in her reluctance to move and her willing submission to the tyranny of tight clothes which are metaphors of her subjugation. The old man in the café and the language sits apart from each other and never talk signifying the separation between the speaker and the language. The 'yes' time is characterized by conformity and silence. It is romantically identified with an apollonian order which establishes a pseudo-harmonious state of being where the plural 'noise' is suspended. But suspension cannot continue forever, for the marginalized will seek to express itself at a given point in time. Consequently, the language rebels and it results in the outpouring of language which is described through images of unleashing, overflowing and spilling over boundaries of social and moral order.

Just as earlier in the story, the narrator brought an abrupt end to the noise of weekdays with the silence of Sunday, here he turns the narrative upside down – the elegance and admirable etiquettes of using chosen words of high moral order are brought to their sudden end by describing the eruption of unsavory words. However, one cannot miss the image of meat hooks in the piazza for words belonging to the family of 'yes', which not only signifies the end of 'yes' times but also heralds the age of arguments. Language casts off the tyranny of clothes metaphorically signifying the difference between bondage and freedom. She can now wear the dress she likes and tap her feet to a 'private' music, suggesting her own free will. The desire for freedom is so intense that it gushes out of even those who have till then remained in the 'comfort' of bondage or have at least learnt the tricks of adjusting to a life of self-annihilation. The new found freedom always have early takers who would be too early to bask in the joy of free-will and remain ignorant to their responsibilities. Personifying the language as a woman helps in exploring the theme of misuse more. Signifying freedom, language is at the centre of masculine desires, as well as abuses. The narrative however emerges as if the language itself is abusive and not those who misuse it.

The old man in the piazza has been living a life of conformation, maintaining status-quo, remaining politically correct and choosing words that sustains a relaxing life. He has been a passive audience who would not participate in the discourse but would sit through watching the drama unfold. Consumed in living a life as directed, the old man initially finds himself a misfit in an environment where free-will reigns supreme. Hence, he tries to maintain a puritanic distance between himself and the 'new' found (dis)order. But he gradually adapts with the change in time.

The narrator at times, is too direct in his prose. He not only introduces random events and characters but also loaded statements which demands critical engagement. For example, he questions the existence of 'mistaken notions' within the body politic but leaves it to the judgement of the reader. A random couple is introduced who asks the old man to choose for them between two travel destinations. He gives his opinion but as it is a norm to disagree, they choose the other option. But the old man is apotheosized as a judge with the 'wisdom of Solomon'. This builds a classic case of fake news in a post-truth era where mediatization of truth may lead to pseudo-heroworshipping. The old man learns the trick of not only surviving in the age of free will and arguments but also grows adept in using the language to his ends. With the old man mimicking the new found way of life, and enjoying popularity among the masses, language grows jealous of him, suggesting, freedom too needs boundaries, checks and antagonists to retain its zeal. These boundaries are important to sustain the uniqueness of freedom. Unfortunately, the boundaries we encounter, were drawn by ignoramuses who knew less about geography, social cohesion, culture and politics of the land and engineered huge forceful migration of people. The narrator speaks of multiple frontiers apart from the frontiers that separate people as nations: frontiers that separate action and observation, the frontier that separates audience and stage, preserving the 'fourth wall'.

During the 'yes' time, the fourth wall has never been breached. Any random departure was nothing but 'delightful conceit' for the old man, unless and until he found himself in between the amorphous walls that separate the actor and the spectator. Once the border is crossed, the scope for reorienting the frontiers and pushing the invisible boundaries broadened for the old man. The puritanic adherence to the earlier order winnowed away, blurring the difference between the ideologies of the old man and the language. The latter therefore warns that the new avatar of the old man may be a new version of the 'yes' era. Hence, in a transformed social order the language of protest as well as the protest of the language has to change. If the vocabulary remains cliched and fails to transform itself, it is destined to meet a frustrating end with no one

caring about it. However, melodramatic ideological vocabulary may at times, expose the crevices in society as does the shriek of the language to the piazza. This can blow out to the extent that even the most conformist may find himself poised within a social structure that holds no central meaning but wishes to produce vain judgements. But, the age of argument and disagreement with all its divisions, frontiers and socio-cultural crevices do have a democratic structure in itself which preserves the opportunity for even the marginalized to exercise its Foucauldian power in its freedom to disagree.

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