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**INTERPRETING SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *THE ENCHANTRESS OF FLORENCE*  
AS A POSTMODERN NOVEL**

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**Abstract:**

*Postmodernism is a late 20<sup>th</sup> century movement in philosophy and literary theory that generally questions the basic assumptions of western philosophy in the modern period. It is the most discussed and debated contemporary literary theory that follows modernism. Arnold Toynbee adopted the term 'postmodernism'. He described the age of postmodernism as one of anarchy and relativism. It is true that the term postmodernism is held to characterize a large number of the most influential or recent writers worldwide. Salman Rushdie has been studied and researched as a postcolonial writer as there are obvious postcolonial themes in his novels. But we can also study him as a postmodern writer. The paper makes an attempt to discuss the postmodern literary concept of magical realism as prevalent in Rushdie's novel *The Enchantress of Florence* and to put forth Rushdie as a postmodern writer.*

**Keywords:** *Postmodernism, Salman Rushdie, magical realism, fantasy, reality, literary theory, literature, etc.*

**Introduction:**

Postmodernism is a late 20<sup>th</sup> century movement in philosophy and literary theory that generally questions the basic assumptions of western philosophy in the modern period. It is the most discussed and debated contemporary literary theory that follows modernism. Arnold Toynbee adopted the term 'postmodernism'. He described the age of postmodernism as one of anarchy and relativism. It is true that the term postmodernism is held to characterize a large number of the most influential or recent writers worldwide. Salman Rushdie has been studied and researched as a postcolonial writer as there are obvious postcolonial themes in his novels. But we can also study him as a postmodern writer. The paper makes an attempt to discuss the postmodern literary concept of magical realism as prevalent in Rushdie's novel *The Enchantress of Florence* and to put forth Rushdie as a postmodern writer.

Postmodern literature is thought to be typically anti-traditional and anti-foundationalist. It can be said that the major body of postmodern literature is thought to have started from the 1950s onwards. The major postmodern literary features are metafiction, self-reflexivity, intertextuality, writerly text, hybridity, magical realism, foreshadowing, irony, parody, anti-novel, anti-hero, fabulation, surfiction, hyperreality, use of language games etc. The prominent themes in postmodern literature are such as crisis of identity, cultural hybridity, experiences of migrants and their feeling of alienation, the general feeling of rootlessness. Postmodern fiction also emphasizes the disbelief in God as well as the disbelief in the conventional notions of the unified or coherent individual. There are many main themes in Rushdie's novel such as the mixture of history and fiction, fantasy and reality, use of myth and magical realism. It is an attempt to study the novel because while studying these novels, Rushdie's real potentiality as a postmodern writer is revealed.

Salman Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008) is set in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The novel portrays the sensibilities and anxieties of the period before the real and unreal



were disconnected forever and destined to live apart under different monarchs and separate legal structures. This novel is a masterpiece of magical realism. There is a frequent discussion of humanism and debate as opposed to authoritarianism. The novel weaves a multi-layered, multi-centred and multi-vocal story in which historical events and adventures of wonder promiscuously intermingle. Thus, it defies any clear-cut borderline between reality and fantasy.

**Magical Realism in Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence*:**

Magical realism is a literary technique. The technique of magical realism is widely used in postmodern literary works. It is a technique in which it mixes fantasy into reality in such a way that it becomes impossible for a reader to separate these two entities. The basic concern of magical realism is the nature and limits of the intelligible, and the texts in which the literary technique of magical realism is used to ask the readers to look beyond the limits of the comprehensible.

Rushdie makes use of magical realism in the novel to depict a plural worldview. By using this literary technique, Rushdie successfully blurs the boundary between fact and fiction. It is also noticed that by using magical realism, the novelist is able to give voice to the historically marginalized character Qara Koz. The literary technique of magical realism itself designates a mode of expression in which the realistic and the fantastic elements are mingled. It is studied that there are many examples of magical realism in the novel. One Florentine considers himself as a conjuror and entertains the sailors with his magical powers. It is cited in the paragraph as:

He seemed perfectly ready to be discovered, and dazzlingly confident of his powers of charm, persuasion and enchantment. They had, after all, brought him a long way already. Indeed, he turned out to be quite the conjuror. He transformed gold coins into smoke and yellow smoke back into gold. A jug of fresh water flipped upside-down released a flood of silken scarves. He multiplied fishes and loaves with a couple of passes of his elegant hand, which was blasphemous, of course, but the hungry sailors easily forgave him (Rushdie, 16- 17).

It is noticed that the novelist makes use of the postmodern literary technique of magical realism and the above cited paragraph clearly reveals that there is a proper blend of fantasy and reality used through the characters. The traveller warns Lord Hauksbank that he cannot tell his story to him and if Lord Hauksbank forces him to tell, he might not live as the story has a curse upon it. It is described in the following sentence. "Only one man may hear my secret and live, and I would not wish to be responsible for your death" (Rushdie, 23).

The above sentence reveals the implication of magical realism. This sentence has the tone of magical realism, a literary technique which is used in postmodern fiction. This literary technique is extremely unique in the sense that it challenges readers and makes it difficult for them to differentiate between the real and the fantastic events. It is also noticed that the magician is able to make heavy objects weightless and also make them invisible. The narrator describes:

'A man who builds a cabin with one hidden cavity has built a cabin with at least two or three,' he reasoned, and by the time the port of Diu was sighted he had plucked Lord Hauksbank as clean as any chicken, he had found the seven secret chambers in the paneled walls, and all the jewels in all the wooden boxes therein were safely in their new homes in the coat of Shalakh Cormorano, and the seven gold ingots, too, and yet the coat felt light as a feather, for the green-eyed Moor of Venice knew the secret of rendering weightless whatever goods were secreted within that magic garment (Rushdie, 27).





The foreigner, namely Mogor possesses ability to make heavy objects lighter and it is an example of magical realism in the novel. The narrator provides one more example of the literary technique of magical realism in the following paragraph.

Chance had placed a great opportunity within his grasp, and he must not let it slip. But where was the thing? He had looked over every inch of the captain's quarters, and yet it remained hidden. Damnation! Was the treasure under a spell? Had it been made invisible, to escape him thus? (Rushdie, 27- 28)

The literary technique of magical realism is aptly used in the novel and the above paragraph is the suitable example of magical realism. It is noticed that the novel clearly represents a world where there are not one but multiple realities in the story of the novel. It can be said that in order to perceive these realities one must possess a pluralistic worldview where magical and real elements exist side by side. While exploring Rushdie's use of magical realism in the novel, Dr. Nabarun Ghosh writes the following lines.

Rushdie carries the hybrid identity and the literary technique of magical realism used in *The Enchantress of Flore* suits the novel. Rushdie's hybrid identity as an Indian, how migrated to Britain, very well suits the technique of magic realism in order to raise voice for those who are marginalized because of their language, religion, caste and nationality (Ghosh, 3).

Here, it is noticed that the above lines reveal the novelist's hybrid identity as he migrates from India to Britain and again from Britain to America. Dr. Ghosh further writes that by using the technique of magical realism, Rushdie is able to provide voice to marginalized characters in the novel. It is described in the following paragraph.

By using this technique, Rushdie successfully blurs the boundary between fact and fiction. At the same time, this technique enables him to give voice to the historically marginalized characters Qara Koz, as the novel is his attempt to write history from below (Ghosh, 4).

In the above paragraph, the novelist is able to remove the borderline between the fact and fiction through the use of magical realism. It is further noticed that Dr. Hawkins also possesses the magical power. The narrator mentions his magical gift in the following paragraph.

Because he possesses the gift of staying awake when no other man's eyes could remain open, the time came, in the small hours of the morning, when he was able to slip ashore in one of the ship's dinghies and disappear, like a phantom, into India (Rushdie, 28).

It is noticed that Dr. Hawkins has the magical power to stay awake for longer time than other men and he can also disappear which again shows magical realism used in the novel. While describing the city mentioned in the novel, the narrator uses magical realism technique and describes the city in the following paragraph.

At dawn the haunting sandstone palaces of the new 'victory city' of Akbar the Great looked as if they were made of red smoke. Most cities start giving the impression of being eternal almost as soon as they are born, but Sikri would always



look like a mirage. As the sun rose to its zenith, the bludgeon of the day's heat pounded the flagstones, deafening human ears to all sounds, making the air quiver like a frightened blackbuck, and weakening the border between sanity and delirium, between what was fanciful and what was real (Rushdie, 33).

The narrator, once again, uses magical realism through his description of the city of Sikri. It is noticed that Sikri is described as a mirage in the novel. It is further noticed that the palace of Akbar the Great is described to have features of magical realism and the incidents which take place at the palace reveal it. The narrator writes about the magical realist events in the Akbar's palace in the following paragraph.

Even the emperor succumbed to fantasy. Queens floated within his palaces like ghosts, Rajput and Turkish sultanas playing catch-me-if-you-can. One of these royal personages did not really exist. She was an imaginary wife, dreamed up by Akbar in the way that lonely children dream up imaginary friends, and in spite of the presence of many living, if floating, consorts, the emperor was of the opinion that it was the real queens who were the phantoms and the non-existent beloved who was real. He gave her a name, Jodha, and no man dared gainsay him (Rushdie, 33).

The above paragraph aptly justifies the use of magical realism in the novel. The real queens are portrayed as imaginary ones and the imaginary queen, namely Jodha is considered as the real queen in the novel. It is observed that after the painter namely Master Abdus Samad the Persian portrayed her picture, Jodha is treated as a real character in the palace. It is described in Emperor's own words in the following paragraph.

'You have captured her, to the life,' he cried, and Abdus Samad relaxed and stopped feeling as if his head was too loosely attached to his neck; and after this visionary work by the master of the emperor's atelier had been exhibited, the whole court knew Jodha to be real, and the greatest courtiers, the Navratna or Nine Stars, all acknowledged not only her existence but also her beauty, her wisdom, the grace of her movements and the softness of her voice. Akbar and Jodhabai! Ah, ah! It was the love story of the age (Rushdie, 34).

The portrayal of queen Jodha seems to be real not only for the people in the courtyard but also for the people outside the courtyard as she is described as a real-life character in the novel. The portrayal of imaginary Jodha has made real in the following paragraph.

She wandered the palace quarter alone. She was a lonely shadow glimpsed through latticed stone screen. She was a cloth blown by the breeze. At night she stood under the little cupola on the top storey of the Panch Mahal and scanned the horizon for the return of the king who made her real. The king, who was coming home from the wars (Rushdie, 58).

Here, it is observed that Jodha is portrayed as a real character as she moves from one place of palace to another. The king treats her as a real character in his life. Imaginary queen Jodha is made look real with the help of magical realism. It is also noticed that the water of river whispers with the emperor Akbar and informs him about the events taking place at nearby places. The narrator writes about this extraordinary incident in the following paragraph.





When he bathed in the royal hammam he leaned his head back and floated for a while like a fish. The hammam water whispered in his submerged ears and told him the innermost thoughts of everyone else who had taken a bath anywhere within a three-mile radius. Stationary water's powers of information were limited; for long-distance news it was necessary to immerse oneself in a river. However, the hammam's magic was not to be underestimated. It was the hammam that had told him, for example, about the hidden journal of the narrow-minded Badouni, a book so critical of the emperor's ideas and habits that if Akbar had admitted he knew of its existence he would have been obliged to execute Badouni at once (Rushdie, 104- 105).

Here, readers come to know that emperor has the magical power to listen to the nature's language and it also helps him to plan for his future and also the acts of his enemies. It is noticed that the major character in the novel, namely Qara Koz is a princess at the palace and she also possesses the magical power. The narrator writes about her magical power in the following lines.

There was poison in a cup of milk which Lady Black Eyes drank down; she was unharmed, but her lapdog, to whom she gave a final few sips, died instantly, writhing with pain. Later there was another drink to which someone had added a quantity of crushed diamonds, to inflict on the beautiful child the dreadful death known as 'drinking fire', but the diamonds passed through her without harming her and the murder attempt only came to light when a nursemaid slave, cleaning the royal toilet, found the stones twinkling in the princess's faeces (Rushdie, 151- 152).

Khazada Begum makes several attempts to kill the princess Lady Black Eyes but fails in all her attempts as the princess possesses the magical power to digest the poison. Through the use of this magical realism, the narrator is able to convince the readers that there is not a difference between magical elements and the incidents in real life. The narrator writes about it in the following lines.

When it became plain that Lady Black Eyes was the possessor of superhuman powers the murder attempts ceased, and Khazada Begum, swallowing her pride, decided to change her tactics and began to coddle and cosset her infant rival instead (Rushdie, 152).

Here, it is understood that Qara Koz's own step-sister tries to kill her using poison in various drinks but she fails to kill her as Qara Koz possesses the magical power to digest poison and live a normal life. The painter at the emperor's court, namely Dashwanth paints Qara Koz's picture as a supernatural child and it is further noticed that she actually possessed the supernatural powers. The narrator writes about Dashwanth's painting in the following lines. "Dashwanth painted the five-, six- and seven-year-old Qara Koz as a supernatural being cocooned in a little egg of light while all around her the battle raged" (Rushdie, 154).

The princess, Qara Koz actually possesses the supernatural powers and people in the emperor's empire agree with it and talk about her magical power. The narrator once again writes about magical power and enchanting beauty of Qara Koz and also writes about Dashwanth's involvement in her beauty. The narrator writes about Dashwanth's involvement in the painting of Qara Koz in the following lines.



When the hidden section of the painting was revealed the onlookers burst into cries of amazement, for there, crouching down like a little toad, with a great bundle of paper scrolls under his arm, was Dashwanth the great painter, Dashwanth the graffiti artist, Dashwanth the palanquin bearer's son and the thief of the Qara-Koz-Nama, Dashwanth released into the only world in which he now believed, the world of the hidden princess, whom he had created and who had then uncreated him (Rushdie, 158).

The above paragraph reveals about how Dashwanth forgets his own existence while painting the most charming and enchanting princess Qara Koz and he also disappears in his beautiful painting of a beautiful princess. It is further noticed that one of the characters namely Marco gets married to a beautiful lady, namely, Simonetta Cattaneo. She is not only the most beautiful lady but her beauty also has the magical powers. The narrator writes about her enchanting beauty in the following paragraph.

Rumours grew of her miracles: a man struck blind by her loveliness as she passed him in the street, a blind man given sight when her sad fingertips were placed in a sudden gesture of pity upon his troubled brow, a crippled child rising to his feet to chase after her, another boy suddenly paralysed when he made obscene gestures behind her back (Rushdie, 169).

The above incidents reveal that the beautiful lady Simonetta Cattaneo possesses the magical powers and through her character the novelist successfully makes use of magical realism literary technique in the novel. Another character in the novel, namely Alessandra also possesses the magical power. The narrator writes that only those people and things exist in the world which she wants to see. If she does not see and think of other people and things, they do not exist. The narrator writes about her magical power in the following lines.

Because Alessandra had long ago perfected the art of seeing only what she wanted to see, which was an essential accomplishment if you wanted to be one of the world's masters and not its victim. Her seeing constructed the city. If she did not see you then you did not exist. Marco Vespucci dying invisibly outside her window died a second death under her erasing gaze (Rushdie, 190).

Here, it is made clear that Alessandra possess a strange magical power. People and things exist only when she sees and thinks of those people and things. As the novels progresses, it is further noticed that the visitor, Mogor dell' Amore was able to influence the king Akbar through his magnificent behaviour and charming personality. The narrator writes about the impression of visitor's behaviour on the emperor in the following lines.

The absence of surprise is the necessary penalty of the life of power, the emperor had set up elaborate systems and machineries to make sure he was never surprised about anything, and yet this Mogor dell' Amore had caught him off guard, whether by accident or design. For that reason alone, he deserved to be more fully known (Rushdie, 89).

These words clearly reveal that the emperor gets influenced by Mogor dell' Amore and thinks that he has a great personality. It is one of the examples of magical realism. While reading the novel, it is understood that Qara Koz's husband, namely Shah Ismail mentions that she is the enchantress and possesses a great beauty. The narrator writes about her in the following lines.





Afterwards, when he had lost her forever, Shah Ismail spoke of sorcery. There was an enchantment in her gaze that was not wholly human, he said; a devil was in her, and had goaded him to his doom. 'That a woman so beautiful should not be tender,' he said to his deaf mute body servant, 'this I did not expect. I did not expect her to turn away from me so casually, as if she were changing a shoe. I expected to be the beloved. I did not expect to be *Majnun-Layla*, driven mad by love. I did not expect her to break my heart' (Rushdie, 271).

The above paragraph conveys that Qara Koz possesses a magical power and is also able to enchant people around her with her enchanting power and beauty. It is further noticed that the foreign traveller, Mogor also mentions about Qara Koz's enchanting beauty and also how her beauty enchants many people in the city as: "‘She was a beautiful, willful girl,’ said Mogor dell’Amore. ‘And her power over men was so great that perhaps even she did not at first know that force of her enchantments’" (Rushdie, 272).

The above lines clearly show the enchanting beauty and its magical power over men. Qara Koz possesses the magical power to enchant people and thus could influence people with her beauty. It is further noticed that Qara Koz's close friend, namely the Mirror also mentions about her friend's enchanting and magical beauty in the following lines.

‘She is the lady who loves you,’ the Mirror said. ‘She can charm the snakes from the ground and the birds from the trees and make them fall in love and she has fallen in love with you, so now you can have anything you desire.’ The enchantress made a small movement of her eyebrow and the Mirror let her clothes fall to the floor and slipped into the bed (Rushdie, 283).

The narrator informs readers about the magical power of Qara Koz and how she is able to enchant even the birds and snakes. One of the characters in the novel, namely Duke Giuliano finds Qara Koz's face in the mirror as the most beautiful lady in the place. Her beauty is described in the following lines.

Duke Giuliano at once recognized Qara Koz as the woman in the magic mirror, the object of his incipient obsession, and his heart leapt for joy. Lorenzo de' Medici saw her too, and in his concupiscent heart at once began to dream of possessing her (Rushdie, 346).

It is noticed that the major characters like Duke Giuliano and Lorenzo de' Medici notice her beautiful face in their mirror and this reveals Qara Koz's magical power and enchanting obsession people have about her magical and enchanting beauty. The narrator, once again mentions about her magical power in the following lines.

Many of those who saw her walking the streets claimed to have heard, playing all around her, the crystal music of the spheres. Other swore that they had seen a halo of light around her head, bright enough to be visible even in the hot glare of the day. Barren women came up to Qara Koz and asked her to touch their bellies, and then told the world how they had conceived children that very night. The blind saw, the lame walked; only an actual resurrection from the dead was missing from the accounts of her magical deeds (Rushdie, 351).



Qara Koz's possesses a magical power. Women get conceived only by the touch of her fingers to their bellies and the blind is able to see and the lame could walk naturally. Through this description, the narrator does not make any distinction between the magical and the real and therefore, the novelist cleverly makes use of the postmodern literary technique of magical realism. While studying the novel, readers come to know that emperor Akbar also possesses the magical power. It is mentioned that the sickness of people gets cured by the sight of the emperor Akbar. It is also mentioned that dying people also get cured when emperor looks at them. The narrator writes about emperor's magical power in the following lines.

The sick, the dying, the injured were brought there each day, and if Akbar's eye fell upon them, if he Glimpsed them even as they Glimpsed him, then a cure was the inevitable result. Glimpsing transferred the emperor's potency to the Glimpsed. Magic invariably flowed from the more magical person (the emperor, the necromancer the witch) to the lesser: that was one of its laws (Rushdie, 402).

The above paragraph reveals that emperor Akbar possesses the magical power to cure the sick people of his empire. Here, it becomes difficult to differentiate between the real and the fantastic events. The narrator, once again, writes about magical realism in the novel in the following lines.

The familiarity with which the supernatural occurrence was received was of course the consequence of such occurrences being normal at that time, before the real and unreal were segregated forever and doomed to live apart under different monarchs and separate legal systems (Rushdie, 409).

In the above paragraph, the narrator himself provides readers knowledge about how the literary technique of magical realism is used in the novel by introducing the real and unreal incidents as well. There are a number of incidents of magical realism in the novel and one of them is mentioned by the narrator of the novel in the following paragraph.

Her powers were failing but she intended to exercise them one last time as they had never been exercised before, and force the history of the world into the course she required it to take. She would enchant the middle passage into being by the sheer force of her sorcery and her will (Rushdie, 423).

In the above paragraph, it is noticed the Qara Koz wishes to use her magical powers once again on the men of her place. It is studied that Qara Koz's magical powers are going to fade and she wishes to use them before they fade her.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008) in the light of postmodernism. The novel is set in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Rushdie successfully removes the borderline between fact and fiction. The novelist is able to give voice to the historically sidelined character Qara Koz by using magical realism. One Florentine considers himself a conjuror and amuses the sailors with his magical powers. The tourist informs Lord Hauksbank that he cannot tell his story to him. He also warns him that if Lord Hauksbank forces him to tell, Lord Hauksbank might not live as the story has a curse upon it. Upon Lord Hauksbank's insistence, the traveller starts telling the story and suddenly Lord Hauksbank faints without listening to the story fully. The foreigner, Mogor also possesses an ability to make heavy objects lighter.





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