

The Enchantress of Florence: Fabulous Blather

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Salman Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence* glances at history on a grand scale. This, his ninth novel, offers a comparative view of two worlds: Mughal India and Medici Italy. The two dynasties ruled at about the same time—the Mughals in India from the sixteenth through the eighteenth century, the Medici in Florence from the fourteenth through the eighteenth century. Rushdie fabricates a link between the two through an account of a Mughal princess—sister of Babar, the founder of the dynasty—who shows up in Florence and sways men in power through her sheer beauty. At a later time, a golden-haired man claiming to be the son of the princess arrives in Akbar's court and tells the emperor the story of the princess. He calls himself "Mogor dell' Amore" or "a *Mughal born out of wedlock*" (Rushdie's emphasis) (91). The story he tells will make or break his fortune. Either it will earn him the status of a Mughal or it will lead to his ignominious exit from the court or a worse fate.

As in *Midnight's Children* and *The Moor's Last Sigh*, storytelling is a strong motif in *Enchantress*. Its story, on the other hand, is not as gripping as those of his early fiction. *Enchantress's* Akbar and India are powerfully drawn, but its Florence and the Florentines are hazily contoured. Chapters dealing with them tend to be tangled and meandering. The reader, moreover, feels that Rushdie's humor is not as funny as it used to be and that some of his characters are mere caricatures. Parts of

Enchantress remind one of the first-rate Rushdie. Such brilliance, unfortunately, gushes in spurts and is not sustained throughout the narrative.

While the two worlds of *Enchantress*, India and Europe, share many common elements such as political hierarchy and social composition, they contrast with each other on some fundamental issues. Akbar's Sikri, the dream capital that he built near Agra, is stable and relatively free from political intrigues. The only threat to his throne is Prince Salim, who is keener on assassinating his father's favorite courtiers than ousting him—the rift between father and son mends at the end when Akbar nominates him his successor. The historical Akbar was known for his interest in music and learning. He even founded his own religion, *Din-E-Elahi*, but never forced it upon anyone, adopting instead a policy of religious tolerance remarkable for his time. Rushdie is at his best in portraying this Akbar and his realm.

Contrasting the stability of Akbar's reign is Florence. Plagued with political intrigue, religious persecution, mass murder, and church-sanctioned sodomy, Florence is an utterly lawless land, a city of degenerates. What guarantees one's safety here is power and connection. The story of the stranger in Akbar's court begins with an account of three young friends in Florence: Antonio Argalia, Niccol "il Machia," and Ago Vaspucci. The reader gets a taste of the Florentine state of affairs when no sooner the three friends enter the narrative than they run cups in hand to collect semen from a hanged man's penis—an Archbishop's in this case—in the wake of Lorenzo de' Medici's brutal suppression of the Pazzi plotters. The boyhood prank occurs because they want to test the popular theories that a hanged man always ejaculates and that semen buried in ground sprouts mandrake plants.

The three young Florentines are interesting enough, but as they grow into adulthood, the narrative sags. When the plague kills Argalia's parents, he leaves Florence. While he is away, il Machio (modeled after Machiavelli, the author of the *Prince*) and Vespucci (cousin to Amerigo Vespucci, discoverer of the New World) grow up to be failures. Il Machio suffers a terrible setback in his prospects because of the return of the Medici in Florence, and both he and Vespucci are content to visit local brothels to ease their frustrations— that is, until Argalia appears with Qara Köz, the lost Mughal Princess, and her maid, the Mirror, so called because she is a look-alike.

Rushdie goes to great length to make the Princess's arrival in Europe from Central Asia believable, but the reader has to tackle a web of yarns. First a captive

of an Uzbek warlord, then of the Persian king, with whom she fell in love, which was the reason for her refusal to return to her brother Babar, then of the Ottoman general Argalia, with whom again she is in love, Qara Köz, also called Angelica, "had a weakness for being on the winning side" (Rushdie's emphasis), as Mogor informs Akbar (211). She is the most ravishing woman of her time, yet her portrait suffers from a certain vagueness of description. Except her name, which means "Black Eyes" (120), no clue to her physical attributes appears in the text. Her effect on people, both men and women, on the other hand, is astounding. Even Marietta, il Machia's jealous wife, is so captivated that she doesn't mind her husband's company with Qara Köz. Rushdie's reluctance to provide a physical description of such phenomenal beauty is perhaps a deliberate artistic choice; what he omits he makes up for by the enchantress's influence on others.

Qara Köz's disembodied presence, nevertheless, weakens *Enchantress*. Several readers have noted the weak appeal of the Florence chapters though many of them have heaped praise on the India chapters, expressing particular admiration for Akbar. Jerry Brotton regards *Enchantress* as "vintage Rushdie," but also adds, "Rushdie is better recreating the lost imperial world of India than Renaissance Florence." In an otherwise exceedingly warm response to the book, Aamer Hussein writes, "The sections set in Italy and elsewhere can at times be so densely detailed that the reader yearns for the quiet of Akbar's contemplations." Andrew Reimer's comment is more to the point:

The trouble is . . . that Rushdie does not understand that world [Florence] in the same instinctive and wonderfully imaginative way that he understands Akbar's realm—or at least he does not respond to European culture . . . as fully as he responds to the cultures of the Indian subcontinent. This is a harsh thing to say . . . From the evidence of this novel it seems, nevertheless, to be true.

That Rushdie who has spent his entire adult life and part of his childhood in the west does not "respond to European culture" as well as he does to India is shocking, indeed. Clearly, Reimer doesn't like what he has to say about the book, but as a reader he has no choice but to be true to his response.

Evidently, the India chapters fare better because Akbar and his India fire Rushdie's imagination to a degree that Qara Köz and Italy fail to match. Fact, here, wins over fiction. The *Enchantress* Akbar is modeled after the historical Akbar whereas Qara Köz is without precedence. With warlords, pirates, and explorers, the world of *Enchantress* exists in the realm of fantasy, but fantasy,

especially if it is the historical kind, is more convincing when it grows out of facts.

Qara K z's ending, which will determine once and for all the kinship of the stranger with the Mughals, is another tortuous tale. Mogor concludes her story with an account of her fall from fortune, of her "short journey from *enchantress* to *witch*" (Rushdie's emphasis) (297). When Lorenzo II spends a night with her and dies, Florence regards her an evil witch whose presence spells doom for the city. Argalia protects her the best he can and dies fighting a frenzied mob so she can flee. In their attempt to reach India via Spain, Qara K z, the Mirror, and Ago Vespucci end up in the New World, where Mogor is born. Akbar appropriates Mogor's story at this point: "This was his story now" (337). He refuses to believe that Mogor is the son of his long lost great aunt. Two unassailable facts contradict Mogor's Mughal lineage: his age and Qara K z's failure to bear children to the other men she was with. Early in the text, Princess Gulbadan, Akbar's aunt, found a problem in Mogor's claim, which was the age discrepancy. Mogor's present age was "thirty or thirty-one" whereas Qara K z would have been "sixty-five" when he was born (109). Akbar still wanted to hear him out because he thought Mogor could be the princess's daughter's son. But who was his father? To this question from the emperor, Birbal, the Grand Vizier, pointedly remarked, "'Thereby' . . . 'I do believe hangs the tale'" (110).

Mogor's tale indeed hits a huge snag on this issue. Akbar doesn't buy Mogor's account that Qara K z had a son by Ago Vespucci. Despite Mogor's explanation that "on account of the unsettled nature of time in those parts [the New World], my mother the enchantress was able to prolong her youth," Akbar rejects the possibility outright (336-37). From the facts Mogor has presented, Akbar deduces what happened: Mogor is a product of an incestuous union between Ago Vespucci and his and Qara K z's daughter. Akbar, who was considering raising Mogor to the status of Farzand, an honorary son, at one point (316), rules out any dynastic linkage with him because of his incestuous origin. Later on, the phantom of Qara K z appears to Akbar and makes clear that she never had a child, that Mogor's mother was the Mirror's daughter, not hers. To make the pedigree soup even murkier, the Mirror's daughter, Qara K z informs Akbar, was called Angelica and was raised as Qara K z the Mughal princess herself. The phantom exonerates Mogor and his mother from all deception; they were raised to believe who they became by Ago and the Mirror.

Mogor's true parentage, thus, is quite convoluted; it is not unlike Salim's in *Midnight's Children* or Shakil's in *Shame*. The issue of identity, a postmodern

motif, is likely to be a focus in future *Enchantress* criticism. The confusion surrounding Mogor's family descent, curiously, leads two reviewers, Amy Wilentz's and Joyce Carol Oates, to identify Mogor as Ago Vespucci. Perhaps the mistake occurs because both Ago and Mogor are golden-haired, a trait mentioned several times in the text. But Mogor appears as "Niccolò Vespucci" at least twice (92, 308), and his full name, "Niccolò Antonio Vespucci," appears at least once in the book (335).

Enchantress improves toward the end when it returns to Akbar and unravels the mystery of Mogor. Does the denouement save *Enchantress* from its feeble Florence? As Michiko Kakutani writes, "Although the novel gains narrative momentum in its final chapters, large portions of the book consist of tiresome free-associative digressions and asides . . . they threaten to topple the slender frame story around which the book is constructed." The labyrinthine plot provokes Kakutani to present a thoroughly unflattering critique of the book. He is not the only one. David Gates admits he could not keep track of the story because of "all its meanderings" and declares that the work "revels in writerly self-congratulation." Peter Kemp goes a step further and calls it "the worst thing he [Rushdie] has ever written."

Enchantress has generated reviews that are strongly positive as well, for example, those by Ursula K Le Guin, Salil Tripathi, William Deresiewicz (who claims *Enchantress* to be "Rushdie's most coherent and readable novel"), and others. They admire Rushdie's portrayal of Akbar, his recreation of bygone times, and his ability to weave interlocking tales. While Rushdie shows great facility in recreating Mughal India, the depiction is not without some oddities. It is not clear, for example, how Mogor is able to speak to the bullock-cart driver who brings him to Sikri. Mogor is fluent in Persian, which, presumably, he has learned from his mother, but Persian was the language of the court, the officials, and the educated in sixteenth-century India. A bullock-cart driver was not likely to know it. Then, on one occasion, Rushdie's Akbar is playing the *dilruba* (326). This instrument is no more than two centuries old and was invented for women to sing with! Placing it in sixteenth-century is quite anachronistic. No doubt more scrutiny will discover more such lapses in the book.

Another problem is an occasional excess of characterization and expression, not uncharacteristic of Rushdie. Argalia moves with four giant Swiss albino bodyguards: Otho, Botho, Clotho and D'Artagnan (181). Michael Dirda informs us that these names suggest certain qualities, but he also finds Rushdie "silly" for creating these creatures. The idea of four oversized albinos, Swiss on otherwise, is

not funny, but ridiculous. A similar ludicrous event occurs when Argalia, to save his life, has to outrun the Turkish sultan's head gardener, who also works as part-time executioner. To ensure Argalia's safety, Qara Köz gives the gardener flatulence-inducing potion, and the poor man "succumbed to a bout of the foulest farting anyone has ever smelled, releasing blasts of wind as loud as gunshots" (226). This is foul humor, indeed.

What Rushdie seems to have forgotten is that beyond a certain point exaggeration ceases to be funny. There is more. Prince Salim becomes a sex maniac after a slave girl gives him an aphrodisiac containing goat testicles. The result is a "notorious night of one hundred and one copulations" (61). Such sexual prowess is also emulated by Italians. In his glory days, Machiavelli or Il Machia "was fucking a different girl every day . . . and fucking his wife too, of course, six times, at least" (240). *Enchantress* takes particular delight in depicting a variety of sex acts, the most favored of which is the threesome. The source is not *Kama Sutra* alone. Rushdie himself acknowledges the fact in an interview with *Atlanta* magazine, where he sounds even a little wistful because "there's a limit to how much of that stuff one can put into a novel." Khushwant Singh's comment is worth noting: "I have not read another book in which the word 'fuck' appears as often as in this one." Singh also considers the book to be "grossly overwritten with a plethora of words in different languages, a veritable verbal diarrhea meaning nothing."

Enchantress is marred by the trite, as well as the extravagant. Rushdie's new novel—"romance," according to some—has found readers who admire it, readers who condemn it, and readers who do both at the same time. Rushdie has yet to match the lucidity of his early fiction, writing that wins all. Though readable and sometimes rewarding, his new book is certainly not by means the best he has ever written. No wonder *Enchantress* did not make the cut in the 2008 Booker shortlist.

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