

New Worlds:
Discovering and Constructing the Unknown
in Anglophone Literature

Presented to Walter Pache
on the Occasion of his 60th Birthday

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“The Re-discovery of India”:
Palimpsest, Multiplicity and Melodrama
in *The Moor’s Last Sigh*

Early on in *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, the narrator Moraes (“Moor”) Zogoiby makes fun of the idea of “the period called Discovery-of-India,” asking ironically: “How could we be discovered when we were not covered before?”¹ At first glance, this remark, with its fleeting identification of “discovery” with sexual aggression, seems to be chiefly aimed at popular (Western or Eurocentric) stereotypes according to which formerly “unknown” regions of the globe are only waiting to be discovered by European eyes as “new worlds.” Perhaps Moraes’ flippant pun could also be seen as a warning to all those romantically inspired Westerners who, like Adela Quested in E. M. Forster’s *Passage to India*, would like to discover “the real India,” only to find themselves in a dark and empty cave that echoes little more than their own fears and desires. Moraes’ remark, then, looks like a characteristic and familiar move in post-colonial literature – an attempt to counter simplified Western images of India by rejecting the idea of “discovering” “new worlds” outside Europe, and by recovering for the country “an identity uncontained by universalist or Eurocentric concepts and images.”²

In fact, a substantial part of *The Moor’s Last Sigh* is clearly constructed in such a way as to demonstrate that Rushdie’s India neither easily lends support to the “orientalist” stereotype of the East as the location of “the timeless eternal,”³ nor to the notion that the “discovery” of India began with Vasco da Gama’s arrival in Cochin in 1498. By contrast, the fact that India has a complex history of its own is emphasized by the enormous panorama of South Asian history unfolded early on in the novel, when the narrator recounts the history – set in the context of Indian history – of the da Gama family, or when the girl Aurora, in her first major painting, puts “history on the walls” of her room:

¹ Salman Rushdie, *The Moor’s Last Sigh* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995) 4. – Subsequent quotations from this edition are identified by page numbers in parenthesis.

² Simon During, “Postmodernism or Post-colonialism Today,” *Textual Practice* 1.1 (1987): 33, as quoted in Walter D. Mignolo, “Anglophone Canadian Literature and the Post-Colonial Challenge,” *Critical Dialogues: Current Issues in English Studies in Germany and Britain*, ed. Isobel Armstrong and Hans-Werner Ludwig (Tübingen: Günter Narr Verlag, 1995) 173.

³ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (1978; London: Penguin, 1991) 72.

... King Gondophares inviting St Thomas the Apostle to India; and from the North, Emperor Asoka with his Pillars of Law ...; and her [version] ... of the building of the Taj Mahal ...; and ... the battle of Srirangapatnam and the sword of Tipu Sultan and the magic fortress of Golconda ... and the coming long ago of the Jews. Modern history was there too, there were jails full of passionate men, Congress and Muslim League, Nehru Gandhi Jinnah Patel Bose Azad, and British soldiers ... In an honoured place was Vasco da Gama himself ... (59)

However, as the plot of the novel advances, it soon becomes clear that Rushdie is not primarily involved in a post-colonial enterprise; his purpose in “representing India”⁴ turns out to be altogether more complex and ambivalent. For Moraes’ early remark about the “period called Discovery-of-India” carries a second reference that is perhaps not immediately obvious to a European reader. It is a reference to an entirely different type of “Discovery-of-India,” conducted not by European explorers, but by one of the men who led India into independence in 1947, and who is still considered “a living presence in the politics of contemporary South Asia.”⁵ In fact, there can be little doubt that the phrase is an allusion to the title of Jawaharlal Nehru’s (partly autobiographical) book about India, *The Discovery of India* (1946) – a text that has since acquired the status of a classic in India, and the significance of which for both *Midnight’s Children* and *The Moor’s Last Sigh* has been pointed out by Jyotsna G. Singh.⁶ Thus in *The Moor’s Last Sigh* the (post-colonial) rejection of Western and orientalist images of India is ironically complemented by a thoroughgoing re-examination of the picture of India presented by one of its founding fathers, who was also its first Prime Minister. The re-discovery of India in *The Moor’s Last Sigh* has therefore the double force of engaging not only with the European orientalist dream of an India that is a timeless utopia outside history, but also with Nehru’s vision of India in *The Discovery of India*.⁷ This twofold approach seems to imply not only a different, but also a differently constructed, concept of India’s national identity: I will try to argue that in *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, India is presented, not so much something that is “given” or can be found or discovered “out there” (either by Europeans or by native Indians), but rather as something that can only be established on the basis of an open-ended and continuing

⁴ See Orhan Panuk’s review of *The Moor’s Last Sigh* in *TLS* 8 September 1995: 4.

⁵ Ashis Nandy, “The Last Englishman to Rule India,” *LRB* 21 May 1998: 14.

⁶ See Jyotsna G. Singh, *Colonial Narratives/Cultural Dialogues: “Discoveries” of India in the Language of Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 1996) 153–174.

⁷ Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (1946; Centenary Edition, Oxford: OUP, 1989) 61.

dialogue with other texts. (Interestingly, and perhaps not entirely accidentally, Nehru's *Discovery*, too, is inspired by this kind of doubleness. In one of the more obviously autobiographical chapters, "the last Englishman to rule India"⁸ writes:

India was in my blood and there was much in her that instinctively thrilled me. And yet *I approached her almost as an alien critic*, full of dislike for the present as well as for many of the relics of the past that I saw. To some extent *I came to her via the West, and looked at her as a friendly westerner might have done.*⁹)

I

Apart from the veiled allusion to *The Discovery of India* at the beginning of *The Moor's Last Sigh*, the novel contains other, rather more obvious references to India's first Prime Minister and to his vision of India. In this respect, *The Moor's Last Sigh* bears a close resemblance to *Midnight's Children*, where Nehru's 1947 independence speech is used as an important point of reference in the very first chapter, and later throughout the novel. In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, India's first Prime Minister even makes a personal appearance in the da Gama family saga, as an admirer and close friend of the narrator's mother Aurora da Gama;¹⁰ the fact that Aurora spends an unaccounted night in Delhi "nine months to the day before I arrived" even induces Moraes to speculate whether he might not "claim descent – even illegitimate descent – from so great a line" (177).¹¹

In the pre-independence part of the novel, there is another, somewhat less complimentary reference to Nehru: Uncle Aires, who, like his mother, is for "England, God, philistinism, the old ways" (18), acquires a British bulldog, which he names Jawaharlal to provoke his brother Camoens, who has become an enthusiastic supporter of the Congress party and of Indian independence. It is the very dog that, preserved by a taxidermist's art after its death, is destined to accompany the narrator to Spain in the last part of the book, only to end up, finally and ignominiously, in the weird sisters' Renegada's and Felicitas' broom-cupboard. – But however suggestive, and perhaps even symbolical, the use of Nehru's person and name may be in both of these cases, *The Moor's Last*

⁸ See Nandy 14.

⁹ Nehru 50; emphasis added.

¹⁰ In fact, as the acknowledgments at the end of the novel indicate, Nehru's letter to Aurora "draws on an actual letter written by Mr Nehru to Indira Gandhi on 1 July 1945" (437).

¹¹ If Moraes were Nehru's illegitimate son, he would be Indira Gandhi's half-brother.

Sigh is connected with *The Discovery of India* in other, more important ways – through a set of references which enable the novel to pursue, at a number of different levels, its implicit dialogue with Nehru's book, and thus to (re)discover India along the way. It is above all two central ideas put forward in *The Discovery of India* with which *The Moor's Last Sigh* seems specifically to take issue.

First, there is the idea of India as *Bharat Mata* ("Mother India"), whose fundamental importance Nehru discusses in the third chapter of his book. When Nehru was writing *The Discovery of India*, India was fighting for independence, and the term *Bharat Mata* was in fact, as Ranbir Vohra points out in *The Making of India*, much used "by Hindu leaders and the Congress Party" at that time.¹² Eventually, this romantic, "idealized vision of a unified nation"¹³ was even – at least in part – enshrined in the Constitution of independent India "in a most intriguing fashion: 'India, that is Bharat.'¹⁴ – In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Rushdie introduces the idea of *Bharat Mata* in a number of different ways and at various levels. In chapter nine, for instance, the narrator Moraes refers to "motherhood" as "a big idea in India, maybe our biggest: the land as mother, the mother as land, as the firm ground beneath our feet" (137); clearly, he is demonstrating his familiarity with the romantic and mythical association, in *The Discovery of India*, of *Bharat Mata* with the soil of India – or, as Nehru himself put it:

I would ask them [the people to whom he was speaking] . . . what they meant by . . . *Bharat Mata*, Mother India . . .? . . . At last a vigorous Jat, wedded to the soil from immemorial generations, would say that it was the *dharti*, the good earth of India, that they meant.¹⁵

At a more personal level, the importance of the theme of motherhood in *The Moor's Last Sigh* is emphasized by the leading part given to the various mother figures – Epifania, Isabella, Flory, and above all the narrator's mother Aurora – and by the culmination of the novel in Moraes' desperate quest, in the last part of the book, for his mother's lost portrait (which, at a symbolical level, could be read as a quest for the lost image of India).

The point of view changes, however, when Moraes starts gossiping about "Mehboob Productions' all-conquering movie *Mother India*" (1957), whose "leading lady . . . Nargis . . . became, until Indira-Mata supplanted her, the living mother-goddess of us all" (137). The irreverent description of this landmark in

¹² Ranbir Vohra, *The Making of India: A Historical Survey* (Armonk: Sharpe, 1997) 21.

¹³ Singh 157.

¹⁴ Vohra 21.

¹⁵ Nehru 60.

the history of Indian cinema and all-time Indian movie classic¹⁶ as “that glutinous saga of peasant heroism, that super-slushy ode to the uncrushability of village India made by the most cynical urbanites in the world” (137) ironically draws attention to the spuriousness of the myth, whereas the brief reference to “Indira-Mata” (*Midnight Children’s* demonic “Widow”) as one of the avatars of *Bharat Mata* indicates its essential ambiguity, as does indeed the portrayal of Aurora as a mother who is both a creative and destructive force. In fact, in one of the early chapters of the novel, readers are made aware of the essentially ambiguous character of “Mother India” in the description of Aurora’s first great painting. On the one hand, the passage celebrates the magic and the glory of *Bharat Mata*; simultaneously, however, drawing on Hindu myth (the goddess Kali), it hints at the darker aspects of Mother India, and of two of the other mother figures in the novel:

... it was Mother India herself, Mother India with her garishness and inexhaustible motion, Mother India who loved and betrayed and ate and destroyed and again loved her children . . . ; who stretched into great mountains like exclamations of the soul and along vast rivers full of mercy and disease, and across harsh drought-ridden plateaux on which men hacked with pickaxes at the dry infertile soil; Mother India with her oceans and coco-palms and rice-fields and bullocks at the water-well, her cranes on treetops with necks like coat-hangers, and high circling kites and the mimicry of mynahs and the yellow-beaked brutality of crows, a protean Mother India who could turn monstrous, who could be a worm rising from the sea with Epifania’s face at the top of a long and scaly neck; who could turn murderous, dancing cross-eyed and Kali-tongued while thousands died; but above all, in the very centre of the ceiling, . . . Mother India with Belle’s face. (60-61)

In a similar fashion, readers are later made aware, not only of Aurora’s “profound and selfless passion” (220) for her children, but also of her acknowledged inclination to feed on – and destroy – their lives, when she says “We all eat children . . . If not other people’s, then our own” (125).¹⁷

The ambiguity of India and Aurora as mother figures is further underlined and, at the same time, complicated by the element of incest that enters not only Aurora’s relationship with her son (e. g. when, in one of her paintings, she

¹⁶ *Mother India* is generally considered to be “an imperishable film which . . . continues to draw full houses whenever it is revived” (review of *Mother India*, *Filmfare* November 1957, online, *Filmfare*, 11 March 1999).

¹⁷ Cf. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ch. 5: “Do you know what Ireland is?” asked Stephen with cold violence. ‘Ireland is the old sow that eats her farrow.’”

portrays him as Othello, and herself as Desdemona), but also, as Aurora herself ironically points out, the relationship between mother and son in Mehboob's *Mother India*:

'The first time I saw that picture,' [Aurora] . . . confided to the famous movie star [i. e. Nargis] . . ., 'I took one look at your Bad Son, Birju, and I thought, O boy, what a handsome guy – too much sizzle, too much chilli, bring water. He may be a thief and a bounder, but that is some A-class loverboy goods. And now look – you have gone and marry-o'ed him! What sexy lives you movie people leadofy: to marry your own son, I swear, wowie.' (137)¹⁸

In both cases, the intimation of incest seems to indicate that there is a submerged oedipal element in those idealised "mutual parent-child longings" which are "deep-rooted in the national psyche" (as the cynic Vasco puts it, 138) – an element that is, however, usually repressed or sublimated. Thus the oedipal theme not only subverts the surface significance of the myth of *Bharat Mata*; it also suggests that the myth is really about symbiotic love, about narcissistic self-centredness, and, finally, about self-consuming violence.

This becomes even more obvious when one looks at the way in which *The Moor's Last Sigh* deals with the second aspect of India that is emphasized by Nehru in *The Discovery of India*: the cultural and religious diversity of the country. At first glance, however, the respective histories of the da Gamas (who are of Portuguese stock) and the Zogoibys (who are, on the one hand, members of the – now extinct – Jewish community in Cochin, and at the same time trace their lineage back to Boabdil, the last Sultan of Granada) seem to be representative of those numerous "foreign influences" mentioned by Nehru in *The Discovery of India* that "poured" into India, enriched its culture, and were finally "absorbed" by it.¹⁹ Likewise, by propelling readers from time to time back into India's distant past, *The Moor's Last Sigh* draws attention to what Nehru calls the "panorama of India's history,"²⁰ which, in its diversity, both underlies and complements the unity of India symbolized by the idea of *Bharat Mata*, and which for this very reason becomes, for Nehru, an important aspect of the national and cultural identity of India. Finally, and perhaps crucially, Rushdie in *The Moor's Last Sigh* even makes use of the very image that Nehru employs to represent India's historically grounded variety: the image of India-as-palimpsest. In *The Discovery of India*, this image occurs in a memorable passage in the third

¹⁸ Nargis did in fact marry Sunil Dutt, who played the role of her son in *Mother India*.

¹⁹ Nehru 62.

²⁰ Nehru 52.

chapter, where it is closely related to the more than five thousand years of Indian history, to the cultural variety of the subcontinent, and, at the same time, to its mysterious unity:

[India] was like some ancient palimpsest on which layer upon layer of thought and reverie had been inscribed, and yet no succeeding layer had completely hidden or erased what had been written previously. All of these existed in our conscious or subconscious selves, though we may not have been aware of them, and they had gone to build up the complex and mysterious personality of India . . . Though outwardly there was diversity and infinite variety among our people, everywhere there was that tremendous impress of oneness, which had held all of us together for ages past, whatever political fate or misfortune had befallen us.²¹

In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Rushdie makes extensive use of the image of India-as-palimpsest, but, in contrast to Nehru, he does not associate it in the first place with the historical, ethnic, and religious variety of India, but mainly (and, as the novel progresses, ever more emphatically) with the country's insidious doubleness – with the contrast between its innocuous-looking everyday face and the dark underworld that, as Moraes Zogoiby finds to his dismay, is lurking underneath. However, even though the narrator is forced to acknowledge the existence of this underworld, and although Rushdie “harshly exposes both the naiveté and the spuriousness” of Nehru’s vision of India,²² *The Moor's Last Sigh* is also a melancholy and elegiac good-bye to the diversity of Nehru’s India, the India Rushdie himself has always considered as “his” India – an India “based on ideas of multiplicity, pluralism, hybridity,” an India whose “defining image . . . is the crowd,” which “by its very nature [is] superabundant, heterogeneous, many things at once.”²³ Likewise, Rushdie’s novel is a final good-bye to the hopes based, in his earlier “Indian” novel *Midnight's Children*, at first on the large variety of special gifts with which the children of midnight had been endowed, and, after the failure of this hope, on Saleem Sinai’s adopted son Adam (the yuppified Adam Braganza-Zogoiby of *The Moor's Last Sigh*), the “member of a second generation of magical children who would grow up far tougher than the first.”²⁴ And yet, in *The Moor's Last Sigh* the utopia²⁵ of an India “based on ideas

²¹ Nehru 59.

²² Singh 171.

²³ “The Riddle of Midnight: India, August 1987,” *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Granta Books, 1991) 32.

²⁴ *Midnight's Children* (London: Picador, 1982) 447.

²⁵ Nandy observes that “since the entry of [Nehru’s] . . . daughter and two grandsons into politics . . . he has gradually turned into the symbol of a lost utopia” 15.

of multiplicity, pluralism, hybridity" is celebrated one more time (if only nostalgically). It comes alive in the kaleidoscopic worlds of Cochin and Bombay; it is above all indirectly evoked in the large number of references to the multicultural world of Granada that was to be irrevocably destroyed by the Reconquista – a world that is also recreated in Aurora's early "Moor" pictures, composed between 1957 (the year of Moraes' birth) and 1977 (the year of "the election that swept Mrs. G. from power,"²⁶ after the 1975-77 emergency). Especially those paintings where the world of Granada and that of Bombay are blended into an imaginary "Mooristan" or "Palimpstine" (226), can be considered as Aurora's "attempt to create a romantic myth of the plural, hybrid nation . . . using Arab Spain to re-imagine India" (227). In that these pictures represent a "place where worlds collide, flow in and out of one another" (226), they also become symbolic representations of the India "based on ideas of multiplicity, pluralism, hybridity" cherished by Rushdie himself, and reflected at least in part Rushdie's own praise of "hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs."²⁷ Likewise, Aurora's fondness of painting the Moor in many different roles – e. g. as courting peacock, as Karl Marx (father of Eleanor), as Othello, and as Boabdil, transforming him again and again, and finally portraying him as

a masked, particoloured harlequin, a patchwork quilt of a man; or, as his old skin dropped from him chrysalis-fashion, standing revealed as a glorious butterfly, whose wings were a miraculous composite of all the colours in the world (227),

– seems to be a perfectly adequate way of representing one of the inhabitants of a pluralist and multicultural world – in this respect her art also resembles Rushdie's own, and even echoes his self-description as "a mongrel self, history's bastard."²⁸ – Finally, insofar as Aurora describes her paintings as "religious pictures for people who have no god" (220), she comes close to Rushdie's own brand of secularism (attributed by him – among other things – to the influence of "Jawaharlal Nehru's vision of a secular India"²⁹), which has its roots in his loss of faith, but has not stopped him from considering his own work as "fill[ing] up that emptied God-chamber with other dreams."³⁰

²⁶ *Midnight's Children* 218.

²⁷ "In Good Faith," *Imaginary Homelands* 394.

²⁸ "In Good Faith" 404.

²⁹ "In Good Faith" 404.

³⁰ "In Good Faith" 377.

However, in spite of the celebration of secularism and hybridity by the narrator, and by Aurora in her early "Moor" paintings, there is, in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, a growing pessimistic awareness that the pluralist "Mooristan" is in fact no more than a fiction, a "hundred per cent fakery of the real" (184). By sending Moraes on a journey of discovery that brings him face to face with a "new" India of whose existence he had not had even the faintest knowledge, Rushdie subverts the meanings Nehru had attributed to India-as-palimpsest in *The Discovery of India*. In fact, Nehru's India turns out to be only an "overworld," the top layer of a completely different kind of palimpsest, under which there is hidden, not "the complex and mysterious personality of India"³¹ as Nehru would have had it, but a terrible "underworld" dominated by forces that threaten destruction to the secularist and hybrid India cherished by the narrator. Moraes himself has his most memorable and traumatizing encounter with this underworld in chapter 16 (the first chapter of "Bombay Central," part III of the novel), when he is taken to prison after being suspected of having murdered Uma. This is not his first encounter with that "other" India, however: earlier, upon discovering the secret business activities of his father (i. e. drugs and arms dealing), he had suddenly realized that "the City itself, perhaps the whole country, was a palimpsest, Under World beneath Over World, black market beneath white" (184).

In this underworld, a number of powerful forces are arrayed against India-Mooristan, the most obvious ones being political and religious sectarianism (personified mainly by "Mainduck" Raman Fielding and his Hindu nationalist party "Mumbai's Axis"), as well as crime, i. e. bribery, drug-dealing, and terrorism on a national and international scale (personified by the narrator's father, Abraham Zogoiby). As far as the threat of sectarianism is concerned, the diagnosis presented in *The Moor's Last Sigh* corresponds in all respects with the position that Rushdie has consistently taken in his essays: like Vikram Seth (in *A Suitable Boy*) and Rohinton Mistry (in *A Fine Balance*) he has always considered all varieties of communalism as the most serious threat to India, and especially to Nehru's "vision of a secular India":

Secularism, for India, is not simply a point of view; it is a question of survival. If what Indians call "communalism," sectarian religious politics, were to be allowed to take control of the polity, the results would be too

³¹ Nehru 59.

horrifying to imagine . . . I have fought against communal politics all my adult life.³²

At the end of part III of the novel, the communal and criminal violence represented by Fielding and Abraham Zogoiby peaks in the apocalyptic destruction of large parts of Bombay, when "Bombay blew apart" and the dream of the hybrid nation is shattered:

three hundred kilograms of RDX explosive were used. Two and a half thousand kilos more were captured later . . . Also timers, detonators, the works. There had been nothing like it in the history of the city. Nothing so cold-blooded, so calculated, so cruel. *Dhhaaiiyn!* A busload of schoolkids. *Dhhaaiiyn!* The Air-India building. *Dhhaaiiyn!* Trains, residences, chawls, docks, movie-studios, mills, restaurants. *Dhhaaiiyn! Dhhaaiiyn! Dhhaaiiyn!* Commodity exchanges, office buildings, hospitals, the busiest shopping streets in the heart of town. Bits of bodies were lying everywhere; human and animal blood, guts, and bones. Vultures so drunk on flesh that they sat lop-sidedly on rooftops, waiting for appetite to return. (371-372)

When, halfway through the novel, the narrator reflects on the pervasive nature of India's palimpsestic doubleness, he comes to realize that

when the whole of life was like this, when an invisible reality moved phantomwise beneath a visible fiction, subverting all its meanings, how . . . could any of us have escaped that deadly layering? How, trapped as we were in the hundred per cent fakery of the real, in the fancy dress, weeping-Arab kitsch of the superficial, could we have penetrated to the full, sensual truth of the lost mother below? How could we have lived authentic lives? How could we have failed to be grotesque? (184-185)

The passage is noteworthy because it indicates that the theme of India-as-palimpsest is reflected within the novel at various levels. On the one hand, the reader's attention is drawn to the fact that two of the more important portrait paintings described in the novel are palimpsests, too, which present to the observer an innocuous and misleading surface that hides an equivocal or unsavoury truth: Vasco Miranda's early portrait of Aurora as mother without child sitting on a giant lizard, painted over with "an equestrian portrait of the

³² "In Good Faith" 404. – Witness also Rushdie's alarm at the sectarian violence after Mrs. Gandhi had been killed by Sikh extremists in 1984, in the essay "The Riddle of Midnight: India, August 1987," *Imaginary Homelands* 26-33. The episode and its antecedents are also briefly referred to in *The Moor's Last Sigh* 309.