

Identity Crisis, Depression, Death and Political Allegory in Salman Rushdie's *The Golden House*

Saurav Shandil

Central University of Himachal Pradesh, Dharmshala

Abstract

The paper proposes to examine the motifs such as identity crisis, depression and death in Salman Rushdie's *The Golden House* (2017), which is a political allegory. Dionysius Golden, the youngest son of Nero Golden espoused the new identity of Greek God after his arrival to America. Dionysius chose the nickname D which in the later part of his life becomes synonymous with depression and death. D suffers from identity crisis because owing to his man-womanly characteristics, he is unable to decisively figure out his sexual identity. His migration to America from India is the result of the inopportune conditions and meagreness of the LGBTQ laws in India which allude to India's need for strong anti-discriminatory laws and exigency for same-sex marriage. India's Supreme Court gave historic decision on September 2018 which legalised consensual homosexual intercourse. But D in the novel symbolises India's lack of LGBTQ laws which evince the failures of different governments of India to acknowledge LGBTQ rights and equality in India before the year 2018. Even in America, the country with well-built LGBTQ laws, his struggle with his identity sojourned with him and he remained unable to decide whether he is a man or a woman which resulted in depression and eventually forces him to commit suicide.

Keywords: LGBTQ; Depression; Death; Political Allegory

Introduction

Salman Rushdie is the author of the seminal work *The Satanic Verses*, a novel that sparked a cultural war in Britain and all over the world. Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa ordering Rushdie's execution for blasphemy against Islam is one of the most notorious literary incidents in history. *The Golden House* (2017) was released by the winner of the Bookers of Booker prize author, which features an LGBTQ subplot that turns out to be a larger political allegory, constructed in the postmodern narrative's modus operandi. In the past, India always had a tolerant stance towards the LGBTQ community. Soon after the advent of British on the Indian soil, the land where *Ardhnarishwara* is worshipped, had witnessed section 377, which stated, anybody who willingly engages in an intercourse outside the set-up of nature with a woman, man, or animal will be “punished with imprisonment or fines” (Wong). Arjuna's disguise as Brihanalla in the Hindu epic Mahabharata, in which Arjuna wore women's clothes during the last year of the exile decreed by Kauravas after Yudhisthira lost a gambling match is one of the fine examples of India's liberal approach towards LGBTQs. British colonial rule in India brought ‘homophobia’ which resulted in the banishment on a flexible identity. However, it took more than a century for section 377's wounds to fade, after an intervention by the Indian Supreme Court in 2018. Even after the Supreme Court's momentous judgment, significant gaps remained in the ruling. The Supreme Court's ruling has given the LGBTQ community in India hope for a better future.

Identity Crisis, Depression and Death as Motifs

All through his career, Rushdie's writings have always reflected issues inside diverse civilisations or the globe at large, and his novel *The Golden House* does not disappoint. The novel revolves around the migration of a patriarch named Nero and his sons to America because of his past involvements in crimes and 26/11 attacks in Mumbai. He wanted to start a fresh in his life but his past kept haunting him. As the novel proceeds, tragedy befalls the family, and dreadful things occur. Rushdie has incorporated the modern world and its issues into his writing. Identity is a major theme in his work, and he probes it extensively. In the work, he goes into great length to

discuss identity and gender issues. In the hopes of uncovering his feminine identity, Dionysus, the twenty-year-old son of Nero, moves to the United States with his father and brothers. After his father's order to draw a veil over their old identities he espoused himself in a new identity of Greek god Dionysus and chose the nickname D. As a youngster, D had a tough childhood. He was conceived as a result of his father's illegal relationship with a lady whose name is unknown to the readers. When he was a teenager, he dared to inquire about his mother, to which his stepmother responded, "Leave it'...That was a woman of no consequence" (Rushdie 64). Both his half-brothers Petya and Apu never had a soft corner for D and treated him awfully.

Throughout the novel, his inner female persona is a fascination for him. Whenever Nero and his wife fought D without any exception took the side of his father unlike his brothers. In the aftermath of a disagreement in the family, D made Nero feel that his stepmother was unfit to run the household. And therefore, "Nero summoned his wife and ordered her to surrender the keys; and after that for a time it was D who gave instructions and ordered groceries and decided what food would be cooked in the kitchens" (65). D always took the position of the lady of the house once his stepmother surrendered the keys. This suggests his inner concealed identity of a woman which remained camouflaged during his childhood years.

It was not uncommon for Rene, the novel's narrator, and Dionysus to attend concerts. Ivy Manuel, a lesbian vocalist, and D were boon friends. Their friendship at best became possible because Ivy did not hit on him as other straight females did often. While talking to Ivy, D made the following statement "Sometimes I feel like I haven't been born yet, sometimes I feel I don't want to be born" (67). The statement insinuates that he hasn't been able to discover his true identity as a woman so far and therefore, he "hasn't been born yet". Also, his words "I don't want to be born" signifies that society may not embrace his transition from male to female and he may have to face penalties for making such a daring decision. Furthermore, the narrator informs us that "The point about metamorphosis is that it's not random" (69). In fact, his comments cause readers to

wonder over the idea of metamorphosis of LGBT people, which is radically different from the constrained rules of 'heterosexuality'.

"Heterosexuality" as an accepted world norm has been challenged by many philosophers and theorists. 'Gender' and 'identity' are really complex issues, on which Monique Wittig opined "A lesbian society pragmatically reveals that the divisions from men of which women have been the object is a political one and shows that we have been ideologically rebuilt into a natural 'group'" (1823). "The distinction between men and women is not a natural one," Wittig said. "It is an artificial construct that is imposed on individuals by politics, society, etc."

Adrienne Rich used the term "compulsory heterosexuality," which Judith Butler adopted and employed to question the fundamental notion of gender and heterosexuality itself, and Butler asserted that "Gender ought not to be constructed as a stable identity or locus agency... rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (Butler 140). Gender becomes ingrained in our minds as a result of these repetitions, and one becomes unable to escape the "meta-narrative" of "compulsory heterosexuality" because of this. For Butler the idea of gender is "a constituted *social temporality*" (Butler 141).

D always found himself in an impossible situation when it came to his sexual identity. Riya Z who works at Museum of Identity (MoI) shares an intimate bond with D tells him that "God is dead and identity fills the vacuum... but it turns out gods were gender bender from the start" (72). Riya's argument demonstrates that in postmodern times, identities, whether cultural, social, national, or sexual, have taken precedence. Also, "We find the contemporary world riven by identities based on class, sex, colour, race, religion, and most of all, politics" (Batra 505). As a motif that runs throughout the work, 'identity' plays a significant role in the plot-whether it be gender, professional, or cultural identity. On top of that, MoI has been used as a metaphor by the

writer and he delineates "...at the heart of the Identity Museum was the question of identity for self, starting with the biological self and moving far beyond that. Gender identity, splitting as never before in human history, spawning whole new vocabularies that tried to grasp the new mutabilities" (72). Since biological identities are not natural as Wittig and Butler both projected in their theories, this also remains at the core of MoI that one has to forge his identity as it's not a naturally given. "New Mutabilities" were only accomplished when several governments granted certain rights to sexual minorities in their countries and people got the freedom to choose their sexual orientations.

Although, for D, "God was not dead, not in America anyway" (73). For D, America appears to be a promising land for him to complete his metamorphosis. Riya believes that D's migration to America is the result of his previous place and its lawlessness for LGBTQs and tells him that he migrated to America because "...where you came from you weren't free to be who you need to be, to become who you need to become" (97). The country remains unnamed, but it is apparent that the author purposefully attacks India's lawlessness for the LGBTQ populations. Prior to 2018, there were no LGBTQ laws in India. Because of this homosexuality was a criminal offence in India, therefore D considers America to be a safe haven for his metamorphosis. He did not relocate to America just because of his father's illegal activities, but also for his own personal reasons. Hence, D's migration is an allegory of Indian lawlessness for LGBTQs. This also reflects the failure of several Indian governments to reform Section 377.

The author too has established a parallel between Gregor Samsa's and D's transformation. "He was a misfit in his own skin, experiencing, in intense form, this newly important variation of the mind/body problem (107). D felt that he was transforming into a monster because he was transgressing the societal gender standards. D even tries on women's attire from Vasilisa's wardrobe, and when he hears his father approaching, he becomes terrified and exclaims, "He'll kill me" (109). He is afraid because his father will not allow him to undergo a transition, as is

common in many households. Many people are unable to discover identities as a result of such anxieties, as well as society's prejudice towards LGBTQ persons and their extremely intolerant attitudes. Rushdie digs into this subject with remarkable insights, and canvassed "...modern sexual identity, which obsess millennials and baffle older generations" (Forna). In a conversation, Ivy and Riya encourage D to find out who he is and tell him "Right now you could be TG, TS, TV, CD. Whatever feels right to you. 'Transgender, transsexual, transvestite, cross dresser'" (111). In addition, they tell D that he is;

'...maybe trans-feminine, because you are born male, identify with many aspects of femaleness but you don't feel you actually are a woman.' 'The word *woman* is being detached from biology. Also, the word *man*.' 'Or if you don't identify with woman-ness or man-ness maybe you are a *non-binary*' (111-112).

Riya believes that identity is not predetermined and anyone can select any identity anyone wants. She tells D that "'You can choose who you want to be.' 'Sexual identity is not given. It's a choice.'" (112).

Rushdie has included mythological elements into the work. The name Dionysus originated from Greek mythology and Dionysus is the deity of fertility, who is also thought to be man-womanish. Additionally, Rushdie has leaned on Hindu mythology to explore the history of sexuality and a sex, and used a reference of the Hindu deity *Ardhnarishwara*. There are a number of historical allusions to the fact that ancient societies were tolerant of each other and even worshipped gods that had both genders in them. In the Hindu epic Mahabharata Arjuna disguised himself as a transgender because of a curse given to him by Urvasi. "Arjuna wore the clothes of a woman and presented himself as an accomplished dance teacher called Brihnalla" (Pattanaik 201). This is one of the best examples of ancient India's unprejudiced approach towards LGBTQs. Another example we find in the Mahabharata is of Shikhandi who was born a woman but later

acquired a body of a man. However, it appears that the concept of tolerance is vanishing in the modern world. Questioned about the issue of LGBTQs in an interview by Frank Pizzoli for *Wendy City Times*, Rushdie said:

I grew up in Bombay, where there has always been a substantial transgender community, the (*Hijra*). I've spent time in that community listening to their stories... In India this terrible thing happened. Under a previous government (in 2009), homosexuality was legalised, decriminalised.... And now this new government came in, and the Indian high court has effectively decriminalised homosexuality (by not recognising the 2009 decriminalisation decision).

This was the primary motivation for Rushdie's writing on the difficult topic of gender identity. In India, there are no employments for LGBTQ people, making it difficult for them to find jobs; therefore, to reveal the problem, writer also has used an example of a *Hijra* dressed as Michael Jackson, dancing on the streets of Bombay to earn some money.

D started transforming and “Hence the (writer had made a deliberate) use of parenthesis with pronoun ‘he’, which changes to ‘she’” (Batra 504). In the novel, D did seek professional assistance, which proved to be ineffective. Soon Riya became crazy after her father’s prison breakout. Finally, D was all alone in his flat. Because of this, he was unable to talk about his transition with her. He began to feel isolated and frightened. “His own fear, his fear of himself, magnified...” (264). When he discovered he was unable to understand his metamorphosis, he began to obsess about it and became depressed as a result of his inability to cope. His memory became hazy and he couldn't even recall where he was. Rene found him and pronounced:

I took [him] back to his apartment. And this is how I remember him now, marooned on a bench amid eight roads of traffic, knowing he couldn't be a hero in his private

war, the cars flowing toward him and away, and he unable to pick a direction, not knowing which was way home (265).

D's identity crisis magnifies. During his depressed condition, the writer purposefully switches his pronoun from *his* to *her*, using his narrator as a façade to show his incomplete transformation. Depression is very common in LGBTQs because of inequality, social injustice and unsupportive families. In the end D could not bear the burden of his transformation/metamorphosis and he remains unable to figure out his sexual identity and commits suicide. His nickname D becomes synonymous with depression and death. In his suicide note, he wrote:

It isn't because of the difficulties of my own life that I do this. It's because there's something wrong with the world which makes it unbearable to me.... The indifferences of people to one another...I, who am both eve and Adam, take my leave from the world in a Garden too (267-68).

D's depression and suicide is not just a result of his failure to establish a gender identity that suited him, but also a reflection of society's attitude towards 'sexual minorities'. After discovering that his transition would be difficult in America as well, he commits suicide because of his inability to break free of the gender norms that society had predetermined. Also, it signified the threat to sexual minorities in America under the rule of President Trump. On Trump's Inauguration Day, a frightening signal of the new administration's intentions was revealed when "every reference to LGBTQ people was wiped from the White House Website" (Winter). Rushdie hasn't missed the chance to represent it in his novel, and he debunks the notion that America has superior LGBTQ legislation. Numerous researchers rendered well built "...evidences of elevated rates of reported suicide attempts among LGBTQ individuals" (Haas et al.).

Summing up, Rushdie has sought to portray a panoramic perspective of the globe by painting corruption, crime, politics, and the issue of identity on his canvas of the world. He has

attempted to address what is going on in both India and the United States. In spite of so many improvements in LGBTQ laws in many countries, individuals still do not treat persons from these communities equally. Because of social injustice and prejudice, many LGBTQ individuals commit suicide. The writer has successfully incorporated and delineated the motifs of identity crisis, depression, death and political allegory in his novel *The Golden House*. He has discussed the issue at great length but has left it to the reader as to how to engage with the issues in the crises of the present. Therefore, the novel has been volitionally kept open-ended so that the reader can infer/decode a whole range of discourses embedded therein.

Works Cited

Batra, Jagdish. "Salman Rushdie's *The Golden House*: Classical Worldview for Postmodern
" *Humanities and Social Sciences Review*, 2018.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.
Thinking Gender, edited by Linda J. Nicholson, Routledge, 1990.

Forna, Aminatta. "The Golden House by Salman Rushdie review- a parable of modern
America." *The Guardian*, 16 Sep. 2017, www.theguardian.com/books/2017/sep/16/the-golden-house-salman-rushdie-review. Accessed 08 September 2021.

Haas, Ann P et al. "Suicide and suicide risk in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender
populations: review and recommendations." *Journal of homosexuality* vol. 58,1 (2011):
10-51. doi:10.1080/00918369.2011.534038.

Wittig, Monique. "One Is Not Born a Woman." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and*

Criticism, general editor, Vincent B. Leitch, W.W. Norton & Co., 2018 pp 1823-29.

(Originally published in 1981).

Pattanaik, Devdutt. *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata*. Penguin Random House, 2010.

Rushdie, Salman. *The Golden House*. Penguin Random House, 2017.

Salman Rushdie. "BOOKS Salman Rushdie on 'The Golden House,' LGBT subplot, global issues." Interview by Frank Pizzoli. *Windy City Times*, 13 Feb. 2018, windycitytimes.com/ARTICLE.php?AID=61907. Accessed 08 Sep. 2021.

Winter, Hannah Murphy. "What It's Like to Be Queer in Trump's America". *Rolling Stones*, October 30 2020, www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-feature/lgbt-rights-rollbacks-trumpadministration-1083911/. Accessed 07 September 2021.

Wong, Tessa. "377: The British Colonial Law That Left anti LGBTQ Legacy in Asia." *BBC*, 29 June 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-57606847>. Accessed 08 September 2021.