



THE CULTURAL CUL-DE-SAC OF THE PRESENT TIMES AS PORTRAYED IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S NOVEL *QUICHOTTE* THROUGH THE EXPERIENCE OF INDIAN IMMIGRANTS

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Abstract:

In an age when nations take pride in their culture, issues like cultural fragmentation, bigotry and xenophobia have become increasingly pertinent, leading immigrants to develop the feeling of belonging nowhere. Immigrants often perceived as outsiders and potential threats, are denied opportunities, despite the abundance of employment prospects and improved living standards. This feeling of the 'Other' leads them to develop trust issues causing them to look at each other with fear and suspicion. Having spent so long in a foreign country creates apprehensions, which in turn prevents them from returning to their native country. Rushdie's fourteenth novel *Quichotte* under the veneer of satire, poignantly portrays the zeitgeist of the contemporary times and addresses through irony and ambiguity, the themes of religious intolerance, racial discrimination, and the hatred and violence that make life difficult for the targeted groups. This paper is an attempt to delve deep into the problems and the estrangement faced by Rushdie's characters in a foreign country. This paper further explores the representation of the immigrant experience in a post-truth American society through the lens of Jacques Derrida's Hospitality theory.

Keywords: Alienation, Immigrants, Intolerance, Guest-Host Relationship, Conditional Hospitality

Introduction

The guest-host relationship even in the conventional sense is not devoid of formality, pretension and lack of genuine warmth. There is a certain level of artificiality in it. The host wanting to appear cordial, puts on an appearance of friendliness and warmth which constantly reminds the guest of his outsider status. Immanuel Kant in *Perpetual Peace* (1795) distinguishes between the right to hospitality and the right to visitation, stating that "it is not a right to be treated as a guest to which the stranger can lay claim—a special friendly compact on his behalf would be required to make him for a given time an actual inmate—but he has a right of visitation" (Kant, 1795, 137-138). This right which Kant describes as belonging to all mankind "in virtue of our common right of possession on the surface of the earth," (Kant, 1795, p. 138) appears inclusive at the peripheral level, but it subtly privileges the host's superiority over the guest under a colourful guise. According to Kant, the guest has the right to visit a place, but he can not permanently reside there. Derrida who further elaborated on Kant's concept of hospitality, terms this 'conditional hospitality', in which the host's generosity is bound by his condition of the guest to remain within expectations, restrictions and limitations, operating within a society. When the guest fails to conform to the demands of the host, crosses the limits drawn, or takes more freedom than what is allowed, the guest-host relationship becomes strained often causing a change in the temperament of the host from hospitality to hostility. The immigrant position dramatically falls from guests to intruders making them to subject to hatred. Even in contemporary times, those who fail to be a part of the dominant homogeneous group are reduced to the position of an outsider - the Other - always viewed with suspicion. The present century witnesses xenophobia and religious intolerance reaching a crescendo with the past of every race raked up and history rewritten to claim a glorious past. The hollowness of this is exposed in Rushdie's *Quichotte*.

Objectives

The main objective of this study is to explore the immigrant experience in a post-truth American society, which is marked by conditional hospitality, through a detailed analysis of Salman Rushdie's *Quichotte*. This paper aims to study how issues like racism, xenophobia and prejudice against immigrants continue to be pertinent in society and how these concerns are explored in the work. The paper further tries to delve deeply into the problems and the estrangement Rushdie's characters feel in foreign countries and their strained relationships. This paper also attempts to investigate the limits of hospitality in



Cover Page



the novel - when a guest becomes an intruder and acceptance turns into rejection and how the novel critiques the contemporary cultural and political climate that breeds hostility.

Research Methodology

This study primarily employs Jacques Derrida's hospitality theory - specifically the distinction between conditional and unconditional hospitality, to identify and analyse the immigrant experience as that of an outsider subject to societal prejudices and biases. The treatment of the immigrant by the native is dependent on certain conditions; when the guest fails to meet these criteria, he is perceived as a threat. The methodology employed for this study is qualitative textual analysis with *Quichotte* serving as the primary text for case study. The theoretical framework is mainly derived from Derrida's *Of Hospitality*, supported by Immanuel Kant's *Perpetual Peace* to understand conditional hospitality. Supplementary critical readings on Derrida's hospitality theory are also taken to further examine the guest-host/native-immigrant relationship employed in the novel.

Conditional and Unconditional Hospitality

Derrida's distinction between the terms conditional and unconditional hospitality stems from the very ambiguous nature of the word hospitality itself. The terms, hospitality and hostility come from the same Latin root '*hostis*'. Derrida finds an interconnectedness between hospitality and hostility making the boundaries between both the terms blurry. Drawing from Émile Benveniste's etymology, Derrida highlights this linguistic paradox to show that every act of hospitality carries within it the potential for hostility. From this ambiguity arises the distinction between conditional and unconditional hospitality. "For Derrida, conditional hospitality operates within an economy of exchange and reciprocity, whereas unconditional hospitality is given beyond norms, rules, and laws without expecting reciprocity or requiring identification" (Khanh, 2023). As Khanh observes, conditional hospitality is founded upon the host's authority and expectations from the guests to adhere to certain rules of the former, where unconditional hospitality resists such power structures.

The Immigrant Experience in *Quichotte*

Rushdie's Booker Prize shortlisted work *Quichotte* is an American novel which presents the experiences of Indian immigrants. The plot of the novel spirals around three metropolitan cities in three countries. The protagonist of the novel, along with his imaginary son, embarks on a journey in search of an unattainable goal - to win the hand of Salma R., an Indian born American television star. What they encounter along the way - racists, opiates, humans who turn into Mastodons, gives a vivid picture of the present American society. As the narrative progresses, the fictional author of *Quichotte*, Sam DuChamp and the character Quichotte merge into a single entity.

In the post truth era, the suppressed feelings of hostility, intolerance and hatred find expression in violent reactions against the immigrants. When Quichotte and Sancho reach Lake Capote they become preys of Islamophobia. "What is your religion?, the white lady asked..., he could be ISIS." (Rushdie, 2019, p. 127). After twelve hours of this incident, on the way, at the town of Kansas, they encounter a similar situation. A drunken man asks the Indians, to get out of his country and later, an Indian is shot without any reason. Rushdie's account of this shooting incident is drawn from a real life incident where a software engineer was shot dead.

The intensity of the violence and torture the Indian immigrants face in the United States is beyond human tolerance. More than his unnatural existence, what worries Sancho most are the inconsiderate comments when he and his father have to encounter while Sancho was walking in the park when he sees a group of three middle aged white men. Out of curiosity Sancho looks at them.

'You're staring at us. Why are you staring at us?'. The men had stopped, facing Sancho, blocking his path. Sancho was placatory. 'No, Sir, not staring. Just walking. Going that way,' he said, pointing.

'He was definitely staring,' said the second man. 'That was impolite. But these people, they don't know manners.'



Cover Page



‘They come over here and we pay for their health care,’ quote said the third man.
‘We worry about the safety of our womenfolk,’ set the first man.
‘We don’t know when one of them will go rogue and attack everything we hold dear. We do know they worship alien gods,’ said the second man.
‘Speak up,’ set the third man. ‘Why are you even looking at us ? You people shouldn’t do that. You should not have done that.’ (Rushdie, 2019, p. 208-209)

Derrida in *Of Hospitality* states that, the “*étranger* is understood on the basis of the circumscribed field of *ethos* or ethics, of habitat or time spent as *ethos*, of *Sittlichkeit*, of objective morality” (Derrida, 2000, p. 45). Derrida’s observation suggests that our idea of a stranger, in the novel’s case a foreigner, is limited and shaped by mainly three institutional contexts - stranger to the family, civil society and to the state. *Quichotte* is set in a racially polarised American society where immigrants are constantly viewed through moral and racial stereotypes. They are perceived not as individuals but as representatives of certain groups whom the natives already hold prejudiced notions. The host’s understanding of the guest is built on the former’s socio-cultural and moral codes.

Conditional Hospitality and Cultural Bias of the Host

Quichotte portrays that hospitality operates within strict boundaries of power. As Derrida states, the foreigner “has to ask for hospitality in a language which by definition is not his own, the one imposed on him by the master of the house, the host, the king, the lord, the authorities, the nation, the State, the father, etc.” (Derrida, 2000, p. 15). The host, whether a nation, community or family - extends welcome only under specific criteria. As per Derrida’s observation, the ethics of hospitality are always bound to the laws of the *ethos* - of home, nation or culture. This tension transforms the immigrant, the woman and the religious minority into strangers within spaces that claim to be hospitable.

In the United States, cultural degradation manifests as hostility towards immigrants. American citizens consider Indian immigrants as parasites who are bent on snatching away their opportunities and waiting for a chance to destroy their culture and nation. From the dot buster gang violence in Jersey to the 9/11 incident, Rushdie captures a society where conditional hospitality collapses into xenophobia.

In India, Rushdie extends this guest-host tension into the domestic sphere, mainly through the structure of family. Sam DuChamp’s family history resonates with gender inequality, sibling rivalry and child abuse. The character Sister was not given the privileges which the Brother enjoyed. The unequal treatment of Brother and Sister underscores a gendered hierarchy within the home, where the *ethos* of patriarchy dictates belonging. When Brother was sent to a university in London, Sister had to work on her own to pursue her studies in the London Law School. The initiative taken by Sister in dividing the property after their parents’ death has completely broken the tie between them. Like a man being lynched by religious fanatics for finding beef in his kitchen and an eight year old girl from a Muslim family being raped and brutally murdered in a Hindu temple to teach the Muslims a lesson; these incidents throw light into the great drift between the majority and minority in India. The India which took pride in ‘Unity in Diversity’ is not found in Rushdie’s writing.

In Britain, where Sister settles later, conditional hospitality manifests through racial prejudice. She realises that as people are narrow minded, it is difficult for people without the acceptable skin colour to live comfortably there in spite of their power and position. Rushdie narrates an incident where sister supports the public interest. A restaurant called ‘Sancho’, named after Ignatius Sancho, a runaway slave who was later forced in England, was later turned into a nightclub with dance and music, where drunken men would be fighting in the street disturbing the quiet life of the residents there. When the residence sought Sisters’ help at intervention, she turned her best to solve the issue through dialogues but when it sees no result, she reluctantly takes the matter to the court. People turn against her and accuse her of being a racist and she finds her efforts as an anti racist futile.



Cover Page



Across these spheres, Rushdie highlights the issue of conditional hospitality. Conditional hospitality is built on limits and stipulations - the host's acceptance of the guest is dependent upon certain conditions. If the guest fails to meet the host's demands he is deemed an intruder, which suggests that achieving unconditional hospitality which is "given beyond norms, rules, and laws without expecting reciprocity or requiring identification" (Khanh, 2023) is near impossible.

Collapse of the Immigrant Dream

In Rushdie's *Quichotte* we see a society stripped of ideals, where dreams are not realised, values are not found and characters pursue their goals unrealistically. When realisation hits, they find that America is not a hospitable space where they can settle peacefully. People like Dr Smile prosper supplying painkillers to the people who do not need it. People like Salma R. though on the pinnacle of fame, to erase the scars of childhood abuse become opiod addicts. Immigrants change their Indian names seeking either acceptance or escape from racial prejudice. Desperate for acceptance, they think of an alternate world where they can bury their sorrows and frustrations, where they are acknowledged as human beings, not as aliens, where they will not be judged on the basis of their skin colour or their nationality. These instances collectively underscore the impossibility of unconditional hospitality in Rushdie's America.

Conclusion

Quichotte by Salman Rushdie is a striking novel, which weaves mainly the story of the immigrants and the problems they face in a foreign country. No ordinary author can use satire in such a poignant way to describe a very serious and realistic theme, and the guest-host relationship reaching new dimensions. It is also a tribute to the diligent and hardworking immigrants who consider the host country as their own, but at the same time, a criticism of the people, who spoil the reputation of the immigrants. For unconditional hospitality to exist, people should be open-minded, devoid of biases, prejudices and expectations - conditions that remain unrealised within the novel's post-truth American landscape. The post-truth American society is driven by preconceptions, ultimately treating the immigrant as outsider, never accepting him or including him a part of society.

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