

UNIT: IV

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Salman Rushdie: 'The Free Radio'

About the author

Salman Rushdie, in full **Sir Ahmed Salman Rushdie**, (born June 19, 1947, Bombay [now Mumbai], India), Indian-born British writer whose allegorical novels examine historical and philosophical issues by means of surreal characters, brooding humour, and an effusive and melodramatic prose style. His treatment of sensitive religious and political subjects made him a controversial figure.

Rushdie was the son of a prosperous Muslim businessman in India. He was educated at Rugby School and the University of Cambridge, where he received an M.A. degree in history in 1968. Throughout most of the 1970s he worked in London as an advertising copywriter. His first published novel, *Grimus*, appeared in 1975. Rushdie's next novel, *Midnight's Children* (1981), a fable about modern India, was an unexpected critical and popular success that won him international recognition.

The novel *Shame* (1983), based on contemporary politics in Pakistan, was also popular, but Rushdie's fourth novel, *The Satanic Verses*, encountered a different reception. Some of the adventures in this book depict a character modeled on the Prophet Muhammad and portray both him and his transcription of the Quran in a manner that, after the novel's publication in the summer of 1988, drew criticism from Muslim community leaders in Britain, who denounced the novel as blasphemous. Public demonstrations against the book spread to Pakistan in January 1989. On February 14 the spiritual leader of revolutionary Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, publicly condemned the book and issued a fatwa (legal opinion) against Rushdie; a bounty was offered to anyone who would execute him. He went into hiding under the protection of Scotland Yard, and—although he occasionally emerged unexpectedly, sometimes in other countries—he was compelled to restrict his movements.

Despite the standing death threat, Rushdie continued to write, producing *Imaginary Homelands* (1991), a collection of essays and criticism; the children's novel *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990); the short-story collection *East, West* (1994); and the novel *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995). In 1998, after nearly a decade, the Iranian government announced that it would no longer seek to enforce its fatwa against Rushdie. He recounted his experience in the third-person memoir *Joseph Anton* (2012); its title refers to an alias he adopted while in seclusion.

Following his return to public life, Rushdie published the novels *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999) and *Fury* (2001). *Step Across This Line*, a collection of essays he wrote between 1992 and 2002 on subjects ranging from the September 11 attacks to *The Wizard of Oz*, was issued in 2002. Rushdie's subsequent novels include *Shalimar the Clown* (2005), an examination of terrorism that was set primarily in the disputed Kashmir region of the Indian subcontinent, and *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008), based on a fictionalized account of the Mughal

emperor Akbar. The children's book *Luka and the Fire of Life* (2010) centres on the efforts of Luka—younger brother to the protagonist of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*—to locate the titular fire and revive his ailing father. *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* (2015) depicts the chaos ensuing from a rent in the fabric separating the world of humans from that of the Arabic mythological figures known as jinn. Reveling in folkloric allusion—the title references *The Thousand and One Nights*—the novel unfurls a tapestry of connected stories celebrating the human imagination.

In *The Golden House* (2017), Rushdie explored the immigrant experience in the United States through a wealthy Indian family that settles in New York City in the early 21st century. His next novel, *Quichotte* (2019), was inspired by Cervantes's *Don Quixote*.

Rushdie received the Booker Prize in 1981 for *Midnight's Children*. The novel subsequently won the Booker of Bookers (1993) and the Best of the Booker (2008). These special prizes were voted on by the public in honour of the prize's 25th and 40th anniversaries, respectively. Rushdie was knighted in 2007, an honour criticized by the Iranian government and Pakistan's parliament.

Introduction to the short story- 'Free radio'

- **Summary**

'The Free Radio' by Salman Rushdie, appeared in the *East, West* collection was published in 1994. The story is set in the context of the Indian Emergency (1975-1977). The story is a narrative about the Ramani who is a young and handsome man. The only thing Ramani inherited from his father was a rickshaw, which became a means of earning his livelihood afterward. The narrator is concerned about Ramani's wellness and wants to keep him away from the thief's widow, because he used to know Ramani's parents. He falls in love with the thief's widow and eventually marries her..The procedure of 'nasbandi' or vasectomy becomes the central theme of the text, after Ramani undergoes the same. Many schemes were launched in lieu of the emergency period; 'Nasbandi' was one of the major schemes launched. The context of the Free radio comes from this scheme, as the radio was given as a reward for performing the procedure.

The story then continues and moves around Ramani's imaginary radio. He migrates to Bombay in search of bigger opportunities and a chance at being an actor.

Backdrop of the story

- **Emergency period in India**

The Indian Emergency of 25th June 1975-21st March 1977 was a 21-month period, when President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, upon advice by Prime Minister **Indira Gandhi**, declared a state of emergency under Article 352 of the Constitution of India, effectively bestowing on her the power to rule by decree, suspending elections and civil liberties.

List of Characters

Ramani – the main protagonist who is a naive rickshaw rider.

The thief's widow – she marries Ramani. She is ten years older than him and has five children from her previous marriage.

The narrator – an old teacher who enjoys a high social status.

Summary

The narrator tells the story of Ramani who is young, good-looking, and rides a rickshaw he inherited from his father. He is seduced by a thief's widow. The narrator disapproves of this relationship:

We all knew nothing good would happen to him while the thief's widow had her claws dug into his flesh, but the boy was an innocent, a real donkey's child, you can't teach such people.

The narrator has a vested interest in snatching Ramani out of the widow's clutches, because he used to know Ramani's parents.

The widow is described as attractive and vicious. She is ten years older than Ramani and has five children from her previous marriage. She is poor, as the thief didn't leave her any money.

The narrator tells the story of how Ramani and the thief's widow met. One day, Ramani rides his rickshaw into town. The thief's widow is in the bania shop. The narrator insinuates that the thief's widow is a prostitute:

I won't say where the money came from, but people saw men at night near her rutyputty shack, even the bania himself they were telling me but I personally will not comment.

The thief's widow and her children catch Ramani's rickshaw. The narrator implies that the widow wants to prove that she can afford a ride in a rickshaw even though her children must be hungry. The narrator thinks that the widow decides then to seduce Ramani.

After that, Ramani and the thief's widow are seen everywhere in public. The narrator is glad that Ramani's mother is dead, because otherwise

her face would have fallen off from shame.

Ramani gets into bad company. He starts drinking illegal liquor in the back of the Irani's canteen. The narrator tries to persuade Ramani to stay away from his new friends but in vain.

Ramani's friends wear the armbands of the new Youth Movement. The narrator disapproves of them and hints at beatings-up in which they might be involved. Ramani has no armband but his new acquaintances exert a strong influence on him.

The armband youths always say that Ramani is handsome and should be a film star. This flattery is designed to con Ramani out of free drinks and money at cards. The widow only makes the situation worse by reinforcing Ramani's dreams about becoming a film star; the narrator once overhears the widow flattering Ramani in public. From this day on, the narrator has a feeling of impending disaster.

The next time the widow comes to the bania shop, the narrator decides to get involved for the sake of Ramani's dead parents. The narrator uses his social status to force the widow to talk to him. The narrator tells the widow that she should stop seeing Ramani. The widow responds in the following way:

"Let me tell you, mister teacher sahib *retired*, that you're Ramani has asked to marry me and I have said no, because I wish no more children, and he is a young man and should have his own. So tell that to the whole world and stop your cobra poison."

From then on, the narrator takes less interest in Ramani's affairs, as he thinks that there is nothing more he can do. There are more interesting things happening in town; the local health officer has parked a white caravan in the street. The vehicle, guarded by the armband youths, is used for sterilising men.

At this time, Ramani starts dreaming about receiving a transistor radio as a gift from the Central Government in Delhi. Everyone is convinced that Ramani makes this up due to his predilection for fantasies. The boy believes in his dream and seems to be happier than at any other point in his life.

Soon after, Ramani and the widow get married. The narrator accosts Ramani to ask him if he's been to the caravan. Ramani implies that he has because he is in love with the widow. The narrator says:

'My idiot child, you have let that woman deprive you of your manhood!'

Ramani replies:

"It does not stop love-making or anything, excuse me, teacher sahib, for speaking of such a thing. It stops babies only and my woman did not want children anymore, so now all is hundred per cent OK. Also it is in national interest."

Ramani adds that his free radio is sure to arrive shortly as a thank you gift from the government. The narrator doesn't tell Ramani that the radio scheme was abandoned many years ago.

After that, the widow is seen rarely in town. Ramani, on the other hand, starts working more. Every time he rides through town, he puts his hand up to his ear and mimics radio broadcasts. The community is almost fooled into thinking that Ramani has the real thing.

Ramani continues to carry an invisible radio but he seems strained from his feat of imagination. The narrator

had divined that Ram had poured into the idea of the radio all his worries and regrets about what he had done, and that if the dream were to die he would be forced to face the full gravity of his crime against his own body, to understand that the thief's widow had turned him, before she married him, into a thief of a stupid and terrible kind, because she had made him rob himself.

The white caravan is back in town. Ramani waits a few days, hoping that government officials will bring the radio to his place. On the third day, he rides to the caravan with the widow. Ramani comes into the caravan alone. After a while, there are sounds of disagreement. Ramani, visibly beaten, is marched out of the caravan by his armband friends.

One day, Ramani sells his rickshaw and tells the narrator that he and his family are leaving for Bombay to fulfil his dreams of becoming a film star.

After a few months, the narrator receives a letter from Ramani. The teacher deduces it was dictated to a professional letter writer, as Ramani can't write. The narrator receives more letters filled with stories from Ramani's new life. According to the letters, the rickshaw rider's talent was discovered at once and now he lives the excellent life of a rich film star. The narrator says:

They were wonderful letters, brimming with confidence but whenever I read them, and sometimes I read them still, I remember the expression which came over his face in the days just before he learned the truth about his radio, and the huge mad energy he had poured into the act of conjuring reality, by an act of magnificent faith, out of the hot thin air between his cupped hand and his ear.

Setting and Language

The action takes place in a tightly-knit community in India.

The language is conversational, which is achieved by the use of rhetorical questions, repetition, and discourse markers such as 'you know':

We felt bad for him, but who listens to the wisdom of the old today?

I say: who listens?

Exactly; nobody, certainly not a stone-head like Ramani, the rickshaw-wallah. But I blame the widow. I saw it happen, you know, I saw most of it until I couldn't stand it anymore.

The narration resembles village gossip. This is especially evident in the following passage in which the narrator implies that the thief's widow prostitutes herself:

The thief's widow had gone to the bania shop to buy some three grains of dal and I won't say where the money came from, but people saw men at night near her rut-putty shack, even the bania himself they were telling me but I personally will not comment.

The passage reveals the narrator's hypocrisy; he likes to pretend that he doesn't stoop to gossip, and yet his insinuations are clear enough.

The Narrator

The story is written in the first person. The narrator is an old teacher who is an important part of the community. He used to know Ramani's parents. The narrator often switches between the singular 'I' and the plural 'we', which means that he assumes the role of the community's spokesperson.

The narration is unreliable, as it is filtered through the narrator's biases and preconceptions. What is more, his knowledge is limited to gossip and what he can witness. Unreliable narrators are fairly common in modernism and postmodernism (Salman Rushdie belongs to the latter movement).

The narrator is particularly prejudiced against the thief's widow. The fact that he never addresses her by her own name reveals a lot about the narrator's views on gender. The widow is only defined by her disreputable dead husband as if her identity were tied inextricably with his. In the narrator's view, women are not independent beings.

The widow was certainly attractive, no point denying, in a sort of hard vicious way she was all right, but it is her mentality that was rotten. Ten years older than Ramani she must have been, five children alive and two dead, what that thief did besides robbing and making babies God only knows, but he left her not one new paisa, so of course she would be interested in Ramani.

The narrator also safeguards conventional morality by frowning on the fact that Ramani and the widow are seen in public:

But after that Ramani and the thief's widow were seen everywhere, shamelessly, in public places, and I was glad his mother was dead because if she had lived to see this her face would have fallen off from shame.

The fact that the narrator is a teacher is significant, given the story's clearly didactic tone. The narrator wants to lecture the reader about the importance of listening to elders and the dangers of succumbing to fantasies.

History

In the story, Rushdie makes reference to real historical events that took place in India. The narrator has the following to say about Ramani's new friends:

They all wore the armbands of the new Youth Movement. This was the time of the State of Emergency.

The Emergency was a period from 1975 to 1977 during which Prime Minister Indira Gandhi ruled by decree. It was declared by President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed due to internal disturbances. The Emergency was one of the most controversial periods in Indian history. It was during this time that Sanjay Gandhi, the Prime Minister's son, launched a campaign propagating forced sterilisation – one of the main themes of the short story.

Reality and Fiction

One of the story's main themes is the relationship between reality and fiction. Ramani easily believes in fantasies about being a film star or receiving a free radio from the government for undergoing a vasectomy. The boundary between fiction and reality becomes blurred when Ramani starts pretending to already have the radio. Even the community half-participates in these dreams:

Ram always had the rare quality of total belief in his dreams, and there were times when his faith in the imaginary radio almost took us in, so that we half-believed it was really on its way, or even that it was already there, cupped invisibly against his ear as he rode his rickshaw around the streets of the town.

Further, the narrator says:

But when I saw him now, there was a new thing in his face, a strained thing, as if he were having to make a phenomenal effort, which was much more tiring even than pulling a rickshaw containing a thief's widow and her five living children and the ghosts of two dead ones; as if all the energy of his young body was being poured into that fictional space between his ear and his hand, and he was trying to bring the radio into existence by a might, and possibly fatal, act of will.

The excerpts question the nature of fiction and reality, almost blurring the distinction between the two. They also point to the dangers of delusions; Ramani's act of imagination is potentially fatal. Rushdie's treatment of the nature of fiction in this story has political undertones; the imaginary radio can be read as a comment on the dangers of propaganda.

Themes highlighted in the story

- **Oppression, Poverty and Politics**

The story includes many themes. The ordinarily narrated story has different undertones of politics, oppression, poverty and freedom.

It cleverly puts forward the state of an individual against state machinations. One of the many strategies used by government for population control was 'Nasbandi' (vasectomy) which was aimed at the poor and marginalized section of the society. Rushdie comments on the faulty behaviour of oppression towards the lower class and poor people, to which government would never admit.

- **Symbolism of free radio in text**

A 'Free radio' is a compensation for the act of humiliation. For Ramani, the free radio was not just an animate object, it was symbol of achievement and loss both for him. He had poured his guilt and happiness into it. It was his escape mechanism from reality and a delusion object to not let him sink in the guilt of his actions.

Different Perspectives

Different people were impacted differently during the time period. Amongst the poor and lower class also, people of different genders and age had a different impact.

- **For Ramani**

Ramani, the main protagonist, represents the youth of the time, high ambitions and no agency. Ramani sees the vasectomy as an opportunity, a good thing rather than seeing it as something which is depriving him off his will and freedom. This represents the manipulation and strategic cunning ways used by the state to lure poor people for their mutual benefit. There was no agency provided to Ramani, no freedom or will at all. The state machinations took Ramani's freedom, his gift of nurturing lives, his identity and only pushed him to drown in the fictional world of a 'free radio'.

- **For the Old Man**

The old man can be seen as someone with old ideologies but far more experience than the youth. He saw Ramani as his son and wanted to use his wisdom for his good. The state machinations deprived him off his sanity and peace and affected him and his surroundings. He saw the exploitation of his country. The state manipulating strategies has so much affected the people around him that even his wisdom and experience cannot save them from luring into the trap.

- **For Thief's Widow**

The thief's widow is looked upon by the whole town as a slut or a whore. The author's idea of not telling the name of the thief's widow imparts the idea of how women were to carry their husband's identity and crimes all their life. The point that his husband left her no money and all she is doing is protecting her children is overshadowed by her being the seducing thief's widow. The status of women in the post-colonial was of humiliation, depriving them of all the rights and giving them no identity or agency whatsoever. Even the blame of Ramani undergoing vasectomy was put upon her. The state exploited the status of women as mere possessions, with no ambitions or identity.