

The Power of Popular Culture in Salman Rushdie's "The Ground Beneath Her Feet"

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Abstract

This paper discusses elements of popular culture found in Salman Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* and bases its arguments on Fiske, Kundu and Herwitz's ideas of globalization. Popular culture is driven by both consumerism and the people that makeup the fan base, who have gained the power to criticize the same society that has labeled them as outsiders and the lower class. For Rushdie, popular culture is not a passing phase of fan culture, but a window to people's deepest desires that they cannot freely express in their current position in society. Fan art is not an act of escapism but a description of what members of such groups think of as resistance and an act to produce a change in the world and be heard and recognized for their own voice. Vina continues to hold on to her fans for as long as her existence is still relevant, and is allowed to be a symbol only as long as there is something to symbolize.

Keywords: Rushdie, popular culture, globalization, fan studies.

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Introduction

Salman Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* is a story of outcasts. People who are born not belonging, on shaky, unstable ground that is losing all boundaries of borders, language and cultures, and becoming one massive field where everyone is allowed to play. Rushdie takes Vina, Ormus and Rai into the dramatic world of stardom and globalization, and turns Vina and Ormus into disoriented rock stars who are worshiped by a worldwide audience and yet whose destiny is also controlled by the same followers. They are living the American Dream while at the same time being clawed to pieces by the adoring public, who are not as passive and controlling as they allow themselves to be viewed.

Our social experience and the environment we live in constantly produce meaning that builds up our social identity (Fiske, 1989, p. 1). What develops from this continuity is an understanding that there are other people in the world who feel the same, and who help us form a group to belong to.

According to Rama Kundu (2009):

One of the important contributions of Postmodernism has been the erasure of boundaries between high and popular culture and directing of attentions towards popular cultural forms like cinema, television shows, games and advertising, as an authentic signifier of the hopes, desires and anxieties of a nation, a race or simply a social group (p. 178).

Rushdie does not describe popular culture as something that is infantile and characteristic of fan culture, but as a window to people's deepest desires that they cannot freely express in their current position in society. While some condemn the power of popular culture for what they believe is controlling the minds of its followers, Rushdie believes that it denotes "liberation, joy and subversion" (Kundu, 2006, p. 179).

According to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in *The German Ideology* (1998):

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore the ideas of dominance (p. 62).

"It is Rushdie's firm belief that, it is only by defying existing realities, by dreaming 'Otherwise' that one can remake and remould the world" (Kundu, 2006, p. 186). Culture itself has become an industry controlled by the ruling classes to "suppress the true needs and create false ones among the masses" (Kundu, 2006, p. 180).

What makes Vina and Ormus influential to the audience is their ‘fantastic’ presence which is allowed to challenge the current dogma by experimenting and supporting extreme behaviour as an excuse for art and freedom of expression through music. “For she is – will be – Dionysiac, divine, and so is – so will – he. They will drive people mad with desire, with music, will leave behind them long trails of destruction and delight” (Rushdie, 1999, p. 146).

The audience does not have the same freedom, as it is a gift given to leaders of popular culture but not necessarily their followers. What the audience gains from being in the presence of Vina, whether in real life or on a TV screen, is small moments of empowerment where they too belong to her music and her body, before continuing with their own lives off screen, while at the same time remaining invisible as supporters of Vina’s actions.

Vina, to whom even strangers would come, following her star, hoping to receive redemption from her voice, her large, damp eyes, her touch. How was it that so explosive, even amoral, a woman came to be seen as an emblem, an ideal, by more than half the population of the world? (Rushdie, 1999, p. 20)

Because Vina’s entire appearance is a stance against those who would fight to push her down and to cage up her freedom. Her entire existence, look and behaviour are yearned for by so many other people who catch a glimpse of her power by standing in her shadow.

Understanding a text beyond its original source

The text of Vina’s songs alone is not enough to represent the full meaning of her culture, because “texts are activated, or made meaningful, only in social relations and in intertextual relations” (Fiske, 1989, p. 3). Therefore the meaning of a text can only be projected fully in an environment that understands it in the social, emotional and cultural setting that it is placed in.

Vina’s songs are not received the same way by everyone, because not everyone belongs to the same group. Even Ormus’ songs are only embraced by about half of the American audience, while the rest are angered by his anti-war lyrics in *Race Ballads*. They even receive a phone call from a federal agent who is concerned about some of their lyrical content. He continues by explaining that, although they are not infringing any individual’s First Amendment rights, they are in fact not American, and “a guest who wishes to remain welcome is not well advised to piss on his host’s best rug” (Rushdie, 1999, p. 381).

The popularity of an artist greatly depends on how relevant their work, image and personal background relate to the audience, and especially so for the younger members. The greater the joy of listening to and watching an entertainer, and the more it satisfies our internal desires, the more attention and power will be given to that individual in order to ensure that the audience can continue to live their own dreams through them. In a crumbling economy and a world where the youngest see little bright future ahead, someone who even remotely symbolizes a leader will quickly be accepted as the voice to follow, and it will only be the audience who can

create true relevance. The signer attempts a connection with the fans, and if they are successful they will enjoy the glory.

What's a "culture"? Look it up. A group of micro-organisms grown in a nutrient substance under controlled conditions. A squirm of germs on a glass slide is all, a laboratory experiment calling itself a society. Most of us wrigglers make do with life on that side; we even agree to feel proud of that "culture" (Rushdie, 1999, p. 95).

"The "knowledge" that, for instance, femininity finds its meanings in the domestic, in consumption, in leisure, in the disempowered, is a means of disciplining women into the roles and values that patriarchy has inscribed for them" (Fiske 1989: 24). A new wave of feminism and female empowerment has been born into the world since Fiske's belief, but the general idea still holds true. It is precisely when women like Vina appear in the world that other women see the possibility of free expression and begin to follow her lead. She is worshiped for as long as she remains on their side and doesn't give into the power of the male rule, or anything that represents it.

What we forbid ourselves we pay good money to watch, in a playhouse, a movie theatre, or to read about between the secret covers of a book (Rushdie, 1999, p. 73).

What Vina represents for adolescent girls is their struggle between acting in ways that society deems as acceptable, and allowing themselves the freedom to express their sexuality and vision of life. The rules that the patriarchy has made for them are still strong enough to cause doubt and prevent young women from following Vina as individuals, rather than remain hidden in a crowd of others.

We mostly conform, we pretend to be motivated by loyalties and solidarities we do not really feel, we hide our secret identities beneath the false skins of those identities which bear the believer's seal of approval. But the truth leaks out in our dreams; alone in our beds, we soar, we fly, we flee (Rushdie, 1999, p. 73).

The perception of Popular Culture among audience members

Although the audience does not have any control over production, when it comes to consumerism, they have the power to choose which products they will pay money for, and which they will have the satisfaction of rejecting (Fiske, 1989, p. 25). Vina 'wanna-bes' who copy her style, mimicry and music are mistakenly considered a flock of sheep who follow her every step, but are instead adopting a style that they too feel is the current source of power. Vina constructs herself "as the object of street art, as a public icon: the body becomes the canvas of changing urban signs" (Chambers, 1986, p. 11).

Some days later, however, when the information had made its way onto the Internet, a fantasy-fiction wonk hailing from the Castro district of San Francisco and nicknamed <elrond@rivendel.com> explained that Raul Paramo had been speaking Orcish, the infernal

speech devised for the servants of the Dark Lord Sauron by the writer Tolkien (Rushdie, 1999, p. 6).

The Tolkien fan base had already begun its impact in the world of fan fiction, and has since then become one of the biggest fan groups in the world. However, their fan fiction which they spend so much time and effort on has been shunned for blurring the boundary between not only our distinction of fantasy and reality but also that of the original work.

The relationship of fantasy to reality, and that of the representation to the real are, to all intents and purposes, the same. Understanding their similarity requires us to reverse and deny the differences that are often set up between them in our patriarchal culture. Fantasy is often seen as feminine, whereas representation is associated with the masculine. In this view fantasy is constructed as “mere escapism,” a sign of feminine weakness resulting from women’s inability to come to terms with (masculine) reality. It is a sort of daydreaming that allows women to achieve their desires in a way that they are never capable of in the “real” world, a compensatory domain that results from and disguises their “real” lack of power (Fiske, 1989, p. 184).

For Rushdie, music is the universal language of the world. It is “the secret language of all humanity, our common heritage, whatever mother tongue we speak, whatever dances we first learnt to dance” (Rushdie, 1999, p. 89). Vina’s melody darts from one side of the world to another, reaching audiences beyond restrictions of borders, religion and language. All who hear it are now connected by the same threads that Vina has created, and will continue to hold on to them for as long as her existence is still relevant.

What creates the sense of a star is the distance between her and her audience. Vina must remain elusive and detached, “faintly glowing above use in some distant space of divine humanity, freed of specific coordinates and ties to temporal existence” (Kadzis, 2011). Distance creates a sense of power for Vina, and one that would be greatly reduced if she were to come down and place herself on the same level as her fans. But she is not all divine on her own, she is an experiment watched from a safe distance, a test to see how far such behaviour and art will be tolerated by others.

We take this group of people and we shine on them a very bright light and give them, if not great power, then certainly great influence. We ask how they behave when we remove all controls and restraints, and we enjoy watching the answer to that question (Kadzis, 2011).

Moreover, this star is always at the mercy of the public and the fans. If she makes one wrong move and angers the fans, she would quickly face their wrath, and either be tormented for her mistakes, or lose popularity and become forgotten and replaced by another. For if someone has tricked Vina into thinking that her freedom at any point in her career was genuine, she was gravely mistaken. Stars do not have the freedom that they so hope for. Instead, their freedom stretches only as far as the clutch of the public, and will be squeezed or released according to their will. She is allowed to be a symbol only as long as there is something to symbolize.

Similarly to Princess Diana's funeral in 1997, which was viewed by 2.5 billion people, Vina's death was also a spectacle. A whole world watching the end of a life known primarily through the media, and so one that must also end in media coverage as well. "Half fairy-tale/half woman-on-the verge of melodrama, these beings exist between real life and the netherworld of the camera and in death become radiant icons in the museum of the public's imagination" (Herwitz, 2008, p. 13).

If she had not died, she might have sunk into a cranky, ignored old age, out of step in a way that was merely wrong – or pig – or muddle-headed, whereas once she had defiantly, triumphantly, been the only one in the parade marching in step, until the other marchers took their lead from her. However, eccentric irrelevance was a fate she was spared. Instead, her death unleashed the full power of the symbol she had constructed. Power, like love, most fully reveals its dimensions only when it is irrevocably lost (Rushdie, 1999, p. 162).

Many other people die in the same earthquake that swallows her, but somehow her death is the one that is iconic and given the greatest attention. There may have been doctors among the casualties, humanitarian workers, rescuers, engineers, people who have risked their own life to save others, but their accomplishments are quickly forgotten with a small nod, while the attention once again turns to Vina.

Death has become a public spectacle. Those who have spent their lives in the public eye are not allowed to die in private so as not to deprive the general public of any details. "The death-watchers, the ostentatious grievers, those who like nothing more than to read about another's physical demise and advertise how moved they are by it" (O'Neil, 2013).

When Scottish author Iain Banks announced that he was suffering from terminal cancer in 2013, social media websites became books of condolences for someone who was still alive at the time. Strangers were impatiently waiting for the author to post the latest update on his condition, and how long he was likely to live. Among the crowd of these people, who were closely following his demise, no question was raised as to whether some moments in the human life should indeed be left private.

Apart from the mourning of a celebrity and the need to watch the media report such an occasion, the audience often finds ways to identify with the now dead star. Depression, eating disorders, a struggle for freedom and complicated love are all themes that audience members can relate to as well, and so feel that they were also part of Vina, or perhaps are partly as important as she is. This dual role of a star is, in Leo Braudy's words, typical of modern fame, which is "compounded of the audience's aspirations and its despair, its need to admire and to find a scapegoat for that need" (1997, p. 9).

In a discussion entitled *Reality, Hyperreality and Public Relations*, Alan Rycroft (2007) argues that postmodernism has "taken us beyond reality, to a place...where 'reality' has been drowned in an ocean of media, messages and symbols, spun out by legions of PR professionals and elites manipulating 'reality' through the all-pervasive mediascape".

The earthquake that takes Vina's life is a metaphor for Rushdie's vision of a turbulent age, where both families and nations are being torn apart in sudden changes, where everything is "shifting, changing, getting partitioned, separated by frontiers, splitting, re-splitting, coming apart" (Rushdie, 1999, p. 164). Technology divides the young and the old, borders separate families as more and more people now go abroad to look for jobs and start new lives. Rushdie's idea of music becomes the best way to build bridges between long distances, and to cross frontiers of misunderstandings and different cultures. Ormus' "earthquake songs" are about "the collapse of all walls, boundaries, restraints. Rock music... which crossed all frontiers, which belonged equally to everyone" (Rushdie, 1999, p. 390).

Conclusion

Rushdie starts the novel by asking "Why do we care for signers?" and ends it by suggesting that it is not so much singers that we should care for but their songs, because although the creator dies her creation still lives on long after she is gone. But creations are not entirely immortal either. When enough new generations are born and are looking towards the future, the past, even with all its art, becomes less enticing and is lost in the noise of the media.

Even the guest appearance of the veteran Mexican superstar Chico Estefan had failed to enthuse her audiences; instead, his surgery-smoothed face with its mouthful of unreal teeth only drew attention to her own fading youth, which was mirrored in the average age of the crowds. The kids had not come, or not enough of them, not nearly enough (Rushdie, 1999, p. 8).

Music and popular culture are a unifying force of communication in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, a power of songs and art that continues to live on and to evoke feelings from people even when the creators are long gone and their faces forgotten. People have gone from spending their entire life in one small geographical point to living in a global village and interacting with all kinds of different races and cultures. And yet, they have still not learned how to handle this relatively sudden change properly yet, or how to fully understand each other's differences. So, according to Rushdie, if there is one thing that can bring people together and help them sing to the same tune, it is the power of music and its ability for a single melody to reach people all over the world, and inspire intercultural communication and understanding.

Online communities and the vast number of people in them are showing the world just how powerful this era of globalization is, and how much communication can be achieved through it. They create new social structures where people are able to understand each other on a global scale, and to look past the cultural differences that are so often reinforced by the media, so that we can understand each other better, rather than drift further and further apart.

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