

**The Broken Signal: Expatriate Memory, State Violence and Biopolitics
of Silence in Salman Rushdie's "*The Free Radio*"**

Dr S Varadharaj

Associate Professor of English Shaheed Bhagat Singh college Morning University
of Delhi, Mail id varadhus2011@gmail.com

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Abstract

This paper offers a critical exploration of Salman Rushdie's short story "The Free Radio" from his anthology *East, West* (1994), examining it as a poignant cultural artefact born out of diaspora and expatriate memory. Positioned against the historical backdrop of the Indian State of Emergency (1975–1977), the narrative is analysed through a multi-tiered framework blending Foucault's bio politics, gender theory, and postcolonial studies. This study argues that Rushdie utilizes an profoundly biased, bourgeois narrator a retired village pedagogue to deliberately expose the moral complicity and class prejudices of the Indian middle class during state-sponsored atrocities.

By deconstructing the story's central transaction where the subaltern protagonist, Ramani, sacrifices his biological virility for the phantasm of a government-issued transistor radio the paper illustrates how the authoritarian state substitutes tangible citizenship rights with illusory promises of technological modernity. Furthermore, the analysis highlights a feminist re-reading of the marginalized "Thief's Widow", mapping her character arc against the oppressive allegories of Indira Gandhi ("The Widow"). Ultimately, this study asserts that Rushdie's expatriate aesthetic champions the transgressive power of human delusion and narrative self-authorship, offering a vital mechanism of psychological survival and subaltern resistance against the bio political trauma of forced sterilization.

Keywords: Salman Rushdie; *The Free Radio*; Indian Emergency; Biopolitics; Forced Sterilization

Introduction: The Expatriate's Backward Glance

The literary maps of Salman Rushdie issue a map fundamentally of displacements. Rushdie, writing from the standpoint of the diaspora, stands in a certain epistemological tension with respect to the Indian subcontinent; this tension is the 'broken mirror' of his memory as mentioned by Author "We will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fiction, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind" (Rushdie, 1991, p. 10). In his epoch-making essay **Imaginary Homelands**, Rushdie lays out the predicament of the expatriate writer who cannot recover the past intact but must negotiate with shards and fragments. This theoretical set-up is indispensable in taking an approach to his short stories, by which, perhaps, *East, West* (1994) dramatizes structurally and thematically the cultural schizophrenia of the migrant experience. Sandwiched within the East section of this anthology is **The Free Radio**, a short story that reconstructs the forensics of one of the most tortured historical moments in India: The State of Emergency (1975-1977). Rushdie's experiences provided him with "strong knowledge about displacement, about rooting's, about feeling wrong in the world" (Goonetilleke, 1998, pp. 2-3).

Offering a thorough, close reading of *The Free Radio* as a story measuring the expatriate's complicated encounter with the political emergency, this paper diverges from the long range of *Midnight's Children*: a broader treatment of an epoch that also encompasses this emergency. As opposed to the vast sweep of *Midnight's Children*, which encompasses this state of emergency, *The Free Radio* issues a constricted, claustrophobic view of coercion, refracted through the unreliable voice of a local regime apologist. Through the lenses of bio politics, gender theory, and postcolonial studies, this analysis argues that Rushdie uses the device of the unreliable narrator to set forth a critique of the complicity of the Indian middle classes in state violence while simultaneously excavating the guilt and distance of the expatriate. *The Free Radio* becomes the ultimate signifier of the postcolonial social contract-an exchange where the subaltern subject has exchanged a biological future (fertility) for a technological illusion (modernity), leaving them with silence.

The Migrant's Eye View

One must understand the expatriate's experience when dealing with the user query. While Rushdie was living in England during the Emergency, he viewed the disassembly of Indian democracy from the vantage of the metropole. This distance is key not only in imbuing the narrative with an air of irony that a localized, realist account may not have possessed, but also in rendering the events in India surreal in their tragedy. The expatriate writer, away from the sterilization drive's flows,

reconstructs the horror not as a documentary but as a grotesque fable. Thus, the story is not just about Ramani the rickshaw-wallah but about narrating trauma from the outside. Rushdie thus displaces the typical narratives of the Indian nation-state (which called the Emergency a 'discipline') and Western media (which frequently simplified it) and instead proposes an exile's-eye view which privileges hybridity, ambiguity, and tragedy.

II. The Historical Wound: The Emergency and the Biopolitics of *Nasbandi*

First, to grasp the weight of the experience contained in *The Free Radio*, one must excavate the historical reality which the stories mythologize. It is with this grim background against which the story unfolds that Indira Gandhi declared an internal Emergency in June 1975, which is regarded as another phase in Indian democracy, where the same was suspended.

The Five-Point Plan and Sanjay Gandhi

Indeed, the Emergency did suspend civil rights and censor the press, and its severest blow to the underprivileged was in the family planning initiative that was spearheaded by the Prime Minister's younger son Sanjay Gandhi. Although he had no constitutional office, Sanjay Gandhi possessed enormous extra-constitutional authority, launching a project which he entitled the Five-Point Program, included this text narrates political allegory as *The Free Radio*.

In the narrative of ***The Free Radio***, Salman Rushdie employs the character of Ramani, a beautiful but innocent rickshaw-puller, to satirize the coercive atmosphere of the Emergency. The narrative acts as a critique of how state-sponsored developmental goals were, under the Five Point Programme, often enforced through deception and systemic violence.

1. Family Planning and the Free Radio

The core of the story is state-sponsored aggressive Family Planning. The protagonist was not convinced that he acted out of civic duty, entering vasectomy by the promise of a free radio, a symbol of modernity and state largesse. As noted by the scholar Nicole Weickgenannt Thiara: "The radio is the empty promise of the state, a substitute for the virility and future prospects that have been stolen from the protagonist" (Thiara, 2009, p.54).

The free radio becomes a phantasm. Ramani eventually pretends to listen to a radio that does not exist as he indulges in the psychological delusion that is required to survive inflicting trauma that is forced sterilization.

2. Abolition of Dowry and Eradication of Caste

Though the story mainly talks about his mutilation, it speaks of Dowry and Caste indirectly through the marriage of Ramani to the thief's widow. The narrator, an old schoolteacher who is a symbol of the traditionalist middle-class view, is horrified by Ramani's action of marrying a woman with an ambiguous social standing and lower character. Rushdie uses this conflict to show that though the state preached Eradication of Caste, social prejudices were deeply entrenched thereafter. The narrator remarks on Ramani's descent:

"He was a high-caste boy... and she has eaten him up" (Rushdie, 1994, p. 23).

Here, abolition of dowry is the reversed; Ramani had offered his body (his virility) as price to the widow, a biological dowry paid to the state.

3. Adult Literacy and Planting Trees

Adult Literacy has been personified in the narrator himself-the retired teacher. His "literacy" is, however, to observe and judge rather than empower Ramani. He does not teach Ramani about the whole truth of the government lies. Likewise, the Tree Planting initiative promises to indicate Green India-the barren surroundings just reflect the paraphernalia and the sterility of the protagonist. As D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke says: "The Five Point Programme is the backdrop of a landscape where the state 'cleans up' the streets by removing the reproductive potential of the poor". By picturing Rushdie's Emergency, it is as much a time of theft as it is of progress. Pointing out the Five Points shows that the rhetoric of the state on Adult Literacy or Family Planning served as mere curtains concealing authoritarian control. With his last departure to the metropole, believing all along in this imagined radio, Ramani leaves a haunting legacy of the political myth.

The dominant instruction in the narrative economy of The Free Radio is the last of these, Family Planning. This program, ostensibly voluntary at first, soon devolved into an almost compulsory mass sterilization campaign (nasbandi), which aimed to fulfil targets set by the government. The mobile sterilization camps terrorizing rural India are referred to as the white caravans within Rushdie's narrative.

The Transaction: Flesh for Fantasy

That oblique title *The offer of a free transistor radio in exchange for sterilization* enacts its grounding in historicity. That is how one can ever get men to lend their bodies to the state through their vasectomies: cash, tin sheets, radios most persuasive incentives. What Rushdie does, however, is elevate this transaction into a symbolic exchange: the state demands the biological potency of the subject (the ability to reproduce, to create a future) and offers in return the technological voice of the state (the radio, which broadcasts the present). The tragedy of Ramani, the protagonist, is that he upholds his end of the bargain (he submits to the knife), but the state defaults on theirs (the radio never arrives). This breach of contract exposes the predatory nature of the developmentalist state, which consumes its citizen's bodies while feeding them illusions of modernity.

III. The Unreliable Narrator: The Pedagogue as Censor

Rushdie's perhaps most clever development in *The Free Radio* is the authorial voice which emerges not from Ramani, the victim, but from a retired teacher, presumably an octogenarian with some status in the community. This narrator becomes a very fine device through which the expatriate author comments on class relationships in the Emergency.

The Voice of Complicity

The teacher is the village intelligentsia in conservative, judgmental steadfastness with traditional authority. Every narration carries a thread of condescension for Ramani; this is how the teacher minors:

"The boy was an innocent, a real donkey's child, you can't teach such people" (Rushdie, *East, West*, Vintage ed., p. 20). The paternal paternal-aggressive attitude of the state toward the huge masses translates this dismissal into, you can't teach such people. "The boy was an innocent, a real donkey's child, you can't teach such people" (Rushdie, 1994, p. 20). The state has become a teacher to the rest of the world, who is not even taught but used, driven, and gelded.

The Introduction of Erasure of State Accountability

Narrator gives deflection in actively displacing the blame from the government. While taking Ramani's sterilization case, the narrator refuses to charge the 'white caravans' or attack the government on their coercion and instead lays the burden of blame entirely on the Thief's Widow, an already silenced, marginal woman of the community.

"My idiot child, you have let that woman deprive you of your manhood!" (Rushdie, *East, West*, Vintage ed., p. 23). He then presents sterilization as a domestic tragedy caused by a wicked woman rather than a political tragedy caused by a totalitarian state; this is again a censoring function that he performs. After sanitizing the political violence, it becomes a village gossip. But the expatriate reader catches it up. By making the narrator unreliable, Rushdie exposes how the middle class has colluded with the Emergency by turning a blind eye to the structural violence perpetrated against the poor.

Linguistic Texture: Chutnification of English

The narrator's voice is distinctively stylized, using what Rushdie calls 'chutneyfication' of history and language. The syntax replicates the rhythms of Hindi or Urdu as spoken in English: 'It is not so bad... It stops babies only'. 'The thief's widow was well and happy and getting fat'.

This linguistic hybridity serves the expatriate's purpose of claiming the English language for the Indian experience (*The Empire Writes Back*) while simultaneously holding up the parochialism of the narrator. The narrator uses the English language so as to enhance his superiority over Ramani, but his English is coloured by the very local context he tries to transcend.

IV. Ramani: The Subaltern Body and the Performance of Modernity

The tragedy of the story revolves around Ramani, the rickshaw guy. Described as being to God's own looks, he is a figure of youth and energies holding the potential for the post-independence generation. His encounter with the Emergency is the physical mark of state power inscribed upon his body.

The 'Donkey's Child' and Cinema's Dream Ramani a dreamer; rather than wanting to be a rickshaw-wallah, he wants to be a film star. The point of reference is not political, but cinematic—he lives in Bollywood fantasy. The Free Radio appeals to him not merely as a gadget, but as a connection into that world of music and stardom. 'He cupped his hand over his ear and mimed the turning of a dial.... 'All India Radio, he announced to the streets.... Here is the news'. This image of Ramani miming the radio is the story's most poignant symbol. It is that which stands in for mimicry in the postcolonial sense (Homi Bhabha). Ramani mimics the behaviour of the modern-cum-connected citizen: he performs hearing to the state when the signal is not present from it. This is a psychological defence mechanism, since the admission of not having the radio would be an admission of losing its absolute hold.

Foucault and the Biopolitical state Scholars have read Ramani's sterilization through the prism of Foucault's biopolitics. The Emergency state no longer disciplined the soul (through education through which the teacher failed to do) but body directly. The sterilization is 'a technique of power' meant to regulate the population. Ramani's body is the statistic being managed. When he goes for the operation, his capacity to reproduce is taken away from him. The narrator states that those who were 'thief's sons' and were also sterilized became 'ruined men' because after the 'miracle' operation their earning capacity was reduced by 75%. It is very important to note: a physical virility is associated with economic vitality in a manual labour economy. By this act, a soldier castrates itself from literal, metaphorical states by sterilizing the men.

The Phantom Thing The radio is akin to a phantom limb; when an amputee feels that they've lost an arm, so does Ramani, with respect to the radio he bought with his manhood. Invisible broadcasts are also what Ramani imagines the village hears as he walks around listening. "It is not so bad ... and soon the free radio will arrive." (Rushdie, East, West, Vintage ed., p. 20). While Bhandari argues that "A new hybrid identity evolves from the cultural negotiation of the colonizer and colonized" (Bhandari, 2022, p. 173).

This delusion is his reality. This is essentially where an expatriate view has to be made: Rushdie is not mocking Ramani; the text implies that in a mad world (the Emergency), the only way to survive is through madness (delusion). Ramani's fantasy is the most rational possible response to an irrational trauma.

The Thief's Widow, protagonist of the tale, becomes the primary lightning rod of the misogyny and political allegory of the story. She has no name - only that of her dead, criminal husband: this omission constitutes her marginalization within society.

The Narrator's Myoshin Uinkel

The Theft Widow is venomously described by an instructor as "The thief's widow and a really cheap type... a luscious, heavy woman" (Rushdie, East, West, Vintage ed., p.21). He blames her for seducing the younger Ramani and "robbing" him of his youth. He regards her sexuality as a threat to the entire social order. Most significant, he holds her responsible for sterilization: You have let that woman to deprive you from your manhood. The narrator accuses the Widow, due to the five children that she has but does not want more for her own, for persuading Ramani into the operation. In this context Lemke correctly opined that "My fear is that the biopolitical can be

transformed into a word that hides, covers problems instead of being an instrument for confronting them" (Virno, 2002, as cited in Lemke, 2011). The Allegory of Indira Gandhi: Critics and scholars have established quite unambiguously the Thief's Widow as a literary double for Indira Gandhi. Indira Gandhi in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is explicitly referred to as "The Widow". In *The Free Radio*, the association is more subtle but equally effective.

The Castrating Mother: Both Thief's Widow (according to the narrator) and Indira Gandhi (in the context of politics) are seen as powerful women who emasculate men. Indira Gandhi castrated the nation through the Emergency; the Widow castrated Ramani through the nasbandi.

Rushdie complicates this allegory: even as the narrator demonizes the Thief's Widow, she is in fact a victim of circumstances according to the text. Poor widow with five children, she is living in a patriarchal world. The only means to survival is Ramani. In blaming her, the narrator (and with him the male-dominated society) avoids confronting the real source of violence: the State. So, the Widow becomes a scapegoat for impotence felt in the community.

A Feminist Reading: Contradictory to the view of the narrator, the Widow could be read as a figure of agency. She defies widowhood's socio-cultural stigma to have a young lover. She survives a brutal economy of the Emergency by ensuring a father for her children. Rushdie, the expatriate, enables the seeing past the bias of the narrator. A woman who 'could not care less for what everyone thought of her'. In society, which calls for the invisibility of widows (the narrator even cruelly jokes she should thank God widow-burning is illegal), her visibility is an act of defiance correctly concluded by Foucault, Modern man becomes "an animal whose politics... places his existence as a living being in question" (Foucault, 1978).

VII. The Expatriate Aesthetic: Irony, Distance, and the Ending

The ending of Salman Rushdie's *The Free Radio* becomes a very intense meditation into expatriate aesthetics, a conscious choice not to tie up the narrative intricately, and indeed it may celebrate the possibilities distance present for the artistry. Near the end of the story, the village where house-eating, dehumanizing policies of the Indian Emergency corner the actual reality turns to Ramani's own inner or psychological landscape. When Ramani and the widow leave for Bombay, they are going to a space of self-manifestation and not just to a geographical site. The retired schoolteacher remains in the village, representing an ironic brand of 'cynical realism' in contrast to

Rushdie's expatriate view. The teacher regards letters from Ramani at best with a sense of cynicism: more lies, he feels, and assumes that the boy must be, 'sweeping the gutters' in the city. But analytical thinking suggests that the narrator's inability to envision a happy ending for a 'donkey's young' shows more about the narrator himself-his entrapping by social hierarchies and the grim logic of the Emergency-than about Ramani's actual end. Ramani's victory would be visible from the angle of close exploration in how he assumes command of his own narrative from being a victim, of state's propaganda, to an author of his own reality.

Very much of the story would turn ironic from the teacher's dismissiveness of Ramani's letters. The narrator makes the observation-the "huge mad energy which he had poured into the act of conjuring reality out the absence of the radio had not left him" (p. 31)-he considered this kind of mad energy merely a symptom of delusion, pathetic prolongation of the one dream that had led Ramani to ignore his own sterilization. For the expatriate writer, however, this energy has meaning and is the whole essence for survival. Indeed, it is often the case for the migrant or the marginalized, in the West by Rushdie, that 'truth' takes a back seat to sustenance. No one would add that this landscape was the reality of the Emergency economy - the theft of space, the theft of privacy, and theft of future. In this world, the fiction offered by the radio or the 'fiction' offered by stardom becomes the necessary Armor. Ramani says he is 'in love' and life was bright and successful, a counteraction. He refuses to be a tragedy that the narrator-and thus, the state-would like him to become. By 'conjuring reality', Ramani is taking control over his own body and his own story, which may now exist only on the page of a letter but with which a great part of the weight of that existence now lies.

The tension between East, represented by the reality of poverty and vasectomies in the village, and the West, represented by Bombay and Bollywood and the glamorous world of the letters, is perhaps the primary thematic concern of the collection East, West. In the popular Indian imagination, Bombay very often serves as a metaphor for the West-a place that evokes a myriad of possibilities and a radical reinvention. The 'golden city' for Ramani is where the 'husband of a thief's widow' tag can go away and where he can become known as 'Ramani the star'. Cynicism in the narrator's viewpoint is something that springs from that 'common sense'. Ramani's appearance invites derision: 'good looks are rare in our parts'. Marriage to Ramani would be a downward social movement. The teacher cannot visualize a world where a man who was 'tricked' by the state could ever rise above his circumstances. However, the peripatetic aesthetic upholds 'unrealism' over 'realism'. The imaginary homelands, as Rushdie rightly points out in his non-fictional work, therefore, do not exist

anymore; or they have grown hostile to the migrant, forcing him to recreate a new reality. Thus, Ramani's 'delusion' is an act of strength in a way. That is what allows him to go on with the ghastly reality in a fiction that he occupies.

A true hallmark of the expatriate writer's style is ending the work without closure. Leaving open whether Ramani is indeed a star or sweeping gutters forces the reader to either side with the narrator's cynicism or with Ramani's optimism. To go by the account of the narrator would mean to accept that the state triumphed and that the injury which occurred is irreversible due to the Emergency. To adhere to Ramani is to acknowledge the possibility that the 'imaginative' could scale above bodily mutilation. The free radio turned out to be an artifact of hollow state promises, coercive tool that followed with the white caravan and ultimately to loss of Ramani's manhood. The hypothetical radio which Ramani 'listens' after surgery, however, is different: it is private. He mimics the actions of someone with a radio, yet the 'broadcasts' are his own. At this point, he moves from imposed delusion through the state to self-imposed fiction - changing the direction of his character arc. He is no longer the innocent believer in the 'gift' of the government; he has become a creator of his own world. The narrator's bias emerges also in his general treatment of the thief's widow. It is indeed interesting to learn that Rushdie calls her a vicious face and not much better than a common thief herself. Since that is indeed a judgment moralizing and part of an aspect of realism, Rushdie seeks to dismantle that.

The widow is the catalyst effecting Ramani's breakaway from the stagnation of the village; she urges him to look beyond the local gossip and the teacher's condescending reference to his character, since the final letters describe her as having been 'fattening up' and 'well and happy'. This image of physical health and prosperity runs contrary to what the narrator expects and therefore cannot hold up those letters. The narrator's refusal to believe the letters is a defensive mechanism; had Ramani made it, all the frame that supports the narrator's understanding of social order and obligatory suffering that accompanies the poor fails. An expatriate, on the other hand, will always celebrate the 'mongrel' and the 'uprooted'. Ramani's power rests in his ability to take charge of the narrative. No longer is he the object of the narrator's observations; he has now become the narrator of his life. In short, The Free Radio evokes the 'Expatriate Aesthetic', bringing out the distance existing between people who remain in the East and those who migrate toward the West, whether the latter migration is literal or metaphorical.

The irony is that the 'madness' which the narrator identifies in Ramani is the only disposition that keeps him human under a dehumanizing political regime. Neither the

'imaginary radio' nor the 'imaginary stardo' is a badge of failure but rather a symptom of a lively and defiant imagination. Ramani makes such a tonic of that his argument is that fiction is not a flight from reality, but rather a way of surviving it. Thus, the ending of the tale hovers between narrator's doubt and the letters of Ramani. It captures the tension of the migrant experience always negotiating his 'grim realities' of the past with his future glamorous fictions. It can capture a man's reproductive ability by physical removal by the State but cannot remove his ability to 'conjure reality' through the power of his own voice.

VIII. Conclusion: The Silence of the Radio

Rushdie wields a blazing pen in a critique of the Indian Emergency not by the historian's statistics but through the broken mirror of the expatriate artist. The unreliable and complicit narrator reveals the social mechanisms such as class prejudice, misogyny, and indifference-negligence that nurtured the very conditions for biopolitical violence by the state. The story transforms the free radio from an ordinary gadget into a complex symbol of its postcolonial condition: a charlatan of modernization, a means for one-way communication of the authoritarian state, and a silence that ensues the wrongful stealing of a citizen's rights. Ramani is tragically redeeming his biological future for this silence. In another breath, the tale glorifies the indestructible obstinacy of the human spirit. Ramani's unwillingness to accept his ruin, his insistence on hearing music where there is none, and his ultimate escape to the dream city of Bombay construct a resistance from below that the narrator cannot fathom, but the expatriate author rejoices in. The expatriate's encounter with the Emergency, in this text, constitutes an act of forensic empathy. Rushdie reaches back across the ocean and the decades to reconstruct the life of a rickshaw-wallah wiped out by the state, temporarily affording him a voice-an illusory one perhaps-which persists long after the white caravans have departed.

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