

**Research Paper**

# Secularism in politics in Salman Rushdie's Novel two years eight months and twenty eight nights

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The article begins with a note on various political concepts and the rivalry amongst the countries of the world that follow various political methods. Rushdie is of the view that there should be no authoritarianism. He attacked politicians who try to dominate and force their views on others. His latest novel *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* satirizes the attitude of fanatics of all sorts and the ignorant multitude. He brought out the contemporary reality in *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty Eight Nights* through the life of Mr. Geronimo and his father Jerry who have to face challenges like communal violence and a contemptuous attitude towards minority in Bombay of the present times. Through the life of Father Jerry he brought out the hypocrisy of a clergy who preached others but did not allow his son born of his extra marital relationship to call him daddy because he was afraid of losing his image in the society in which he lived. Through Mr. Geronimo's life he portrayed the life of a culturally hybrid person and the adjustments he had to make. The novel dealt with the political issues like the government supporting the religious majority and terrorism and being soft on communal violence. It also talks about racial discrimination and gender discrimination.

**Keywords:** Politicians, Contemporary, attitude, authoritarianism, contemporary, society, dominate

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## INTRODUCTION

Politics as defined in the Wikipedia is the study or practice of the distribution of power and resources within a given community as well as the interrelationship(s) between communities. Aristotle thinks of politics as "more like an organism rather than like a machine, and as a collection of parts none of which can exist without the others" (Ebenstein 59). Politics implies a categorical division in society, the ruler and the ruled, the leader and the followers. Politics is defined as the practice and theory of influencing other people. It is an organized control of a group or person over a human community. Various methods are utilized in politics, which incorporate advancing or constraining one's own political

perspectives among individuals, arrangement with other political subjects, making laws, and practicing power, including fighting against enemies. Political issues are practiced on an extensive variety of social levels, from tribes and tribes of customary social orders, through advanced nearby governments, organizations and foundations up to sovereign states, to the worldwide level.

A political framework is a structure which characterizes adequate political systems within a given society. The earliest of political thought can be traced to the writings of Plato's Republic, Aristotle's Politics and a little later to the works of Confucius. "The good politicians", Nietzsche

says, "divide mankind into two classes: tools and enemies" (qtd in Goodreads). i.e. those who help the politicians and those who oppose him.

Marxism holds that human societies progress through class struggle: a conflict between an ownership class that controls production and a dispossessed labouring class that provides the labour for production. Marx believed that:

States were run on behalf of the ruling class and in their interest while representing it as the common interest of all. And he predicted that, like previous socioeconomic systems, capitalism produced internal tensions which would lead to its self-destruction and replacement by a new system called socialism. He argued that class antagonisms under capitalism between the bourgeoisie and proletariat would eventuate in the working class's conquest of political power and eventually establish a classless society. (qtd in Wikipedia)

Tolstoy promoted the idea of tolerance in politics. He held that the act of non-resistance was the best way to accomplish progress toward an idealistic culture (a belief that would go on to influence Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.). He has best expressed his view that peaceful anarchy could be achieved without violent revolution in his essay, "On Anarchy":

The Anarchists are right in everything; in the refutation of the current request, and in the statement that, without Authority, there couldn't be more regrettable brutality than that of Authority under existing conditions. They are mixed up just in imagining that Anarchy can be founded by a transformation. Be that as it may, it will be founded just by there being more individuals who don't require the assurance of legislative force. ... There can stand out lasting unrest — an ethical one: the recovery of the internal man. (Maude 22)

Leo Tolstoy in his work *Anna Karenina* has expressed his political opinions through the characters, besides his moral views:

You know that capitalism oppresses the workers. Our workmen the peasants bear the whole burden of labour, but are so placed that, work as they may, they cannot escape from their degrading condition. All the profits on their labour, by which they might better their condition, give themselves some leisure, and consequently gain some education, all this surplus value is taken away by the capitalists. And our society has so shaped itself that the more the people work the richer the merchants and landowners will become, while the people will remain beasts of burden for ever. And this system must be

changed. (86)

Foucault's political world-view was different from the then existing notions. His political view was not idealistic, and neither was his view of power. For Foucault, not only are there "no relation of power without resistances" (142), but power is constituted by resistance as a primary condition for its existence. Where there is no resistance, there is no power, but domination; "slavery is not a power relationship when a man is in chains, only when he has some physical mobility, even a chance of escape" (342). Foucault warns against regarding power as "a phenomenon of mass and homogeneous domination" (29). Power is not something possessed by even the mightiest, but is relational, and hence present in all political relations, including dynamics of resistance. Resistance is not conducted against power, but through power, using it to resist political oppression. As Simons puts it, "Foucault offers an ethic of permanent resistance" (6).

George Orwell, a great thinker of the twentieth century consciously criticized any kind of domination in the name of country, money or even religion. According to him there should be freedom of expression and human beings should exercise that freedom. He attached significance to public opinion. According to him, gregarious adjacency is easy for animals but human beings are governed by emotions and hence their views bound to differ. Orwell, "relentlessly and uncompromisingly criticized imperialism, nationalism, capitalism, political dishonesty, power, totalitarianism, privilege and private education" (1). In 1946, in an essay entitled "Politics vs. literature" he wrote, "In a society in which there is no law, and in theory no compulsion, the only arbiter of behaviour is public opinion" (4).

In the novel *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell indicated: "a real Socialist is one who wishes — not merely conceives it as desirable, but actively wishes — to see tyranny overthrown" (206). Orwell specified in his essay "Why I Write": "Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism, as I understand it" (23).

In olden days, during the rule of Kings and Queens, even ordinary people had the right to knock the doors of the royalty and the right to express their opinion about the rule and thus had the power to question and to guide. Through poems and stories they commented on the governance and thus created awareness. Hence stories have always been a medium of free expression. Rushdie too creates stories to represent his situation and create awareness. In Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* and *Luka and the Fire of Life* stories stand for free expression. According to Rushdie, a proper political climate is one where there is freedom of expression.

Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, The

Moor's Last Sigh, Luka and the Fire of Life and Joseph Anton: A Memoir and Two Years Eight Months and Twenty Eight Nights abound in his comments on contemporary political methods. He criticizes selfish politicians who are interested in projecting their image and wielding power forgetting the original purpose for what they have been voted. Politicians turn out to be advertisers for their party or power mongers and ditch people. They turn out to be autocratic. There is no thought about common good but only selfishness in the rat race. The political climate is rampant with rivalry and authoritarianism.

Politicians are expected to exercise power only to build up a powerful united nation. But the reality falls short of this idealistic view and politicians, after gaining power turn out to be egoistic, power crazy and inhuman. Rushdie exposes this totalitarian attitude in politics and maintains that democracy is the best form of Government and that the Government that allows freedom of speech and motivates and encourages intellectual and humanistic thinking as the best of Governments

Rushdie's novels exhibit his political views frankly, vividly and daringly. His *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty Eight Nights* has been the platform for his political expression. Rushdie believed that a writer had a responsibility and that he should express his opinions about the happenings around him. Kakutani brings out Rushdie's conviction about avowed political expressions in one of his articles:

He (Rushdie) also felt that, there is a genuine need for political fiction, for books that draw new and better maps of reality and make new languages with which we can understand the world. He also asserts that it is necessary to grapple with the special problems created by the incorporation of political material, because politics is by turns farce and tragedy and sometimes both at once. (Kakutani 2)

Rushdie's works expose his views on politics, religion, and education. Rushdie throws light on the mechanisms of politics, the dangerous consequences of authoritarianism, the destructive levels of totalitarianism, intolerance in politics and reiterates the need for individual thinking, and constructive, all inclusive humanistic secular attitude in politics and he defends and campaigns for freedom of expression. It could be considered idealistic to speak about freedom of expression but since politics is all about wielding power and influencing people, there is bound to be coercion and loud talk on one side and silence and submission on the other. But Rushdie is of the view that people should be careful to discriminate the use of power and the abuse of it and should be alert to question and correct or change the government.

According to Rushdie, it is the duty of the Government to protect every individual and the duty of the individual to accept or change the Government depending upon their behavior. Rushdie exhibits that in reality, politicians are selfish and often people who thirst for power enter into politics and they use power with vested interests. He feels that an ideal Government should have honesty, integrity, selflessness and intelligence and the people should have the courage to question the Government when they suppress them.

Rushdie, like, Noam Chomsky believes in democracy and gives allowances for the varying and creative nature of human being. Rushdie's political views and his comments on the functioning of the various governments of the world and on the role of the individuals are spread out in his novels. Salman Rushdie in all his works stresses the importance of freedom in expression. He attacks the politicians who try to dominate and force their views on others. Rushdie turns real political leaders for his characters and makes a kind of caricature of them. They are thinly veiled and have fictitious names and there is a satirical portrayal of events.

Most of his novels written after *Midnight's Children* could be taken as his political statement against any kind of totalitarianism in politics. He believed that every individual should have the freedom to express what he thinks. The matter can be debated and the writer can be corrected or accepted but he should not be silenced. All literature is to Rushdie an interim report from the artist's conscience which is made at the frontier between the self and the world. Rushdie would like literature to perform the same role in the present age as were carried out earlier by religion and politics...Literature which is of any real significance, is an inquiry "and by asking extraordinary questions opens new door in our minds" (Pathak 127).

Rushdie has a broadened vision and he does not subscribe to traditionalist thinking. He supports individual freedom and freedom of expression. As far as Salman Rushdie is concerned, religious power should not influence political power. Politicians should allow others to express their views. Rushdie's *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty Eight Nights* though basically a novel about beliefs, abounds in his direct and subtle comments on political events and attitudes too. The novel shows the power strife between the two philosophers, Ghazali and IbnRushd and their followers, the dark Jinnis and the Jinnis of light. IbnRushd is the man of Science and logic who is often overshadowed by Ghazali in his political tactics. Ghazali, the believer in order to keep the world on his side, i.e., on the side of God and faith, instructs his follower Zumurrud Shah to spread fear. People will go to God as long as there is 'fear'. In other words, Ghazali wanted Zumurrud Shah to keep people under control by keeping them in fear.

Rushdie warns that when religious totalitarianism is

powered by the political parties then it becomes dangerous. He talks and writes vehemently against this kind of support. His *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* also has instances where Rushdie comments on the support of the Government for religious terrorism. He mentions how the Babri Masjid issue supported by the VHP provoked Muslims and ended up in Muslims and Hindu innocents being killed. "A mob angered by the destruction in Ayodhya of the Mughal emperor Babar's mosque ran through the streets... after that there were two waves of killings" (TET 37 - 38).

Rushdie in his *Step Across Line* gives political explanation for this religious extremist activities:

Of course there are political explanations. Ever since December 1992, when a VHP mob demolished a 400 year-old Muslim mosque, the Babri Masjid in Ayodha, which they claim was built on the sacred birthplace of the god Ram, Hindu fanatics have been looking for this fight. The pity of it is that some Muslims were ready to give it to them. The murderous attack on the trainload of VHP activists at Godhra (with its awful, atavistic echoes of the killings of Hindus and Muslims by the trainload during the Partition riots of 1947) played right into the Hindu extremists' hand. (402)

Rushdie in *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty Eight Nights*, recollects the Bombay of his childhood which was a place of cultural diversity and open mindedness following the secular policy of Nehru and how supported by the Hindu extremists became less tolerant and named Mumbai. People of Bombay, people like Rushdie, were thinking that Bombay was beyond all these communal riots and that the extremist views that affected the other regions would never affect Bombay. But they were shattered when organized communal riots ruined Bombay. Through Geronimo's life he brings out how slowly cultural and religious intolerance crept into the minds of Bombayites as well through the crevices in their minds. Geronimo's father Father Jerry and his uncle Charles die in the riots and Geronimo describes that incident as marking the death of Bombay and that "what remained was the new, uglier Mumbai" (TET 38).

In the fight between the dark spirits and the spirits of light – descendants of Ibn Rushd and that of Ghazali, one of the followers of Ghazali by his evil work makes Geronimo suffer from levitation. Dunia realizes this to be a part of the spirits of the dark to destroy humanity. She says, "This had to be the work of Zabardast the sorcerer Jinni" (TET 143). In order to remove humanity from the earth the dark spirits had their plan. "She learned about Zabardast's plan to spread the dual diseases of rising and crushing which would, once and for all, remove

humanity from the surface of the earth" (TET144).

Motivated by the desire to dominate they plan to annihilate the 'other' group. Rushdie through Zabardast and the Zumurrud Shah, portrays the attitude of intolerant people. There is also a hint at the cultural challenges that one might face by being different from the others. Geronimo, who suffers from levitation is not supported, but envied by some people and misconstrued by some others as a diseased person. Apart from struggling to maintain his physical balance due to loss of gravity, he also had to face the looks of apathy from others. He feels alienated and depressed.

The novel sparkles with Rushdie's political comments and allusions. At one place in the novel where Duniya asks IbnRushd to be wary of his opponent Ghazali, she says that Ghazali, an unforgiving man who is supported by a Jinni, a fool without imagination might create havoc if IbnRushd was not alert.

Rushdie exposes the real nature of politicians and politics where one should always be on guard and react to the comments and actions of the opponent. He also observes that it might be dangerous to allow unimaginative fools to lead others. Duniya warns IbnRushd to act fast since his opponent is supported by a Jinni with ferocious powers:

Right now, your enemy is awake. His old jinni has found him, just as I found you. What is the jinni of Ghazali? He asked her. The most potent of all the jinn, she answered. A fool without an imagination, whom nobody ever accused of intelligence, either; but with ferocious powers. I do not even want to speak his name. And your Ghazali seems to me an unforgiving, narrow man, she said. A puritan, whose enemy is pleasure, who would turn its joy to ash. (TET 56 – 57)

Similarly, power is handled well only by some, while the others abuse/misuse power, and create anarchy through their mismanagement. Some Governments fail mainly because of their lack of organizational capacity. Rushdie implies this in his description of the consequences of the probable jinn conquest:

Conquest was something entirely new for the jinn, to whom empire does not come naturally. The jinn are meddlesome; they like to interfere, to lift this one up, to cast that one down, to plunder a treasure cave or throw a magic spanner in a rich man's works. They like the making of mischief, mayhem, anarchy. They have traditionally lacked management skills. But a reign of terror cannot be effective through terror alone. The most effective tyrannies are characterized by their excellent powers of

organization. (TET 209)

It can be said that there is gender politics too, though not in a much pronounced way. Duniya's challenge to Ibn Rushd that comes out of his reckless attitude to Duniya, can be taken as an instance of man's 'taken for granted' attitude towards woman. Ibn Rushd, though a great philosopher does not give his family name to his children because it was an illegal relationship that he had with Dunia and he did not want to reveal the fact to the world:

Dunia was deeply offended. 'You mean,' she said, 'that because we are not married our children cannot bear their father's name.' He smiled his sad crooked smile. 'It is better that they be the Duniyat,' he said, 'a name which contains the world and has not been judged by it. To be the Rushdi would send them into history with a mark upon their brow.' (TET 11)

This attitude of IbnRushd is found in one of his descendants, Father Jerry also. Father Jerry does not acknowledge Mr. Geronimo to be his son because he was born of an illicit relationship between him and Magda Manezes and Geronimo has his mother's name. "Father Jerry's son could not be given his father's surname, of course, the decencies had to be observed, so he received his mother's instead" (TET 27). Here Salman Rushdie points out the man's hypocrisy in the patriarchal world. He was more bothered about keeping up his image than observing morality. And in the bargain women suffered. Rushdie refers to this injustice done to women in the past.

Rushdie throws light on the fact that power strife is existent everywhere; not only in the human world but also in the jinni and the fairy world. Resistance to another culture and the impulsion to establish one's own superiority over the other and the determination to retain one's status between one being and another there is always the desire to show one is superior to the other. Zabardast tries to establish his intelligence and status as better than others when he says:

let me tell you, who are so puffed up about the creation of your wormhole, that after the long separation of the worlds, when the first seals broke and the first slits reopened, I came back to earth long before you dreamed of doing so. And what I did then sowed a seed that will soon bear fruit and inflict a wound upon humanity deeper than any injury you could manage. You hate the human race because it is not like us. I hate it for its possession of the earth, the beautiful, damaged earth. I have gone far beyond the tiny fanatical vengeance of your dead philosopher. There is a gardener from whom a whole garden

of horrors will grow. What I have begun with a whisper will become a roar that will expel the human race from the planet forever. (TEM 139)

The ego of the jinns results in mutual irritation and quarrel. This is symbolic of the quarrels between members of the same party or between members of two parties. These quarrels may result in a big level destruction also sometimes. The quarrel between Zabardast and Zumurrud Shah illustrate this point:

At the height of the quarrel, up there in the white clouds over the city, Zabardast pummelled his old friend in Zumurrud's weakest spot: his immense amour proper, his pride. 'If I so chose,' Zabardast cried, 'I could make myself a larger giant than you, but I am unimpressed by size. If I so chose, I could be a more dazzling metamorph than Ra'im Blood -Drinker, but I prefer to retain my own shape. (TET 139)

Zabardast tries to irritate Zumurrud by telling that he has the power to take any shape he wants but he wants to retain his own shape because he wants to retain his individuality, thus trying to prove to him that he bothers more about his originality and individuality than Zumurrud.

It is not just the political strife but the various shades of problems and challenges that may occur during the fight between two groups that find portrayal in Rushdie's description of the battle between the dark jinn and the lightening freaks:

This must be said again: the competitiveness of even the mightiest of the jinn is often petty and childish, and leads to childish feuds. These are usually, as is the way with childishness, quarrels of short duration, but they can be bitter and spiteful while they last. When the jinn fight the results can be spectacular to the human eye. They throw things which are not things as we understand them, but the products of enchantment. Looking up at the sky from the earth, human beings would read these enchanted not things as comets, meteors, shooting stars. The more powerful the jinni, the hotter and more fearsome the 'meteor'. Zabardast and Zumurrud were the strongest of all the dark jinn, so their magic fire was dangerous, even to each other. And the slaying of the jinn by the jinn is a crucial part of our story. (TET 138-139)

The lightening freaks emerge from obscurity to the frontline trying to save humanity and in the process establishing their proper image, erasing the earlier bad

image attributed to them mistakenly, because of the activities of the dark jinn:

In the battle against the dark jinn, this lightning became a crucial weapon. And so it was that lightning freaks, a group accused during the mighty paranoia of those days of being behind the disruptions that became known as the strangenesses, in fact became the prominent and eventually legendary frontline of the resistance to the Zumurrud gang of dark jinn as it set out to colonise, even to enslave, the people of the earth. (TET 209)

Geronimo also understands from the princess of Qaf that fairy world too is like the human world and there is power strife there too. Rushdie, portrays the power strife in the world of fairies, through Geronimo's conversation with the princess of Qaf:

Between the emperor and the Grand Ifrits there is no affection. Mount Qaf is the most desirable location in all of Fairyland and the Ifrits would dearly love to possess it but the thunderbolt magic of the emperor's daughter, a great jinnia sorceress, is equal to that of Zabardast and Zumurrud Shah, and it maintains a wall of sheet lightning that surrounds Qaf and protects the circular mountain against their greed. However, they are always on the lookout for an opportunity, fomenting trouble among the devs, or lesser spirits who populate the lower slopes of Qaf, trying to persuade them to rebel against their rulers. At this moment there is a hiatus in the endless struggle between the emperor and the Ifrits, which, to tell the truth, has been in a condition of stalemate for many millennia, because the storms, earthquakes and other phenomena that broke the long-closed seals between Peristan and the world of men have permitted the Ifrits to make their mischief here, which has the attraction for them of a novelty, or at least a thing long denied. They haven't been able to do this for a long time, and they believe there is no magic on earth capable of resisting them, and being bullies, they like the idea of destroying an overmatched opponent. So while they think of conquest my father and I get a little respite.

'You? Mr. Geronimo asked. It's you, the princess of Qaf?'

'That's what I'm trying to tell you,' she said. 'The battle beginning here on earth is a mirror of the battle that has been going on in Fairyland for all time.' (TET 205)

Rushdie has also commented on racism, the majority attitude towards minority and the strife between people and people in the power structure in the novel. When Father Jerry attributes the change in attitude in Bombay to the change in Government. He says, "majority rules and minority, look out" (TET 34) and grumbles how since people have changed, he is seen as an outsider in his own place, after having lived there for more than sixty years. He comments on the western racism also in a lighter vein when Geronimo makes the comment after he realizes that he is half human and half jinni. "It isn't bad enough being a brown dude in America, you're telling me I'm half fucking goblin as well" (TET 75).

Through this epic scale description of the natural and the supernatural world Rushdie brings out the political struggle prevailing in the various states of the world and within a state at various levels of hierarchy like caste/class/ religion and also the clash of ideas and beliefs and the struggle to convince, dominate and suppress the opponent.

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