

THE NARRATIVE DETACHMENT IN THE NARRATION OF NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE BY SALMAN RUSHDIE IN KNIFE: MEDITATIONS AFTER ATTEMPTED MURDER

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Abstract:

The near-death experience (NDE) is a concept that has captivated the human imagination and understanding for centuries. In literature, the narration of near death incidents is an open-ended genre to explore the human perceptions about mortality, spirituality, consciousness and also after-life experiences. Salman Rushdie, an internationally acclaimed postcolonial author, in his work “*Knife: Meditations after Attempted Murder*”, narrates a life-changing scenario of the near-death experience he had at Chautauqua Institution on August 12, 2022, when he was attacked. This paper explores the objective approach in Rushdie’s portrayal of NDEs, considering the balanced use of realism and mysticism in his broadly referenced narrative technique. By analyzing Rushdie’s narrative style, this research paper delves deeper into how his personal experience of the near-death incident also brings its attention to a broader discourse on the issues of identity, and survival of a writer in an era where there is a loud voice promoting freedom of expression to every human. The subjective nature of reality faced in a heart wrenching experience, is obviously compelling enough for a subjective narration. However, the paper demonstrates the objective approach of narration, not just as a tool for detachment but also as a means of amplifying the psychological and spiritual after-effects of such encounters on an audacious author like Rushdie.

Keywords: Objectivity, Narration, Identity, Survival, Detachment, Trauma, Death

Introduction:

Sir Ahmed Salman Rushdie, born in India, is a renowned British-American author known for his distinctive style of writing blending magic realism with historical fiction. His works often intersect the disruptions and migrations between Eastern and Western cultures, with a particular focus on the cultures and variations in Indian subcontinent. Rushdie’s second novel, *Midnight’s Children* (1981), earned him the Booker Prize and was later recognized as the best novel of all. His fourth novel, *The Satanic Verses* (1988), Rushdie faced global criticism, and violent acts by extremists on censorship and religious violence. Rushdie faced multiple murder attempts and death threats, including a *fatwa* calling for his execution. The novel was banned in 20 countries.

In 2022, Rushdie survived a stabbing attack at the Chautauqua Institution in New York. In his recent book “*Knife: Meditations after Attempted Murder*”, Rushdie narrates the near death experience he had after the attempted murder. Ironically, Rushdie was there “*at the amphitheatre in Chautauqua to talk about the importance of keeping writers safe from harm.*” (Rushdie 1) Rushdie portrays the experience engaging both subjective and objective perspectives of life and death. The narration by Rushdie focuses on blending the objective narration with lots of literary references pointing to the mystical and psychological effects.

A near-death experience is typically viewed as a deeply personal and affective event. However, in *Knife*, Rushdie breaks the traditional confines of subjective narration and attempts to present his personal opinions about the experience, through a detached perspective. This perspective, however, is especially intriguing,

given the context of Rushdie's earlier writing style, which often includes magic realism, allegorical details, and deeper philosophical enquiry into mere beliefs. Analysing the objectivity in *Knife* is central to understanding how Rushdie addresses the transience of life, spiritual realisation, and the search for meaning in mortal existence.

The Near-Death Experience and Objectivity:

American philosopher and psychiatrist Raymond A. Moody coining the term "near-death experience" in 1975, in his book *"Life after Life"*, describes it as a series of psychological and physiological incidents that occur when a person comes close to death. These experiences are often subjective phenomenon, involving visions of bright light, encounters with deceased loved ones, detachment and levitation, and sensations of floating outside the body. The subjectivity of NDEs is central to their cultural and psychological significance and may also affect their beliefs. However, literary treatment of NDEs by Rushdie, offers a more complex perspective where subjectivity and objectivity interlace – *"It's rare for anyone to be able to describe a near-death experience. Let me say first what did not happen. There was nothing supernatural about it. No "tunnel light". No feeling of rising out of my body. In fact, I have rarely felt so strongly connected to my body. My body was dying and was taking me with it. It was an intensely physical sensation."* (Rushdie 16)

Rushdie's narration in *Knife*, despite being in first person, is objective narrative structure in approach, and hence unique. Rather than using the NDE as merely a mystical experience, Rushdie incorporates into it a detached narration perspective, which reflects an attempt to explore the boundaries of life and death. Without a total surrender to the fearful feeling that typically surrounds such experiences, Rushdie through this lens, frames the NDE as a deeply personal event analysing, questioning, and trying to understand the deeper aspect through reasons and perceptions built up in the collective psyche of humanity.

He writes, *"In the first days after the attack, as I lay in my hospital bed with various parts of my body held together by metal staples, I would proudly say to anyone who would listen, "I never lost consciousness, so I remember everything". It is now clear to me that this wasn't true. It's true that I remained blurrily aware of my surroundings, and didn't completely pass out, but nor true that my powers of observation were functioning normally, or anything like it. The confidence of my assertion was probably bolstered by the powerful painkillers I was being given at that time – fentanyl, morphine, you name it. What follows, therefore, is a collage, with bits of my memory pieced together with other eyewitness and news reports."* (Rushdie 12)

Rushdie has been one of those prominent public figures who never shied away calling a spade, a spade. A politically outspoken personality needs to be rational when it comes to public engagements. The narrative detachment in the memoir, *Knife*, happens to be one such way of performing his duties objectively as a public figure. Here he performs this duty by sharing the detailed narration of his extremely personal experience of death on a public platform with utmost objective eloquence as well as efficiently logical references.

The Knife as a Metaphor:

The Knife – being a tool of violence, also appears as the central metaphor of the narration, in the memoir, which later turns more into an object of reflection– an object that was an immediate threat to Rushdie's life; an object that made him question the broader psychological aftermath raised by the attack. It made him understand the raw emotion while being under threat for life. It made him realise his identity as being a human, being an author, as well as being the target of the assailant. It made him aware of his desire for living, his instinct of survival, and later the impact of such violent residue on his physical and mental state.

Rushdie, not only expresses his perspective while going through such a major, fatal, transformational event in his life, but also assesses the assailant's psyche at the time of the attack. He questions how the assailant could process such a violent attempt in order to satiate his desire for revenge towards him. Rushdie also prompts

another side of revenge stating it could also be a demand for justice, or ultimately could have been turned into a sense of forgiveness. But it was finally the desire for revenge that took the centre stage and hence the attack.

Rushdie sets a boundary between life and death, where the knife being the only thing that could make him cruelly cross it had the assailant succeeded in his attempt. The knife made him muse upon the moment of crisis – *“A gunshot is action at distance, but a knife attack is a kind of intimacy, a knife’s a close-up weapon, and the crimes it commits are encounters. Here I am, you bastard, the knife whispers to its victim. I’ve been waiting for you. You see me? I’m right in front of your face, I’m plunging my assassin sharpness into your neck. Feel that? Here’s some more, and some more after that. I’m right here. I’m right in front of you.”* (Rushdie 15)

Later, the knife became a constant reminder of the fragility of life of an author who chose to speak out against some deep rooted ideologies that need to change with time. Rushdie says it is all upon the ideology while using a knife which makes it just a tool or an immoral weapon to kill someone. It denotes how worse a cultural and ideological battle can get leading to such a violent incident. The assailant’s knife, was not the only weapon that was wielded on Rushdie, rather, the actual weapon wielded upon him was the ideological difference that had been hanging over him for years.

Language as a Knife:

The attack, for Rushdie, was not merely a personal calamity, but also an assault on the freedom of expression of a writer and the impact of his ideologies on the society. Rushdie has already been using language as a knife to make many revealing cuts upon the inner workings and secrets of the society we live in. He says, *“Language was my knife. If I had unexpectedly been caught in an unwanted knife fight, may be this was the knife I could use to fight back.”* (Rushdie 85)

Keeping a narrative detachment, Rushdie meditates on the role of writing in the face of violence with reference to this incident. For him, the attack was not just a physical one, rather on the right of an author to speak and write what he wants to. He reflects on the long-standing tension between the power of words willing to inspire a change ahead of the stereotypes, and the dangers of writing them as they may seem to be offensive to certain ideologies.

Documenting this memoir, for Rushdie, was also a way to come out of the Post Traumatic Stress disorder, which he says, he had no symptoms of. But the nightmares related to the incident did bother him till he was writing. He does not consider writing as a therapy to come out of the mental replays of the event. He plans of writing the memoir so that he is able to *“move on to anything else. To write would be my way of owning what had happened, taking charge of it, making it mine, refusing to be a mere victim. I would answer violence with art.”* (Rushdie 129)

However, Rushdie has utilised writing in its supreme form to come out of the trauma of the attack. *“In the memoir’s standout chapter, Rushdie imagines himself having a series of conversations in the Chautauqua County Jail with the A. He seeks to cast his assailant as a literary character, “to make him up, make him real,” and wonders if the A. is like Othello’s Iago, a slighted man turned destructive, or André Gide’s Lafcadio, who murders “for no reason at all?”* (www.vulture.com) The aforesaid section of the book is an imagined conversation between him and the assailant, as it was impossible for them to meet in person. Rushdie imagines the psychology of the assailant while talking to him. This conversation is another example of an objective narration which Rushdie has used in the book. Amidst the imagined conversation, the questions asked by Rushdie and his thoughts regarding the assailant can be called genuine curiosity born out of the incident. An attack survivor does have so many questions to ask about the reason of the suffering he has

to go through. But Rushdie, at the same time, also delves deeper into the mind of assailant and imagines every possible reasons he might be having behind his motto to kill Rushdie. Though he imagines conversation more as the mental state of the assailant but it is so much logical and literary as a whole in the memoir. Rushdie could have made the assailant the deadliest of villains in his imagination, but all he does is an imaginary mind reading of a twenty two year old young man who has attacked a renowned author on a public platform.

Throughout the conversation, there is no biased perspective of the author towards the young man. There are genuine questions, anguish, frustration, pain and the feeling of being the one who has suffered for no reason. But in every question, Rushdie has tried his best to put an objective approach while imagining the answers from the assailant. There could have been many ways to justify the acts of an obvious villain as a villain in a book written by the victim. But despite going through so much pain, Rushdie keeps his motives clear while being a detached observer and narrator.

Being a writer, Rushdie appreciates the value of literature in challenging the existing state orthodoxy in the society around. His own writings have been taken as a form of resistance against the censorship imposed upon people. The *fatwa* and the attack on him are the visible proofs of how extreme such ‘cultural terrorism’ could go for the writers who challenge certain cultural and religious norms. An attack or any kind of violence cannot always be revenged through the same. But any form of art if used as an answer to such physical and ideological violence, makes it a testament over time. “*And in the end, it outlasts those who oppress it. The poet Ovid was exiled by Augustus Caesar, but the poetry of Ovid has outlasted the Roman Empire. The poet Mandelstam’s life was ruined by Joseph Stalin, but his poetry has outlasted the Soviet Union. The poet Lorca was murdered by the thugs of General Franco, but his art has outlasted the fascism of the Falange.*” (Rushdie 168)

Such detailed references restate the fact that art (literature) is the best weapon to fight back when needed. “*Rushdie’s Knife has a lot of Rushdie-isms, as it should. Long sentences covering entire paragraphs, made-up-words that seem all natural from his pen, commentary on Gods and religions, little nothings about his favourite places.*” (<https://medium.com>) Art is open to arguments, criticism and rejection. In a society, art demands just the right to its existence, not any kind of protection as it is because of art that human race is able to renew and rethink with the changing world. “*Knife is Rushdie at the peak of his powers, writing with urgency, with gravity, with unflinching honesty. It is also a deeply moving reminder of literature’s capacity to make sense of the unthinkable, an intimate and life-affirming meditation on life, loss, love, art—and finding the strength to stand up again.*” (<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/199344846-knife>)

Detachment and Foreshadowing:

In *Knife*, Rushdie adopts a narrative approach that shifts between various storytelling styles along with dark humour depicting both personal fear and practical approach. He frequently uses a third-person omniscient narrator, which provides a sense of detachment and objectivity to the events as they unfold. This narrative decision is crucial, as it enables the depiction of a near-death experience (NDE) in a way that separates it from the emotional or psychological struggles often linked to such an event. The voice remains neutral and observational, recounting the protagonist’s NDE without resorting to overt religious or spiritual symbolism.

In his objective approach, Rushdie also mentions the intuitions and foreshadowing he had experienced before the attack and also through various literary references. Two days before Rushdie travelled to Chautauqua, he had a nightmare where he was assaulted by a gladiator holding a spear in a Roman amphitheatre. While Rushdie doesn’t believe in the idea of premonitions, the dream felt eerily prophetic—especially since the venue in Chautauqua was also an amphitheatre. Another such instance he mentions comes from one of his book. The novel that would eventually become *Shalimar the Clown*, released in 2005, had an image that haunted Rushdie: a dead man lying on the ground with his killer standing over him, holding a knife. He now

views this as a form of “foreshadowing.” Similarly, the opening lines of *The Satanic Verses*—the book that led to the fatwa issued against him—also came back to trouble him: “‘To be born again,’ sang Gibreel Farishta tumbling from the heavens, ‘first you have to die.’”

Even that the scenes of his own novels seem to be foreshadows and premonitions to him. However, here the dual identity of the author comes upfront. In his memoir, Rushdie has skilfully kept the two personalities together and apart- the man who suffered the physical pain and the man who objectively documented it into a piece of literature. The detached approach of impersonality in his writing, gives the text universality in terms of trauma studies. Such objectivity in narration is a challenge to the typical subjectivity expected in narrations such as near death experiences. Rushdie imagines a platform where such a close encounter to death is not merely an emotional state, but is narrated from an external vantage point making it a detached and logical narrative. An inherently personal experience, detailed with such premonitions, intuitions and foreshadowing, becomes a phenomenon of shift from “personal unconscious” to the “collective unconscious” analysed through the lens of rationality.

Physical and Psychological wound after attack:

In the later part of the memoir, Rushdie explains the detailed impact of a near death experience on both physical and psychological level of existence. The brutal assault by a stranger driven by a religious motive, forces Rushdie to confront his deepest vulnerabilities. In this book, he confronts the profound psychological and emotional impact he has to undergo following the attack. The cliché belief of society- surviving through such tough incidents in life makes one stronger than before- seems to be denied. The recovery from physical wounds is visible, but the recovery from psychological effect it makes is not visible at all and tougher to handle for the rest part of life. The optimistic and motivational boost up one gets from family and friends around, does help the person to face severe situations. However, Rushdie describes how despite trying his best to get back to his normal life in every possible way, he was unable to understand how to deal with a murder attack. Various incidents in life might make one stronger, but it is the psychological trauma that stays and keeps bothering even after years of an incident.

Rushdie explains how the attack changed him, not only in terms of his safety at physical level but also in terms of his psyche. While documenting the attack, Rushdie acknowledges the physical pain he had to go through after the attack, along with the fearful anticipations he had been going through all those years. While undergoing so many physical and psychological changes, Rushdie explains how ‘survival’ becomes the only instinct for him in his life as well as the main theme of the memoir. He grapples with what it truly means to endure such a horrific experience and the cost that survival entails.

He realises that even after surviving the attack, the second life he has got, cannot be lived without fighting multiple battles at multiple fronts. There are battles in the contested territories like conflicts of narratives, religious sectarianism, political tyrannies and there is a person who despite not willing to continue with the debate, is supposed to be fighting such battles, rather than leading a peaceful life after facing such a calamity.

Conclusion:

In *Knife*, Salman Rushdie employs a detached and objective narrative approach to pursue a deeper philosophical inquiry. His treatment of the near-death experience (NDE) transcends mere emotional interpretation, instead positions it as a critical moment of realisation about mortality of human life. This kind of confrontation with mortality becomes a vehicle for examining the fundamental nature of consciousness and existence. By resisting sensationalism or overt sentimentality, Rushdie has knit the NDE not as an isolated psychological event, but as part of a broader existential framework. His survival is thus not merely a return to life, but a re-entry into a world reframed by philosophical insight. Ultimately, this narrative strategy challenges conventional depictions of trauma and survival while inviting readers to reflect on the fine line

between experience of life and death, and the self—underscoring Rushdie's enduring interest in the intersection of storytelling and philosophical thought.

Knife: Meditations after an Attempted Murder is a powerful reflection on the aftermath of violence, examining its emotional, psychological, and philosophical dimensions from a detached perspective. In recounting his experience of surviving an attack, Salman Rushdie confronts difficult questions the price of speaking freely, and how art can both heal and provoke in a world divided by beliefs. Rather than offering a simple narrative of events, the memoir becomes a deep inquiry into vulnerability and the complexities of living in a society with constant fear. Rushdie's path through personal trauma, along with his efforts to find meaning and healing, provides a striking exploration of how creativity, resilience, and introspection can lead to renewal even in the face of profound suffering.

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