**Salman Rushdie’s The Free Radio**

(For B.A. 2nd Semester, Honours)

Salman Rushdie’s story ‘The Free Radio’ is about the sterilization campaign launched by India’s ruling regime during the Emergency period (1975-1977). The title of the story refers to an incentive, the gift of a transistor-radio the health department gave to those undergoing the sterilization surgery or vasectomy. Here the narrator is a retired school teacher who enjoys a high social status. He watches from a distance the intimate relationship developing between Ramani, the main protagonist of the story and a poor thief’s widow, who is attractive, vicious and ten years older than him and also has five children from her previous marriage. Ramani is a naïve rickshaw rider, young, good-looking who inherits his profession from his father.

Ramani is seduced by the widow. The narrator disapproves of this relationship. He has a vested interest in snatching Ramani out of the widow’s clutches because he used to know Ramani’s parents. The narrator thinks that the widow decides to seduce Ramani as they were seen everywhere in public. Ramani gets into bad company. He starts drinking illegal liquor in the back of the Irani’s canteen. The narrator tries to persuade Ramani to stay away from his new friends but in vain. Ramani’s friends wear the armbands of the new youth movement. The narrator disapproves of them and hints at beatings-up which they might be involved. Ramani has no armband but his new acquaintances exert a strong influence on him. The armband youths always say that Ramani is handsome and should be a film star. This flattery is designed to con Ramani out of free drinks and money at cards. The widow only makes the situation worse by reinforcing Ramani’s dreams about becoming a film star.

The narrator decides to take Ramani away from the widow for the sake of Ramani’s dead parents. The narrator uses his social status for the purpose but in vain. From then on the narrator takes less interest in Ramani’s affairs, as he thinks that there is nothing more he can do. Soon after, Ramani and the widow get married. At this time Ramani starts dreaming about receiving a transistor as a gift from the Government. The boy believes in his dream and seems to be happier than at any other point in his life. The narrator again accosts Ramani to ask him if he has undergone the sterilization process. Ramani replies that he has because he is in love with the widow. He also tells the narrator that he has done so because the widow does not want any children anymore and also because it is in national interest. He also adds that the free radio is sure to arrive shortly as a thank you gift from the Government.

After that, the widow is seen rarely in the town. Ramani, on the other hand, starts working more. Every time he rides through the town, he puts his hand up to his ear and mimics radio broadcasts. He continues to carry an invisible radio but he seems strained from his feat of imagination. The white caravan used for sterilizing men is back in the town. Ramani waits a few days, hoping that the government officials will bring the radio to his place. On the third day, he rides to the caravan with the widow. After a while, there are sounds of disagreement. Ramani, visibly beaten, is marched out of the caravan by his armband friends. Ramani sells his rickshaw and tells the narrator that he and his family are leaving for Bombay to fulfill his dreams of becoming a film star. After a few months, the narrator receives a letter from Ramani filled with stories from Ramani’s new life.

The action of the story takes place in a tightly-knit community in India. The language is conversational, which is achieved by the use of rhetorical questions, repetition and discourse markers such as ‘You know’. The narrator often switches between the singular ‘I’ and the plural ‘we’, which means that he assumes the role of community’s spokesperson. The narrator wants to lecture the reader about the importance of listening to elders and dangers of succumbing to fantasies. The narration resembles village gossip. The narration is unreliable, as it is filtered through the narrator’s biases and preconceptions. His knowledge is limited to gossip. Unreliable narrators are fairly common in modernism and postmodernism. Salman Rushdie belongs to the latter movement.

In the story, Rushdie makes reference to real historical events that took place in India. The Emergency was a period from 1975 to 1977during which Prime Minister Indira Gandhi ruled by decree. It was during this time that Sanjay Gandhi, the Prime Minister’s son launched a campaign propagating forced sterilization – one of the main themes of the story.

Relationship between reality and fiction is another theme of the story. Ramani easily believes in fantasies about being a film star or receiving a free radio from the Government for undergoing a vasectomy. The boundary between fiction and reality becomes blurred when Ramani starts pretending to already have the radio. Even the community half participates in these dreams. Ramani’s act of imagination is potentially fatal. The imaginary radio here in this story can be read as a comment on the dangers of propaganda.

Set in the nineteen seventies, ‘The Free Radio’ talks of an India taken for a ride by the country’s ruling class that has ever survived on violence, trickery and hypocrisy. The reader is presented with a scene on the roadside where men, women and children move around aimlessly in conditions of squalor and dirt. Even as poverty increases in the country, dreams of making it big in life multiply. ‘The Free Radio’ emphasizes actuality and appeals to the reader merely at the level of the five senses that are available to the human being as the only link with the world around, the writer suggesting that deprivation reduces the human being to the level of an animal.

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