In the modern world, migrants constitute a significant part of the global network society. One of the biggest is the Indian diaspora, comprising more than 30 million people around the globe. Thus, the fiction produced by them constitutes a large portion of literature, which cannot stay unnoticed both by ordinary readers and academics. Among those authors, one of the most renown and simultaneously controversial writers of Indian origin is Salman Rushdie, a representative of the Anglo-Indian and migrant as well as the postcolonial writing. In this paper, I would like to focus on one of his most important, though not so well known novel, The Moor’s Last Sigh, as an image of Indian cultural identity. The primary aim shall be to analyze the book in the historical context of nation building through the lens of the characters’ individual stories.

Rushdie, as proved in his numerous works, such as Midnight’s Children (1981), Satanic Verses (1988) or Shalimar the Clown (2005), just to mention a few novels, is a keen investigator of not only an individual human being but also society. Representing a complex identity, of a minority as a Kashmiri Muslim, post-colonial – as a member of a community residing in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, the only Muslim-majority state in India, mainly in the Valley of Kashmir along the Jhelum river. Together with other Kashmiris (Hindu, Buddhists) they have a particularly strong regional identity, based on shared culture and history. The key concept for this identity is the idea of kashmiriyat, traditionally linked to religious tolerance and syncretism. Besides, Kashmir used to be a separate princely state and there has been a dispute over the region between India and Pakistan since 1947. The tumultuous situation adds on to the Kashmiris’ feeling of distinctness, resulting in some separatist tendencies, particularly from the part of Muslims. See e.g., Chowdary, Rekha. “The Muslim Identity and the Politics of Fundamentalism in Kashmir.” Reader in Political Science. Jammu: University of Jammu, 1998.

2 A community residing in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, the only Muslim-majority state in India, mainly in the Valley of Kashmir along the Jhelum river. Together with other Kashmiris (Hindu, Buddhists) they have a particularly strong regional identity, based on shared culture and history. The key concept for this identity is the idea of kashmiriyat, traditionally linked to religious tolerance and syncretism. Besides, Kashmir used to be a separate princely state and there has been a dispute over the region between India and Pakistan since 1947. The tumultuous situation adds on to the Kashmiris’ feeling of distinctness, resulting in some separatist tendencies, particularly from the part of Muslims. See e.g., Chowdary, Rekha. “The Muslim Identity and the Politics of Fundamentalism in Kashmir.” Reader in Political Science. Jammu: University of Jammu, 1998.
of an ex-colonial society, and finally transnational – as a migrant, he is a carrier of an uncommonly multicultural perspective he is consciously making use of. Born in 1947, the year in which Indian and Pakistan emerged as independent republics, he represents the first generation of post-colonial India society, along with which he grew up and which was put by him under scrutiny in numerous works. Rushdie spent his childhood in Mumbai, one of the chief trading cities of colonial India. He was a Kashmiri Muslim by origin, though his family was not a religious one. In 1960, as a 13-year-old he moved to United Kingdom where he studied and spent most of his life, firstly as a copywriter, then as an author of numerous widely recognized books. However, despite physical migration, his mind never entirely left India. He eagerly returns there in both in person and in the guise of his characters. It turns into a significant background for the narration, not only with its diverse scenery but also historical richness.

While some argue that as an expatriate Rushdie has no right to describe the land and reality, he no longer belongs to, or at least such a description cannot be seen as accurate. Rajakrishnan notices:

As far as the émigré writer is concerned, his geographical sense of distances and isolation enables him to view in perspective the predicament of his people who having lost their significant connections with the past and being confronted with sudden gaps and silences in their immediate view of reality, are left to lead an empty life. His art thus becomes the defense against collective amnesia.

Rushdie, defending himself as an author, sees the matter as follows:

If literature is in part the business of finding new angles at which to enter reality, then once again our distance, our geographical perspective, may provide us with such angles. Or it may be that that is simply what we must think in order to do our work.

He also stated that his role as a writer is to “look at the world as it is, and say something about it” but it does not necessarily mean resorting to realism. As Carl G. Jung

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stated in the first half of the 20th century, the symbol is a manifestation of inner experience perceived with senses, which neither encompasses nor explains anything, but instead points to some other, transcendent sense, impossible to express sufficiently with words of our human language. Such understood symbols are at large in Rushdie’s novels and play a crucial role to grasp the sense hidden underneath. Although every work by him is disparate and inimitable, most of them fall within the literary genre of magic realism, which means the introduction of some imaginary, supernatural elements into the apparently realistic image. The novel *The Moor’s Last Sigh* is not an exception here. This book, published in 1995, was written in the shadow of Rushdie’s house arrest which may be the reason why it is most often analyzed within the exile discourse. However, this unrealistic, even peculiar story, may be understood in more general perspective as symbolically referring to post-colonial identity and the modern Indian nation. It was preceded by three other novels on a similar subject: *The Midnight’s Children* (1981), *Shame* (1983) and *The Satanic Verses* (1988). As Anuradha Dingwaney states, these three works represent parallels to three identities of Rushdie associated with the countries he is related to: England, India, and Pakistan (where his family lives). The abovementioned novels are portrayals of persons on a border, understood both as a physical and an imaginative one. The characters are placed on the verge of cultures, social backgrounds, etc., which makes them seek their own identity. It is a pattern used by Rushdie eagerly several times, also in his later works. The situation of those individuals is comparable to what was experienced by those who faced the shift from a colonial to post-colonial reality, or of expatriates. However, *The Moor’s Last Sigh* as following this trilogy, goes beyond any divisions, resembling an Indian *masala* mixture of spices as it combines elements representing different cultures and times. The coming back to the beginnings and dealing with the matter of memory seems to summarize the issue of identity.

The novel concentrates upon the character of Moraes Zogoiby, called the Moor, and his family story. It may be referred to as a saga, placed among minority communities of Jews and Christians. The Zogoiby family is to be traced back to 15th century, to the famous Portuguese traveler, Vasco da Gama and has its roots in Islamic

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10 E. g. *Shalimar the Clown*.
12 *Masala* – (hi.) a mixture, mainly referred to the mixture of spices, as well as to Bollywood cinema, which combines various genres.
Andalusia of that time. The exact genealogy is drawn from Moraes’ great-grandfather, Francisco, a spice-trader of Cochin in Kerala, supposedly one of da Gama’s descendants. He and his wife, Epifania, had a son, Camoens, who was strongly longing for India to become a unified country. Unfortunately, he died in 1939, before having a chance to see the emergence of an independent Indian nation. It is his daughter, Aurora, who’s the one to lead her existence on the threshold of modernity, as she witnesses the events of 1947 and what follows. She also chooses to live in between of two religions. She, herself being a Christian, marries to a Jewish clerk, Abraham Zogoiby, who is a misconduct, contemptible by both religious communities. But Aurora, an open-minded artist, ceases to pay much attention to what people say throughout her life. She and her husband move to Bombay\(^1\), the city dear to Rushdie, a ‘borderland’ where the land meets the sea by which the Europeans first arrived. It is an all-absorbing city where anyone is accepted or may even live to be officially non-existent. It is where Abraham changes his occupation and turns to trafficking and Moraes, the only son of Zogoibys’, is born. The boy though possesses a physical impairment which is a distorted, club-shaped hand. Besides, due to some genetic fault, he is aging twice as fast as any other human being. Thus, his life is much more difficult than that of his peers, among whom he cannot find a place for oneself. Achieving the look of an adult too quickly, he receives his sexual initiation very early. These hardships also influence his mother, whose finds herself in a rather difficult position. Struggling toughly to develop any affection towards her son, she ultimately manages to reveal her hidden emotions through art. She starts to depict Moraes on canvas, though in quite an erotic manner. The kind of a perverse relationship lasts for some time but finally ends when the Moor meets Uma Sarasvati. Two women fight for Moraes’ attention. Although both are painters, they represent the opposite poles of feminine character in the novel. Aurora is a rebellious and non-conformist activist (courageous enough to, e.g. confront the Hindu tradition by dancing during the annual Ganesh festival), which is why the society rejects her. Uma, on the other hand, is an ambiguous individual, prone to change her identity accordingly to current circumstances, which makes her able to ensnare Moraes. While her sculptures are generally appreciated, her affection seems rather all-consuming. As she fails to establish one stable identity, her relationship with Moor is doomed to failure, such as was the Aurora’s. As the story develops, both women die in inglorious circumstances. The pattern is repeated by another female character, Aoi Ue, who appears only in the final chapters.

\(^1\) The name Bombay was introduced as the official one under the British Raj. It was changed to Mumbai only in 1995.
(for which Rushdie got criticized, as it breaks any rules of constructing narration)\textsuperscript{14}. Aoi, a painting restorer of Japanese origin, meets the Moor in the Spanish palace of Vasco Miranda, former Aurora’s lover. Due to envy, Miranda stole the series of Moor portraits painted by Aoi, and kidnapped her to restore one of the pictures, hidden beneath his self-portrait. While she is forced to do so, Moraes must be telling the story of his life. Finally, the palimpsest fails to be completely revealed, as Miranda destroys the canvas and kills Aoi. Moraes sees the whole picture just before he dies. It is only the story that survives, having already been written down when the Moor’s last sigh is heaved.

\textit{The Moor’s Last Sigh} was written by Rushdie when his life was under threat of Ayatollah Khomeini’s \textit{fatwa} due to the publication of \textit{Satanic Verses} in 1988. It must have shed a pessimistic light on Rushdie’s attitude to various aspects of the existence, including his writing. Unable to leave his own, English house safely, he attempted to define himself anew, at the same time preserving the memories of the country he had left\textsuperscript{15}. The colonial trauma the Indian nation experienced could have then been more vividly perceptible by Rushdie throughout the personal experience of imprisonment. Being under the British custody, as both he and India was, may have provoked the ultimate question about the influence of foreign rule on the nation as it is today, and if it is already a nation. An attempt to answer it resulted in an imaginary journey to the beginnings of Indian colonial history, which can be traced in \textit{The Moor’s Last Sigh}.

Delving back into the 15\textsuperscript{th} century, Rushdie draws up a detailed historical background of the colonial rule in India, even before it officially started. It was the time when all the intercontinental contacts revolved around the spice trade. Beginning from the Moor invasion, through the British Raj, up to the emergence of an independent state under Nehru, and then the rule of Indira Gandhi, that history of the Indian nation narrated by Rushdie is an exact analogy of the story of the Zogoiby family, but in a bigger scale. It is full of greed, betrayal, misunderstandings, lack of acceptance, illicit affairs and struggles for power. It is only the figure of the Moor who is believed to fulfill all the lacks in the family. He symbolically seems to play a similar role in the whole nation – the character, and at the same time, the narrator personifies convoluted Indian history with his distorted hand as the symbol of impairment Indians suffer due to colonial rule\textsuperscript{16}. This hand then turns into a powerful tool, means of


executing the power of nationalists, led by the fictional character of Raman Fielding (mainly based on the figure of Bal Thackeray, leader of Shiv Sena). It is this political group which, according to Rushdie, should be blamed for the destruction of Bombay, the city of his childhood, which he used to cherish for its inclusivism. But now, he regrets, under the rule of Shiv Sena, it turned into a sectarian Mumbai. The narration depicts this view quite accurately. Moor’s collapse and a crisis inside his family goes hand in hand with the degeneration of the city of Bombay. The moment when Mo-raes leaves his mother for Uma coincides with the State of Emergency instituted by Indira Gandhi. This event also casts a shadow on Aurora’s painting, which then falls into a period of darkness and ceases to receive any public appreciation.

Moreover, Rushdie has some other pessimistic predictions about his motherland. It seems, as Alexandra Schultheis suggests that according to the author there is a strong possibility that the religious nationalism and economic corruption will take the place of modern plurality, which, to him, fails to establish its power. The figure of the Moor’s father, Abraham Zogoiby, who turns to illegal business, incarnates such an economic corruption perfectly. Abraham’s own path towards modernity leads through the economic post-nationalism, the child of the colonial rule called wild capitalism, born as one of many false Edens of that times. There is no reluctance in him even to hire people unlisted on the recent census and thus declared by the government as non-existent, phantom-workers. As little money and no medical care is given to them, the costs of their labour would be minimum. It is the path that Abraham Zogoiby, as many real Indians followed at that time. It is also this historical lack that makes one not think of the nation as a unity, particularly on the level of the economic future of the country as a whole.

Moreover, as far as the unity of the nation is concerned, one of the crucial symbols used by Rushdie in this novel is the one of Mother India. As Moraes Zogoiby states: “Motherness… is a big idea in India, may be our biggest: the land as mother, the mother as land, as the firm ground beneath our feet.” However, is this ground still firm? The metaphor of India as a mother, though established a long time ago, was popularized in modern mass culture by one of the most important Indian 20th-century movies, a lavish production of Bollywood that was then in its early stages of development, Mother India (1957). An association of the figure of the Moor’s mother, Aurora, with this image, seems irresistible due to several reasons. Firstly, there is

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17 Ibidem, p. 587.
a slight allusion in the year of Moor’s birth which is also the year of the movie release. Secondly, there is some, though indirect, parallel between the movie background and an episode of Rushdie’s story. Nargis, the actress playing Radha, the movie heroine, was actually married to Sunil Dutt, the actor playing her son. At some point of the book, Aurora mentions this fact, which, according to Schultheis, may suggest the character of her relationship with her own son\(^\text{21}\). This tricky play between the fiction and reality introduced by Rushdie through these references may, however, serve to open a broader comparison. Radha, bearing a name originating from Hindu mythology, is a character built for Indian women of that time to identify with, an image based on nationalistic tendencies that have been arising\(^\text{22}\). This newly-married peasant lady suffers a lot of misfortunes and hardships throughout her life. She loses her husband, is forced to make ends meet left alone with three children, survives natural disasters that come and destroy her field, tackles with her son’s dangerous behavior, and finally has no other choice other than to kill her own child. She is presented as a persistent, hard-working woman, entirely devoted to what she believes in, even if it demands a supreme sacrifice. The metaphor of India as a mother, Bharat Mata, is not a new concept. Actually, she was considered as one of Hindu goddesses, and the character of Radha was partly created to represent such an image.

This allegory evolved as India changed. In modern times, for example, it was also used by an Indian painter, Maqbool Fida Hussein, whose image of a naked woman on the map of India titled Bharat Mata, along with a series of unique portraits of Hindu gods and goddesses caused controversies, especially among Hindu nationalists\(^\text{23}\). However, as located outside India, Rushdie enjoys more freedom to use and transfigure the functioning and respected motives. Aurora being compared to Radha, the heroine of Mother India, seems to go beyond the pattern preserved in the movie. What is common between his character, Aurora Zogoiby, and the heroine, is that they are both mothers of a perseverant nature. However, it seems difficult to find any other similarities between those two. Primarily, Aurora is an urban aristocrat, living for oneself almost solely; she is an Indian, though not a Hindu. Her identity could be perceived as one of a multicultural hybrid. Nevertheless, she is unified with her internal self and can make her son feel her protection. To create a shelter from the brutal reality, she brings him into the world of art. No matter how pessimistic the novel may seem, it is mainly thanks to Aurora that the future vision is not entirely apocalyptic. Her last

\(^{21}\) Schultheis, Alexandra W., op.cit., pp. 581–582.
painting, seen by Moor just at the moment of his death, depicts the son and mother reunited: she is making a gesture of forgiveness, and he is sitting on the ground in front of her. This image seems to convey a meaningful message. India needs to be a new type of mother, and it is for its boundless acceptance, being inclusive, that makes coexistence of many varying individualities possible as one nation⁴⁴.

Apart from Aurora, though it is less obvious, the image of Mother India may as well be seen in the figure of Uma Sarasvati. She is a representative of the new generation, a product of the colonial past which has to face the upcoming modernization. She is presented as having multiple faces and identities, changed continuously according to the current needs and other people’s expectations. What she stands for is only just temporary and shallow. She lacks cultural and historical roots, no matter how intense her attempts to include the pieces of Indian culture in her art are. She deceives Moraes and tries to gain power over him; it is due to her activity that he actually gets excluded from his family. Finally, she fails to overcome Moor’s attachment to his mother and it is the latter with whom he ultimately reunites after death. Uma Sarasvati is a personification of a mythological goddess: she seems to have multiple incarnations, similarly to the goddess – the leading one being the destructive Kali. However, she aspires also to be perceived as the benevolent, powerful but stable Parvati, the holy mother. She is unsuccessful in her attempt, because the position is already occupied by Aurora. This character may be interpreted as a warning against the lifestyle of apparent multiplicity, lacking any substantial basis in one’s personal beliefs, cultural eradication, and selfishness. According to V. Rajakrishnan, “her humiliation—and violent end—represented in some sense a defeat for the pluralist philosophy.”⁵⁵

On the other hand, Rushdie touches the issue of masculinity as well. The magical figure of Moraes Zogoiby brings on numerous connotations, with sexual as one of them. His crooked hand seems a most intriguing symbols, due to its phallic shape. It may stand for impairment of vital forces: Moraes is never able to continue the legacy as he is unable to beget any descendant. However, the magical character of the Moor has numerous other dimensions. As a physically distorted and mentally struggling human being, a mixture of two minorities represented by his parents, he is a symbolic representation of the author’s identity. He combines numerous cultures and communities, as it happens in a person of a migrant, continually negotiating between different selves. However, according to Jameson, the Third-World Literature regarding colonialism always contains some references to national identity. Even if a book is apparently only devoted to the character’s personal issues, it is usually an allegory of a broader

⁴⁴ Schultheis, Alexandra W., op.cit., p. 588.
Thus, Rushdie’s Moor should not only be perceived as a symbol of individual identity but of group identity as well. Therefore, he represents flaws in the society, for example, a tendency to passivity. As the Moor says at the very end of the novel:

I’ll drink some wine; and then, like a latter-day Van Winkle, I’ll lay me down upon this gravestone, lay my head beneath these letters RIP, and dose my eyes, according to our family’s old practice of falling asleep in times of trouble, and hope to awaken, renewed and joyful, into a better time.

The emerging post-colonial Indian nation seems no less a hybrid than an expatriate, which is primarily visible in multicultural cities such as Mumbai. As Schultheis explains: “Through the alignment of subject and nation, Rushdie reveals the traumas underlying postcolonial Indian identities: the lasting influence of British culture, the inaccessibility of a purely “Indian” past, and the problem of defining modernity without acquiescing to the narrative of capital expansion.”

Nevertheless, Rushdie does not leave his readers in a state of utter hopelessness. The reader’s identification with the character/subject, that is an intended part of the narrative reading process, functions here as a symbolic suture. It stitches the internal, mental wounds caused by some deficiencies in history. All those flaws are included in the figure of Moraes Zogoiby as a metaphor for the nation. The concept of suture reaches its peak and is revealed, in the very final chapters. It is personified in the image of Nadia Wadia, the beauty queen whose face was destroyed in an explosion. Despite the disfigurement, she makes a speech through which she spreads an optimistic message about the future. She does not perceive the stitches on her face as anything disqualifying her from public life. It is just a matter of getting used to new conditions. Similarly, the nation must come to terms with the changed reality; neither the present nor the past cannot be rejected.

Along with visual arts, Rushdie refers to the process creation of a literary work as well. According to the anti-mimetic postmodern view, nothing exists until it is made. So Moraes’ family history comes into being only as the Moor writes it down. He succeeds to finish the work just before he dies, enabling the story to survive as a piece of literature. This final scene supports the concept noticeable throughout the story: the best medicine to deal with life pessimism is to turn to art. A regenerative

27 Rip Van Winkle is a short story by an Englishman, W. Irving, published in 1819.
29 Understood as diversity of ethnicities and religions.
30 Schultheis, Alexandra W., op. cit., p. 576.
31 Cook, Rufus., op. cit., p. 25.
function of aesthetics is the one that allows seeing the reality from a different perspective and in that way to build faith in the not-yet-existent nation. No matter how disastrous may the consequences be, as it happened for Aoi, an attempt to reveal the past trapped in the palimpsest of times should be made. Finally, it is for the art that the ultimate unification of the characters turned feasible.

*The Moor’s Last Sigh*, as an outcome of the Rushdie’s complex personal background and traumatic experience, which preceded the publication of the novel, may be perceived as a diagnosis of the post-colonial Indian society. Through numerous multidimensional characters, the author managed to bring some interesting views on the identity issues and the problems the newly emerging nation has to face. The novel reveals that it is a gradual, long-term and strenuous process during which it is necessary to deal with the past to establish something new. To handle its pains and renegotiate one’s identity does not mean to reject and forget. Every experience is relevant during the time of transition from the old to the new. If the nation’s diversity is lost, it will eventually fall, as it happened to the Moor. What is eternal though is a narration, something necessary to preserve the nation’s history. Salman Rushdie is one of those whose contribution to Indian narration is pretty recognizable which casts some light on the future of this nation.

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32 Schultheis, Alexandra W., op.cit., p. 570.
Bibliography


Summary

The subject of the article is *The Moor’s Last Sigh* – one of the most important, though not so well known novels by Salman Rushdie. It was published in 1995 and is considered to be a combination of magical realism and historical fiction. It is full of symbols and references to the culture of India, the country of Rushdie’s origin. The paper shall reveal multiple dimensions of the plot and the metaphor hidden beneath the fictional surface of narration. The principal aim is to analyze the book in the historical context of nation building through the lens of the characters’ individual stories. The work also deals with the question of identity in the context of migration.