

## POST-COLONIAL MYTH IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S NOVEL THE GROUND BENEATH HER FEET

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**Abstract.** The article examines the reinterpretation of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth in Salman Rushdie's novel, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*. The analysis aims to underscore this myth's significance within the post-colonial and post-modernist context.

As a distinguished post-colonial writer, Rushdie critically engages with established concepts of colonialism, postcolonialism, nationhood, nationalism, history, and politics, utilising innovative theoretical frameworks. Notably, scholarly examination of Rushdie's work constitutes a relatively new area of inquiry within the Georgian academic community.

Post-colonial authors frequently employ myth, fantasy, and magical realism as tools to critique imperial structures, resulting in works infused with exotic, magical, and mythological elements. This narrative strategy serves as both a regional counter-narrative and a protest against Eurocentric worldviews. By reconstructing the histories of subjugated nations, these authors provide an alternative to the dominant narratives imposed by colonial powers, enabling marginalized groups to express their identities. Rushdie, in particular, explores the theme of identity formation among postcolonial migrants through the lens of myth.

Scholars argue that Rushdie's modernization of Orpheus is entirely justified. The novel's protagonist, akin to a god of music, possesses the power to captivate and influence others, much like Orpheus. Rushdie intricately links Ormus's life, his music, and the broader concept of migration.

From ancient Greek sculpture to twenty-first-century experimental music, Orpheus has inspired diverse artistic works across centuries. Rushdie's interest in the Orpheus myth allows for multiple interpretive perspectives. On one hand, Orpheus's descent into the underworld to retrieve Eurydice reflects the perilous journeys undertaken by immigrants transcending geographical and cultural boundaries. By invoking Orpheus, Rushdie employs music as a medium of transcendental and universal communication.

The character of Orpheus is compelling in his defiance of the boundary between life and death. His ambiguous genealogy—presented as the son of Apollo in some sources and of Egeus in others—positions him as a figure embodying Greek, Thracian, European, and Asian identities, existing simultaneously as both human and divine.

Rushdie advocates for a model of a hybrid world, one where diversity and heterogeneity are not only tolerated but are essential for cultural uniqueness. He aligns with Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridization, proposing a framework in which cultural equality prevails, free from hierarchy, discrimination, and prejudice.

The novel thus serves as a space where ancient myths are reimagined into complex, multifaceted identities, while new metaphors of migration are simultaneously born. In this context, myth, migration, and identity emerge as central themes in Rushdie's novel, carrying profound implications for the modern, globalized world.

**Keywords:** Rushdie, Interpretation, Myth, Orpheus, Eurydice

**Introduction.** Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999), his sixth novel, exemplifies the intersection of post-colonial and postmodern literary frameworks. Rushdie, an English writer of Indian origin, is widely recognized for his complex narrative style that engages with themes of migration, identity, and transformation within post-colonial contexts. Upon its publication, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* garnered both acclaim and criticism, with literary critic Toni Morrison lauding it as a “comprehensive novel” while others highlighted its contentious nature.

The novel's narrative structure alternates between India, England, and America, with these settings frequently interweaving to reflect the complexities of transnational experiences. Rushdie's distinctive style integrates elements of Western and Eastern mythologies, popular culture, literature, science fiction, political critique, and rock music, thereby offering a multifaceted exploration of identity and history in the modern world. This intertextual blend underscores Rushdie's signature method of addressing the intersections of culture, history, and memory within a globalized and post-colonial context.

Post-colonial authors frequently employ mythological, fantastical, and magical realist techniques to interrogate and deconstruct imperialist narratives and dominant Eurocentric perspectives. These narratives are imbued with exotic, magical, and mythical elements, functioning not only as artistic expressions but as symbolic modes of resistance. They provide insights into histories of colonization and marginalisation while simultaneously offering marginalised groups a platform for self-representation and the reimagining of their identities.

This analysis seeks to examine *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* through both a post-colonial theoretical lens and a personal interpretive perspective. The focus will be placed on exploring the novel's engagement with identity formation, particularly as it pertains to the experiences of post-colonial migrants. By situating these themes within the broader context of migration and identity in post-colonial cultures, this study endeavours to contribute to a nuanced understanding of Rushdie's narrative strategies and their implications for redefining identity in transnational spaces.

**Methods.** The research employs comparative, hermeneutical, and historical methodologies to analyze Salman Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* alongside relevant scholarly literature related to his oeuvre. This analysis also situates Rushdie's novel within the broader context of post-colonial literature, examining the author's ideological stance and thematic preoccupations.

**Discussion and Results.** In *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, Salman Rushdie reinterprets the Orpheus and Eurydice myth through the lens of catabasis, offering a dual perspective that intertwines a post-colonial authorial lens with a deeply personal exploration of identity. This duality enables Rushdie to reconceptualize the processes of identity formation experienced by the post-colonial migrant, embedding these themes within a complex, intertextual framework.

The novel's opening preface, derived from Rainer Maria Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*, encapsulates its mythological and existential themes, establishing its mythic and symbolic undertones:

„Set up no stone to his memory.  
Just let the rose bloom each year for his sake.  
For it is Orpheus. His metamorphosis  
into this and that. We should not trouble  
about other names. Once and for all  
it's Orpheus when there's singing.“

Set in 1930s Bombay, the novel introduces the intertwined lives of the Kama and Merchant families. Ormus Kama and Umedi Merchant, also known as Photographer Rai (the novel's narrator), grow up closely connected. In the 1950s, their lives are transformed by the arrival of Vina Apsara, a beautiful, half-Indian, half-Greek woman born in America and later uprooted to India. Ormus is a gifted

musician and composer, while Vina is an extraordinary singer. Their fateful meeting takes place in a Bombay record shop, sparking a postmodern love story that unfolds “under the sign of music in the age of mechanical reproduction” (Bass, 2003, p. 107).

Though they fall in love at first sight, Ormus and Vina experience long periods of separation. Rai becomes Vina’s lover, further complicating their relationship. According to Martino (2018, p. 207), Orpheus and Eurydice are reimaged as modern rock stars whose fame spreads worldwide. In the end, one of them dies in an earthquake in Mexico. Through parody, Rushdie invokes the myth of Orpheus’s descent into the underworld to petition Hades for Persephone’s life. In this postmodern retelling, however, Ormus, the novel’s Orpheus figure, is unable to save Vina.

The novel offers a kind of open space where ancient myths transform into new forms, complex identities emerge, and modern myths of migration are born. Themes of myth, migration, and identity are central to Rushdie's musical novel, resonating with the contemporary global world.

It is noteworthy that the figure of Orpheus entered Greek mythology relatively late, as he is not mentioned in the works of either Homer or Hesiod. However, by the 6th and 5th centuries BCE, Orpheus had become a notable figure referenced by poets such as Ibycus and Pindar. Since this time, Orpheus has maintained a central role in the development of Western literature, symbolizing the archetypal poet and musician while embodying the Orphic tradition—a tradition that celebrates mythic inspiration and the capacity to mediate between the human and the divine.

From ancient Greek sculpture to twenty-first-century experimental music, Orpheus has inspired a vast array of artistic expressions. His mythological journey to the underworld has fascinated authors and artists across centuries. During the Middle Ages, Orpheus came to be understood as a metaphor for Christ’s death and resurrection, while Renaissance thinkers focused on his music as a symbol of civilizing power. Baroque artists explored themes of marital love through his myth, while Romantic writers celebrated Orpheus as the epitome of pure, transcendent love.

According to Summers (1993, p. 93), the Symbolists diverged from the Romantic ideal by presenting Orpheus as an androgynous figure, signaling a significant reinterpretation of his mythological role. In the twentieth century, innovators such as Igor Stravinsky and George Balanchine reimaged Orpheus within their neoclassical ballet *Orpheus*, further highlighting his adaptability to changing artistic movements.

The complex, multifaceted nature of Orpheus and the variety of mythological sources associated with his legend have sparked extensive scholarly debate and a range of interpretations. Notably, no single source contains all the elements of his myth, which has allowed for diverse readings and reinterpretations across time. Over the course of more than 2,500 years, different aspects of Orpheus’s myth have resonated with the concerns and cultural priorities of each successive era. For modern readers, the most prominent versions of his story are best known through texts such as Virgil's *Georgics* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

The key difference between Virgil's and Ovid's interpretations of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth lies in their respective endings. Ovid presents a relatively happy resolution, while Virgil offers a far more somber conclusion. In Ovid's version, the character of Aristaeus is absent, and it is Orpheus himself who is responsible for losing Eurydice. This occurs when he succumbs to the temptation of looking back at her as they are leaving the underworld, thereby violating his promise to Hades. Ultimately, Ovid's narrative allows for a reunion of the lovers, as Orpheus's soul joins Eurydice's in the realm of the dead. Conversely, Virgil’s account denies Orpheus the opportunity to restore his beloved, portraying a far bleaker and unresolved outcome.

Rushdie clearly draws from Virgil's version. The title of the novel's first chapter, "The Keeper of Bees," refers to Aristaeus, who appears in Virgil's *Georgics*. In this myth, Aristaeus, a beekeeper, causes Eurydice's death by chasing her with the intent to assault her. While fleeing, Eurydice is bitten by a snake and dies. To avenge her, Orpheus destroys Aristaeus's hives. In *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, Rushdie narrates the story through an Aristaeus-like figure: the photographer Rai, who serves as the narrator. In the novel, the central couple, Ormus and Vina, are entangled in a love triangle marked by intense jealousy, conflicting viewpoints, and unspoken, unfulfilled desires.

Similar to Virgil's *Aeneid*, Rushdie's novel opens with a moment of profound tragedy: the female protagonist perishes in a devastating earthquake in Mexico. Following her death, the story is narrated by Rai, a photographer, Rai recounts her life, his own story, and that of Ormus.

The novel's central figure, Ormus Kama, can be understood as a mythological hybrid that fuses elements of the Greek musician Orpheus with the Indian deity of love, Kama. According to myth, Kama was rescued from the underworld by his wife, Rati, the goddess associated with music, thus establishing a symbolic link between music and transcendence. In this modern retelling, Ormus functions as a contemporary Orpheus, drawing influences from iconic figures such as Elvis Presley, Bob Dylan, and John Lennon, embodying a synthesis of myth, music, and modern cultural iconography.

The prototype for Eurydice is Vina Apsara, a character who is a fascinating composite of the Queen of Pop Madonna, Tina Turner, and Princess Diana. For Rushdie's fusion of myth and music, Orpheus is a fitting choice. As he notes, "Orpheus is the defining myth for both singers and writers – for the Greeks, he was the greatest singer as well as the greatest poet" (2001).

Gita Ganapathi, in her article "An Orphic Journey to the Disorient: Salman Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*", rightly notes (2000, pp. 19-20) that Rushdie's interest in the myth of Orpheus can be interpreted in various ways. First, Orpheus's descent into Hell to retrieve the lost Eurydice mirrors the immigrant's risky decision to cross geographic and cultural boundaries. Through the figure of Orpheus, Rushdie seeks to incorporate music as a form of transcendental and universal communication.

The decision choice to reimagine Orpheus as a modern character is well-justified. The novel's protagonist, a god-like figure of music, enchants people much like Orpheus, with his life and music closely tied to themes of migration. In discussing the protagonist's identity—particularly regarding the concepts of belonging to a place (notably India) and the need to leave one's homeland—the narrator reflects on these intertwined ideas:

"Among the great struggles of man – good/evil, reason/unreason, etc. – there is also this mighty conflict between the fantasy of Home and the fantasy of Away, the dream of roots and the mirage of the journey. And if you are Ormus Cama, if you are Vina Apsara, whose songs could cross all frontiers, even the frontiers of people's hearts, then perhaps you believed all ground could be skipped over, all frontiers would crumble before the sorcery of the tune (Rushdie, 2000, p. 55)".

Here, the narrative tone adopts an almost epic quality, with Ormus's art equated with the concept of magic. Similar to Orpheus, Ormus (whose name is a modified reference to the Greek god of music) possesses the ability not only to captivate through the "magic of melody" but also to transcend boundaries. The myth of Orpheus is reimagined within the context of globalization, where pop music functions as a universal language.

Rushdie appears to advocate for a model of a hybrid world—a world where differences and diversity are not only accepted but are also celebrated as essential components of cultural uniqueness. This perspective aligns with Homi Bhabha's concept of fostering equality among cultures through the process of hybridization. In such a hybridized world, the issues of cultural hierarchy, discrimination, prejudice, and bias are rendered obsolete. An illustrative example of this hybridization in Rushdie's work is his choice to position some of the most famous rock stars as characters of Indian origin.

Almost every character in the novel reflects some aspect of Orpheus's journey, each engaging in the surrender of personal desires while searching for a new identity within an "underworld" of transformation. The female protagonist, Vina, plays a pivotal role by rescuing Ormus from a coma—this descent can symbolically represent a journey into the underworld, offering a feminized reimagining of the Orpheus myth. However, this interpretation is less persuasive, as Vina, a successful singer in her own right, performs Ormus's lyrics rather than assuming a traditional Eurydice role or recovering a lost love.

According to Elena Rossi, the title of the novel can be interpreted as a reference to the earth opening up and swallowing Eurydice, while simultaneously referencing the earthquake that engulfs Vina (2003, 23). In this context, Rushdie reminds us once again of the story of Orpheus, focusing on the power of love and art: "Death is more than love or is it. Art is more than love or is it. Love is more than death and art, or not. This is the subject. This is the subject. This is it" (Rushdie, 2000, p. 202)

The title of the novel appears directly within the story when, after Wina's death, Ormus writes a song of the same name, in which he announces to the world his eternal love for Wina:

“All my life, I worshipped her. Her golden voice, her beauty’s beat. How she made us feel, how she made me real, and the ground beneath her feet. And now I can’t be sure of anything, black is white, and cold is heat; for what I worshipped stole my love away, it was the ground beneath her feet. She was my ground, my favorite sound, my country road, my city street, my sky above, my only love, and the ground beneath my feet. Go lightly down your darkened way, go lightly underground, I’ll be down there in another day, I won’t rest until you’re found. Let me love you true, let me rescue you, let me lead you to where two roads meet. O come back above, where there’s only love, and the ground’s beneath your feet.” (Rushdie, 2000, p. 475)

It should be noted that in 2002, the famous Irish band U2 wrote a song based on the mentioned text, which later became the soundtrack for Wim Wenders' movie "Million Dollar Hotel," in the music video of which Rushdie himself appeared. Interestingly, Rushdie's words about music and migration moved from the pages of a novel to music, specifically to the repertoire of one of the most influential and respected musical bands of modern pop mythology. In an interview following the novel's publication, Rushdie stated that "rock is the mythology of our time" (Kadzis, 2000, p. 223), explaining that for him, it represented a language of cultural exploration that would be readily accepted worldwide, just as people once embraced a wide range of classical or mythological experiences.

According to the novel, Ormus is born with an extraordinary musical talent that is so powerful his song is capable of silencing even the birds. He asserts that he hears the songs before they are composed and sings them, which leads him to become the most celebrated singer. In this regard, he evokes comparisons to Orpheus, the mythical Thracian musician whose songs were said to induce magical phenomena. Furthermore, the novel draws additional parallels between Ormus and Orpheus. According to the myth, Orpheus participated in the expedition of the Argonauts, aiding the heroes in overcoming numerous challenges through the power of his music. Similarly, Ormus accepts an invitation to join a radio crew working aboard ships on the River Thames, mirroring Orpheus's role as a guiding musical figure navigating challenges through song.

Following Vina's loss, Ormus embarks on a journey mirroring that of Orpheus after the loss of Eurydice. He rejects all romantic relationships, consumed by the overwhelming nature of his love for Vina. In the novel, Orpheus's descent into Hades to reclaim Eurydice is reimagined as Ormus's failed endeavour to restore Vina through his music. Modernity provides a new avenue for Ormus's all-consuming obsession: through computer hardware, he reconstructs both the body and voice of his beloved. This reproduction, shaped by anguish and despair, persists until the miraculous moment when Vina is brought back to life. “Then Ormus sits down at a control desk, says Look at this, throws a bunch of switches, and there she is, three hundred times over and more, blazing from all the monitor screens. He pushes a set of audio slide controls, and her wonderful—her inimitable—voice wells up and drowns me. Vina. It’s Vina, returned from the dead (Rushdie, 2000, p. 518)

Resurrection is achieved only through substitution. A young singer, Mila Celano, who resembles Vina in both appearance and voice, tries to act like her. Vina cannot return because the dead do not come back from the underworld. Ormus recognizes the irreversibility of death, admits his ultimate defeat, and is forced to confront the painful reality: „Nobody comes back from underground. Nobody did return. Vina Apsara’s gone [...] What’s that? Asks Ormus Cama, quietly. Vina Apsara? Oh, I’m sorry, she died“ (Rushdie, 2000, p. 552)

After Vina's death, Ormus impersonates Orpheus on stage. His recording studio is also called "the Orpheum." Ormus is locked in the world of his music. In the novel, Orpheus's catabasis is replaced by a tour called Into the Underworld, a musical show that creates a hellish environment— a technical hell— into which Ormus plunges every night for two years: “The Into the Underworld tour was conceived as a giant traveling memorial to Vina.... For most of 1994 and 1995 he lived exclusively in the world of the tour, an ersatz underworld environment tiered like the circles of Hell” (Rushdie, 2000, p. 558)

It can be said that Ormus parallels Orpheus at the end: after the death of Eurydice, Orpheus did not want to marry any Thracian woman. Angered by his rejection, the women from Cicones took revenge on Orpheus and tore the singer's body apart with bloody hands. In the novel, Ormus is killed

by a woman who embodies Vina. This episode, in turn, reminds us of the death of John Lennon. As mentioned at the beginning, Ormus represents a hybrid of Elvis Presley, an important figure in the rock music industry; John Lennon, who was murdered by a psychopath; Bob Dylan, the poet laureate of modern music; and Freddie Mercury, a rock legend of Indian origin: “Ormus Cama turned towards her and paused. I’m sure his eyes would have widened when he saw what she looked like, so he must have seen the small handgun that she aimed at him and emptied at point-blank range into his chest. After she had finished shooting she let go of the weapon, she let it drop right there in the snow by his fallen body and walked quickly away, showing a surprising turn of speed in spite of the stilettos, turning right down a side street and vanishing from view” (Rushdie, 2000, p. 570)

At the end of the novel, the reader does not know who is responsible for Ormus’s death, although the narrator, Rai, offers a magical interpretation. „If you ask me, I think it was Vina, the real Vina, Vina Apsara herself. My Vina. No: I have to accept this too, that she was still Ormus’s Vina, always and forever his. I think she came and got him because she knew how much he wanted to die. Because he couldn’t bring her back from the dead she took him down with her, to be with her, where he belonged. (Rushdie, 2000, p. 571)

**Conclusion.** Salman Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* serves as a postmodern reinterpretation of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, offering readers a nuanced exploration of the challenges inherent in the post-colonial world. Through its intricate narrative, the novel examines a range of complex themes, including migration, identity, metamorphosis, and cultural hybridization, while seamlessly blending ancient mythology with elements of contemporary popular culture.

Rushdie draws on the Western myth of Orpheus and Eurydice and the archetypal descent into Hades to symbolize the transformative effects of globalization on art and culture, while also uncovering the latent creative potential residing in the unconscious mind. The novel’s narrative intricately weaves together diverse geographies—India, England, and America—as well as a variety of cultural motifs, including Eastern and Western mythologies, academic scholarship, popular culture, rock music, literature, photography, and science fiction. This blending of elements not only highlights the interconnectedness of disparate cultural traditions but also serves as a form of political and social critique.

*The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, much like Rushdie's broader body of work, occupies a pivotal position within postcolonial literature, reflecting both the complexities of cultural identity and the innovative potential of mythic reimagining in the context of a globalized age.

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