

**Love, war and lexicogrammar: transitivity and characterisation in**

***The Moor's Last Sigh***

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**Abstract**

Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* is a most energetic piling up of different stories, but in the diversity so created there is also thematic unity, brought about most forcefully through the character of Aurora, the narrator's mother – 'most sharp-tongued woman of her generation' – and through the counterpoint of her relationship with her husband, the shadowy Abraham. This paper examines transitivity patterns in certain passages of the novel, showing how these lexicogrammatical features underpin the perception that it is Aurora in particular, but other women too, who dominate the narrative – and the men in their lives. More generally, the paper points up the value of transitivity analysis in explicating reader responses to characters in fiction.

The narrator of Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Moraes ('Moor') Zogoiby, sees his story as 'A last sigh for a lost world, a tear for its passing. Also, however, a last hurrah, a final, scandalous skein of shaggy-dog yarns ... and a set of rowdy tunes for the wake. A Moor's tale, complete with sound and fury' (p.4). The sound and fury of love, regret, betrayal and conflict are, indeed, at the heart of the narrative, which, being told by one who has been destined to age at double speed ('No need for supernatural explanations; some cock-up in the DNA will do' (p.145)), proceeds at a headlong pace. Belying its title, then, the novel is more breathless pant than sigh, and its rumbustious energy corroborates the view that Rushdie's magic realism transforms 'everyday, mundane actions into something more lively than life' (Casey 1995).

The liveliest by far of all the characters in this zestful work is the narrator's mother, 314 reportedly also Rushdie's own favourite creation: 'The story revolves in the first place around one person, around the painter Aurora. For me as a writer, she is the most pleasing character I have ever invented and described' (Doerry & Hage 1996:155 [my translation]). It is Aurora's energy that lies at the epicentre of most of the conflict in the novel, be this the tension between the comic and the tragic, the satirical juxtaposition of

religions, the internecine ‘battle of the in-laws’, or the confusion of love and power: ‘Did we really love her at all in those days, or was it just her long dominance over us, and our passive acceptance of our enslavement, that we mistook for love?’ (p.91). So in *The Moor’s Last Sigh* we have a female holding sway, and this is something of a precedent in Rushdie’s oeuvre. It is true that his earlier novel, *Shame*, has been read as an indictment of the oppression of women in Pakistan, and that its narrator is half inclined to believe that the women’s stories subsume the men’s, but at least one feminist critique of the novel nevertheless sees in it the depiction of ‘the unchanging subordinate position of Pakistani women, of women as more acted upon than acting, of the futility of opposition, and of the “otherness” of women’ (Grewal 1994:143).

I hope to show that such a charge could not possibly be levelled at *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, and in the process to point up the value to be derived from close analysis of grammatical features – specifically the transitivity system – in the novel for explicating reader perceptions that here it is the men who are ‘more acted upon than acting’ while the women dominate the proceedings. Sometimes, this view is expressed quite explicitly. Thus, early in the narration, after Moraes has told of the death of his great-grandfather, Francisco da Gama, who leaves just a ‘modest allowance’ to his wife, Epifania, and control of the lucrative family trading company to their two sons, Aires and Camoens, we read that ‘The women are now moving to the centre of my little stage. Epifania, Carmen, Belle, and the newly arrived Aurora – they, not the men, were the true protagonists in the struggle...’ (p. 33). Appalled that her ‘useless playboy’ sons have inherited virtually all their father’s wealth, Epifania summons Carmen, her niece-cum-daughter-in-law, to her boudoir ‘for a pow-wow’ and declares: ‘From now on, better us ladies should call-o the tune’ (p.33). The immediate context of these statements is the family feud between Epifania and Carmen on the one hand, and Camoens, his wife Belle and daughter Aurora on the other, but they can also be seen more broadly as emblematic of the way gender relations are depicted in the novel.

The major personal conflicts that shape this novel – between Epifania and her husband and sons; between the narrator Moraes’s parents, Aurora and Abraham; between Abraham and his mother, Flory Zogoiby; and between Moraes, his mother and his lover, Uma – play

themselves out across gender lines. Occasionally, as in some passages that focus on the relationship between Moraes and his mother, there is poignancy to the conflict ('... the closest Rushdie has got to genuine psychological insight, and almost the best things he has written' (Shone 1995:38)); for the most part, though, the gender battles generate the richest comedy, where the women tend to have the upper hand and the men are at the receiving end.

These power imbalances in the gender conflicts find expression via the usual options open to a narrator. There is explicit description of character, as when Aurora is described thus: 'We may perceive her indirectly, in her effects upon others – her bending of other people's light, her gravitational pull that denied us all hope of escape, the decaying orbits of those too weak to withstand her ...' (p.136); or as 'the most sharp-tongued woman of her generation' (p.5); while her mother Belle, too, is characterised as one who 'had always spoken her mind' (p.10). Of Abraham, on the other hand, we read for example that for Aurora's sake he is prepared to give up his Jewishness and embrace the Catholic faith: 'in this matter too he would surrender to her will' (p.100); and later, more generally, '...his weakness demeaned us all – by which I meant, of course, all men' (p.169).

Direct description of personality traits as a category of characterisation shades naturally into description of characters' actions and, given that speech is action, from there into the more indirect representation of character through dialogue. Reading this novel one gets the impression that, where there is overt conflict between men and women, that conflict is practically always verbal and that it is mostly the women who are responsible for the 'sound and fury' of this 'Moor's tale'. Through their actions and speech, too, they seem to dominate their environment – and most particularly their menfolk. Unlike the women of *Shame*, who are seen – at least from a gender-political point of view – to be too passive, the main female characters in *The Moor's Last Sigh* appear to act, rather than be acted upon. The interesting question here for stylistics is what kind of linguistic features in the text underpin this perception and what kind of analytical framework might be used for describing these features in a relatively objective and quantifiable manner.

A framework that has much to offer is systemic-functional grammar, and specifically the

system of transitivity within this model. The relevance of this system for the purposes of this study will be obvious from the following definition:

[Transitivity] is concerned with a coding of the goings on: who does what in relation to whom/what, where, when, how and why. Thus the analysis is in terms of some PROCESS, its PARTICIPANTS, and the CIRCUMSTANCES pertinent to the Process-Participant configuration (Hasan 1988:63).

The notion of transitivity has been used by a number of linguists to throw more light on the use of language in literary texts. Halliday's analysis of William Golding's *The Inheritors* (Halliday 1973) is the pioneering, and now classic, work in this field. His aim was to show how an analysis based on transitivity could help to distinguish the world-view that characterised the more primitive 'people' of the novel on the one hand and the 'inheritors', the members of the 'tribe', on the other. He finds in passages depicting the 'people' that a picture emerges where 'people act, but they do not act on things; they move, but they move only themselves, not other objects', and where 'a high proportion (exactly half) of the subjects are not people; they are either parts of the body [...] or inanimate objects [...], and of the human subjects half again [...] are found in clauses which are not clauses of action' (Halliday 1971:335).

Clearly, this kind of analysis is relevant to the issue of the relative passivity of different fictional characters. Kies (1992) focuses specifically on this question of passivity in his discussion of Orwell's *1984*, adducing 14 different syntactic devices that he sees as undercutting the degree of 'agency' that the central character of the novel is permitted. The approach here is loosely based on systemic grammar. A more specific focus on transitivity is found in Kennedy's (1982) discussion of the role it plays in the depiction of the main players in Conrad's *The Secret Agent* and Joyce's short story, *Two Gallants*, while Hubbard (1994) shows how a transitivity analysis lays bare gender stereotyping in popular (Mills and Boon) romances and helps to explicate reader perceptions that in these stories the men are very much action heroes but the women are to a large extent victims of their circumstances – including their own emotions.

Closer examination of the studies just mentioned highlights the prime relevance, within the system of transitivity, of *participant roles* to our response to fictional characters:

... part of the basis of our perception of what a person is like derives from knowing what sort of Participant roles are ascribed to that person (Hasan 1988:65).

In terms of this functional-grammar perspective, animate and inanimate objects (the participants) take up various possible roles relative to the process depicted by the clause. These roles differ in the degree to which the relevant participant is active rather than passive, i.e. what Hasan calls their *effectuality* or *dynamism*:

If we define effectuality - or dynamism - as the quality of being able to affect the world around us, and of bringing change into the surrounding environment, the semantic value of the various [...] roles must be seen as distinct (Hasan 1989:45).

Hasan further refines and extends the linguistic stylistic potential of the transitivity system by positing a *cline of dynamism* along which the various participant roles can be ranged, from most active to most passive (Hasan 1989:46), and this construct informs her stylistic analysis of certain poems (Hasan 1988; 1989).

The participant roles and the cline of dynamism are key features of my analysis of extracts from *The Moor's Last Sigh*, and in order to clarify both concepts, examples of each role, drawn from the text, will now be considered - in order of dynamism, from most to least dynamic (coded accordingly, from 1 to 12).

#### *A1 Actor (+ Animate Goal)*

The participant role of Actor has been defined as 'the "logical subject" of older terminology, and means the one that does the deed' (Halliday 1985:103). In terms of the transitivity system, the process in which some participant performs as an Actor is termed a *material process* (Halliday 1985:103). The most dynamic 'deed' is seen as one that directly affects animate participants (as Goals):

[1] **She** spirited Abraham away... (p.98)

*A2 Actor (+ Goal)*

This category differs from A1 in that the Goal is usually an inanimate entity, though it includes cases where the Actor acts on his or her own body as Goal:

[2] **Aurora**...stretched her long body for maximum provocation... (p.100)

*S3 Sayer (+ Recipient or Verbiage)*

Sayer is seen as a relatively dynamic role, involved in *verbal process* clauses (Halliday 1985:129), and defined as ‘anything that puts out a signal, like *the notice* or *my watch*’ (Halliday 1985:129), and it does of course include human speakers, as in:

[3] **Aurora** commanded Abraham that night... (p.115)

In [3] Abraham is the Recipient (see R12 below), but an alternative or additional role in verbal process clauses is that of Verbiage, as in:

[4] Aurora ... to demand **an explanation**.

*A4 Actor*

This is the standard role found in intransitive clauses, as in:

[5] **The young heiress** leaned closer towards him... (p.69)

In Hasan’s (1988;1989) cline of dynamism this role is categorised as less dynamic than the three roles that follow below but, following Thompson (1996:79-80), a distinction can be made between the Actor role in intentional processes, such as in [5], and this role in

involuntary processes, categorised here on the level Hasan suggests (see A8 below).

*P5 Phenomenon (+ Senser)*

Phenomenon and Senser are the main participants in *mental process* clauses, where the Senser is 'the conscious being that is feeling, thinking or seeing', while the Phenomenon is 'that which is sensed - felt, thought or seen' (Halliday 1985:111). The role of Phenomenon is seen as the more dynamic one as it might be said to trigger the relevant mental process:

[6] ...and Abraham without flinching accepted **his fate**... (p.99)

*S6 Sayer*

The role of Sayer is seen as less dynamic when there is no overt Recipient, as in:

[7] 'My God,' **she** burst out... (p.69)

Although we are here working with a cline or continuum, it could be said that for most cases, if one had to divide the full set of roles into two groups, one essentially active and one essentially passive, it would be most appropriate to see the above six roles as 'active' and the eight that follow as 'passive'.

*S7 Senser*

In [6] above, the Senser role is represented by **Abraham**.

*A8 Actor (involuntary)*

This is the role of Actor in involuntary processes, as in:

[8] **...he** would wake up... (p.57)

*B9 Behaver*

Behavioural processes are ‘processes of physiological and psychological behaviour, like breathing, dreaming, smiling, coughing’ (Halliday 1985:128). Halliday admits to a certain fuzziness between this category of process and material processes, and hence between the roles of Actor and Behaver (a fuzziness which of course affects all grammars with a strong semantic orientation, but space prevents this issue from being considered further here). Behavioural processes could be seen as less under voluntary control than material processes, and some fairly clear examples include:

[9] ...her ageing husband..., **mouth** twitching in an embarrassed smile... (p.99)

*C10 Carrier*

This is ‘the entity to which some attribute is ascribed’ - a participant in a *relational process* (Halliday 1985:113):

[10] **Abraham** was tougher than any frog. (p.170)

*B11 Beneficiary*

The Beneficiary is ‘the one to whom or for whom the process is said to take place’ (Halliday 1985:132):

[11] ...Aurora da Gama... waited for **Abraham...** (p.89)

*R12 Recipient*

This is the role of the receiving entity in verbal process clauses, exemplified in [3] above, repeated here as [12], by **Abraham**:

[12] Aurora commanded **Abraham** that night... (p.115)



*G13 Goal*

As seen in [1] above, reproduced here as [13], the Goal is the role of ‘the one to which the process is extended’ (Halliday 1985:103):

[13] She spirited **Abraham** away... (p.98)

*C14 Circumstance*

The Circumstance role carries in a sense the background information of the clause, describing aspects such as time, manner and place. This role is usually realised within a prepositional phrase, as in:

[14] ...it was upon **him** that Aurora descended... (pp.69-70)

In order to examine the degree of dynamism shown by the two most prominent male and female characters in the novel with respect to one another, all clauses in passages where they were both present and interacting were analysed in terms of their transitivity roles and the cline of dynamism. Extracts 1-3 below exemplify these analyses. The processes of all clauses in which either Aurora or Abraham participate are represented in upper case; Aurora’s participant roles are analysed in bold and Abraham’s in italics.

**Extract 1** (pp. 68-70)

Below these grand personages, at an everyday sort of desk with its own little lamp, SAT the godown’s duty manager [*A4*], and it was upon him [*C14*] that Aurora [**A4**] DESCENDED, [**A2**] upon RECOVERING her composure, [**S3**] to DEMAND an explanation of the pepper shipment’s delay. [...]

The sight at close quarters of the most beautiful of the da Gamas and the sole inheritrix of the family crores [**P5**] STRUCK the duty manager [*S7*] like a spear in the heart, [**P5**] RENDERING him [*S7*] temporarily dumb. The young heiress [**A4**] LEANED closer towards him [*C14*], [**A1**] GRABBED his chin [*G13*] between her thumb and forefinger, [**A1**] TRANSFIXED him [*G13*] with her fiercest glare, and [**S7**] FELL head

over heels in love. [...]

‘My God,’ she [S6] BURST OUT when at last the white capitals insisted on being seen, ‘it isn’ t disgraceful enough that you [C10] HAVEN’ T GOT a bean in your pocket or a tongue in your head, you [C10] HAD TO BE a Jew as well.’ And then, aside: ‘FACE FACTS, Aurora [S7]. [S7] THINKOFY. You’ ve [S7] FALLEN FOR a bloody godown Moses [P5].’

Pedantic white capitals corrected her [R12] (the object of her affections, thunderstruck, moon-struck, dry of mouth, thumping of heart, incipiently fiery of loin, [C10] WAS UNABLE to do so, [G13] HAVING BEEN DEPRIVED anew of the power of speech by the burgeoning of feelings not usually encouraged in members of staff): Duty Manager Zogoiby’s name was not Moses but Abraham.

Extract 1 depicts the first meeting of the narrator’s parents and is in terms of transitivity relations and relative dynamism fairly representative of the total data sample of 334 participant roles analysed (173 for Aurora and 161 for Abraham). In this extract, of the 26 relevant participant roles, Aurora features in 14 and Abraham in 12, and the imbalance in the dynamism of the two characters is clear. Thus, in spite of the fact that the account of this meeting has them both falling in love, assumably a reciprocal phenomenon, only Aurora participates as Actor and Sayer in the three most dynamic roles (A1, A2 and S3), and in both clauses where she is an A1 category Actor, the animate Goal (G13) of her actions is Abraham or part of his body (‘his chin’). Of the eight essentially passive roles (S7-C14) Aurora participates in only two here – once as Senser (S7) and once as Recipient (R12), while on the other hand 10 of Abraham’s 12 roles are essentially passive, with Carrier (C10) and Goal (G13) being most common.

**Extract 2** (pp.88 and 89)

In the perfumed half-light of C-50 Godown No. 1, Aurora da Gama [A1] GRABBED Abraham Zogoiby [G13] by the chin [C14] and [A4] LOOKED deep into his eyes [C14]...no men, I can’t do this stuff. This is my mother and father I’m talking about...

Way up there near the roof of Godown No.1, Aurora da Gama at the age of fifteen [A4] LAY BACK on pepper sacks, [B9] BREATHED IN the hot, spice laden air, and [A4] WAITED for Abraham [B11]. He [A4]

CAME to her [C14] as a man [A4] GOES to his doom, [C10] TREMBLING but [C10] RESOLUTE, and it is around here that my words run out, so you will not learn from me the bloody details of what happened when she, and then he, and then they, and after that she, and at which he, and in response to that she, and with that, and in addition, and for a while, and then for a long time, and quietly, and noisily, and at the end of their endurance, and at last, and after that, until...phew! Boy! Over and done with!

This extract is in some ways more interesting for the light it throws on the character of the narrator than on that of his parents. It is also towards the end something of a comic and stylistic *tour de force*, with its rhythmically suggestive succession of Actor and then Circumstance roles piled one upon the other, but no overt process. From the point of view of the characters' relative dynamism it is a little ironic, and symptomatic perhaps of the overall picture, that in this last section, just when Abraham could have appeared in dynamic Actor roles – more or less on a par with Aurora – these roles are not analysable because of the absence of processes. As it stands, this extract too shows Aurora as a more active participant, with Abraham in many more of the passive roles.

**Extract 3** (p.100)

Aurora under a white linen bedsheet [A2] STRETCHED her long body for maximum provocation; a breast [A4] BURST into view, [A2] CAUSED a sharp ecclesiastical gasp, and [A1] OBLIGED Aires to address his remarks to the Telefunken radiogram...

The context of Extract 3 is the summoning of Aurora's uncle Aires by a local priest, who has been spying on the fifteen-year-old Aurora and Abraham, the company employee who has become her lover. He leads Aires to Abraham's rooms, where the lovers are discovered. The transitivity relations here, too, provide much of the high comic effect while highlighting the way in which even a part of Aurora's body can dominate her surroundings.

The three extracts discussed provide some indication of the relationship between Aurora and Abraham and of the role of the transitivity system in explicating reader perceptions about these two characters. Table 1 provides the overall participant role statistics for the relevant passages in the novel as a whole.

**Table 1: Participant role statistics for Aurora and Abraham**

	<b>Aurora</b>		<b>Abraham</b>	
	<b>Number</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>%</b>
A1 – Actor	22	12,7	11	6,8
A2 – Actor	22	12,7	12	7,4
S3 – Sayer	32	18,5	14	8,7
A4 – Actor	36	20,8	38	23,6
P5 – Phenomenon	7	4,0	4	2,5
S6 – Sayer	4	2,3	0	0
S7 – Senser	17	9,8	16	10,0
A8 – Actor	1	0,6	0	0
B9 – Behaver	6	3,4	5	3,1
C10 – Carrier	11	6,4	14	8,7
B11 – Beneficiary	1	0,6	1	0,6
R12 – Recipient	1	0,6	2	1,2
G13 – Goal	7	4,0	31	19,3
C14 – Circumstance	6	3,4	13	8,1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>173</b>		<b>161</b>	

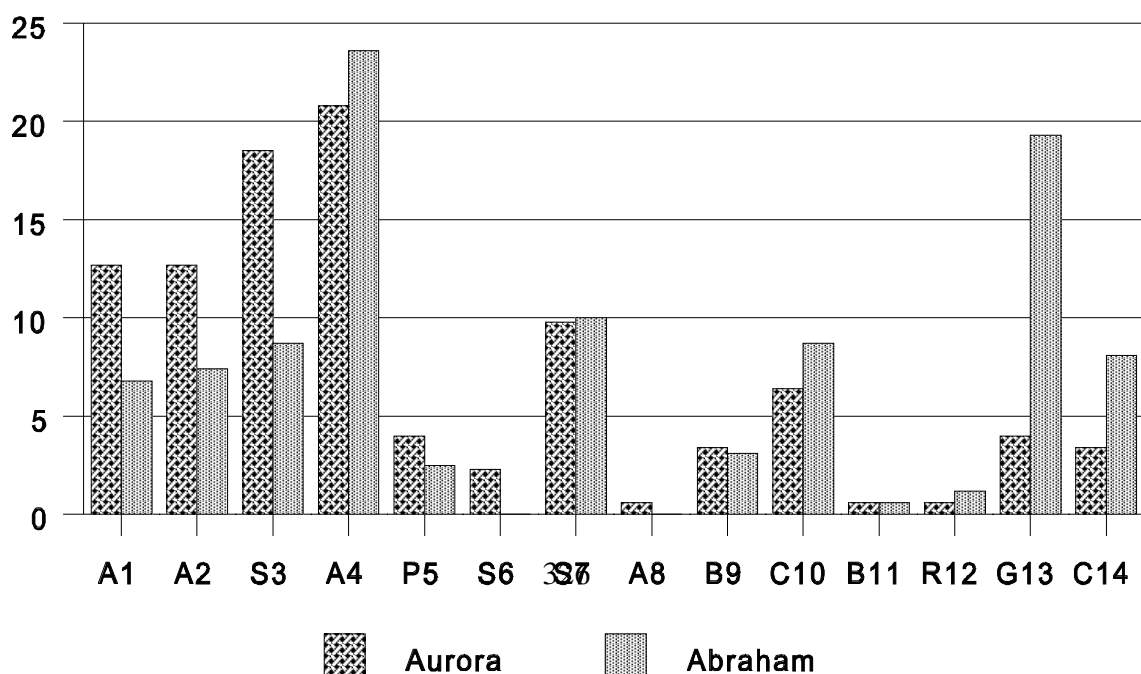
It is readily apparent that the general pattern for the data taken as a whole is much the same as that for the three sample extracts examined above. Aurora features in twice as many of the most dynamic three roles than does Abraham: she it is who acts in transitive clauses and does most of the speaking. Abraham, on the other hand, is strongly represented in the passive participant roles of Carrier, Circumstance and particularly Goal. Figure 1 provides a graphic representation of this complementarity between these two characters.

The point needs to be stressed that the clauses analysed for this study were taken only from those passages in the novel where Aurora and Abraham were both obviously present. In these passages there is no doubt that Aurora is the dominant personality, but in her absence it is true that Abraham does play a more active role. After Aurora's death his thoughts are 'I have just begun to live' (p.317) and it is he, after all, who is responsible for her murder. The women of this novel might be at centre stage, but Abraham works from the wings, as he admits when he sees his son for the last time, after his manipulations have gone awry: 'It's all coming apart in my hand. The magic stops working when people start seeing the strings' (p.187). As the narrator himself suggests: 'You must judge for yourselves whether Abraham was a potent fellow or im-' (p.139).

It is indeed one of the paradoxes of the novel that the manipulative Abraham, who arranges the murder of his wife, should be so passive in her presence. But he is, after all, up against a formidable personality. There can be no gainsaying the fact that we perceive Aurora as by far the most energetic and dominating character of all, and we have seen how the lexicogrammatical features analysed underpin these perceptions. In Montgomery's words: 'If character is "the major totalizing force in fiction", then it is important to discover how characters are constructed and on the basis of what kinds of linguistic choices' (Montgomery 1993:141). The transitivity system provides a very powerful matrix for the exercise of such choices.

**Figure 1**

**Participant roles: Aurora and Abraham**



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