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Short Paper

The Paradox of Choice: Freedom and Goodness in Salman Rushdie's "Late" from *The Eleventh Hour*

Ananya Chowdhury*

Research Scholar, Department of English, Raiganj University, West Bengal, India.

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Corresponding Author:

Ananya Chowdhury

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ABSTRACT

As a postcolonial and postmodern writer, Rushdie quite naturally interrogates in his works many essentialist views, the conflict between freedom and goodness being one of them. His latest work, *The Eleventh Hour: A Quintet of Stories* published in November, 2025, deals *inter alia* with the freedom - goodness interface. "Late" is the third story of this collection and it expressly treats the interface in his wonted magic-realistic way. This short paper takes a look at how the author uses the protagonist's surreal existence to interrogate two deeply intertwined concepts: freedom and goodness.

1. Introduction

The publication of Salman Rushdie's short story collection, *The Eleventh Hour: A Quintet of Stories* in November, 2025, represents a definitive pivot in the author's long and storied career. Published after a period of profound personal trauma and partial recovery following the 2022 attack, the collection serves as a meditation on the finality of existence and the 'eleventh hour' - the space between two 'adjacent verandas', death and life (Rushdie, 2025, p.19). Among the pentad, "Late" (Rushdie, 2025, pp.101-73) stands out as an intricate exploration of the relationship between individual liberty and the institutional imposition of 'goodness'. Through the phantom perspective of the protagonist S.M. Arthur, an 'Honorary Fellow' at a fictionalized British university (modelled on King's College, Cambridge, where Rushdie read history) the tale probes the tensions between sexual freedom and professional belonging. S.M. Arthur is clearly a mix of E.M. Forster who too read history at King's College (and later became a Honorary Fellow there) and Alan Turing, the father of modern computer science, who broke the German Enigma Code during the WWII. Both these famous Cantabs were gay. "Late" is both a ghost story and a philosophical inquiry into the nature of identity (Tzer Island - Book blog, 2025). The narrative starts with a stark, Kafkaesque metamorphosis: 'When the Honorary Fellow S.M. Arthur woke up in his darkened college bedroom he was dead [...]' (Rushdie, 2025, p.105). Death is not presented as an endpoint, but as a liminal space - a threshold where the deceased must reconcile the 'unfinished businesses of their lived history' (World Literature Today, 2026). The reconciliation is attempted through the formation and development of a cordial relationship between Arthur and Rosa, an Indian student of history there. Acquaintance and periodic conversations with Rosa are palliative for the restless soul of the dead Honorary Fellow who discloses to her his old enmity with the Provost who represents the institutional 'goodness' as opposed to the Fellow's own cherished ideas of freedom. The story is therefore one about conflicting ideas underlying humanism.

2. Explication

At the centre of the conflict of ideas presented in the story lies the provost's ideas of freedom and goodness which basically are products of Western liberal democracy. A few snippets from the text would bring the point home: [...] the concept of "freedom" carried an assortment of other baggage with it, a group of related concepts that might be called individualism, anarchism, carelessness, irresponsibility, selfishness, narcissism, lawlessness, et cetera [...]. (Rushdie, 2025, p.155)

*Corresponding Author can be contacted at clouddamselmohor@gmail.com

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[...] freedom fell into two categories, “good” and “bad”. [...] How were good and bad freedoms to be defined, and by whom [...]? (Rushdie, 2025, p.155)

The Provost (Rushdie satirically names him L.L.Emmemm) deeply pondered some such questions and offered ‘[...] potential answers that many had found problematic, and his conclusion had been explosive [...]: [...] that to be “good” one had to abandon the idea of being “free” [...] (Rushdie, 2025, p.156). Similarly ‘institutionalized’, ‘given’ and ‘conservative’ was his idea of ‘goodness’ :

Goodness in his argument was communal, a value arrived at by agreement, by shared view- points. One could not be good in isolation. To be good was to be seen to be good [...] doing good. He came close to rejecting altogether the idea of *being good*. (Rushdie, 2025, p.156)

The Provost’s argument of course triggered great commotion within the College, and the Honorary Fellow’s rejoinder was the most cutting:

“You lead me to suspect”, S.M. Arthur had written in a personal note to Lord Emmemm, “that it is wholly conceivable that a person might be neither free nor good.” (Rushdie, 2025, p.157)

Meanwhile, the Honorary Fellow and Rosa - the dead and the living - become affectionately intimate so much so that she starts looking upon him as her ‘uncle’. She is his Horatio, in a way, and she gradually imbibes his ‘philosophy’:

If she had to choose between these two poles in order to be a moral being, as Lord Emmem had stated, then she must be immoral, because she didn’t know how to make the choice. (Rushdie, 2025, p.158)

Rosa’s affinity with the ghost of S.M. Arthur intensifies all the more as it tells her of how he was wronged by the Provost as the custodian of institutionalized ‘goodness. She also becomes instrumental in S.M. Arthur’s pursuit of revenge against Lord Emmemm, the Provost of the College.

In death more than in life, the Provost becomes the Honorary Fellow’s staunch enemy because the Provost lied about the Fellow only to protect the ‘goodness’ of the College at the cost of the Fellow’s ‘freedom’. The prestige of the College was at stake when the news of S.M. Arthur’s illegal sodomite activities with P.C. Jai Sing, a ‘Brown Bobby’ (Rushdie, 2025, pp.163-4) reached the Provost :

“A bad business”, he said. “Bad for the College”, he additionally said. “The College has been good to you”, he added “Too good, some might say.”

“All we expected from you was discretion”, he next remarked.

“A pretty pickle he concluded. “Let me consider the best course of action”. (Rushdie, 2025, pp.164-5)

Emmemm planned out ‘an elegant solution’: arrest, scandal (both personal and institutional) and jail time could be avoided if the Honorary fellow could be fakely diagnosed with prostate cancer and if, therefore, he could regularly take the drug called DES.[This Rushdie directly lifts from what really happened to Alan Turing.] But the drug had sinister side-effects (as Arthur says to Rosa):

It had the effect of stopping the production of sex hormones [...] Medically induced eunuchdom, *chemical castration*. [...] I took them until the day before I died. (Rushdie, 2025, pp.165-6)

The penultimate section of “Late” the tale has eleven sections, all told- is about how the Honorary Fellow S.M. Arthur takes the revenge on the Provost, Lord Emmemm. In this section, Rosa acts like an interpreter between Arthur and Emmemm:

“Tell him I want the truth [...] it’s time to stop lying [...] Tell him I want a detailed description of the way I was treated. I want it on the front pages of the newspapers. And I want a public apology. A grovelling public apology.” Trembling she repeated the Honorary Fellow’s words. (Rushdie, 2025, pp.168-9)

If Lord Emmemm does not comply with the Fellow’s deep desire, he will have to face the music:

“Tell him if he doesn’t, I’ll crawl inside him and give him the deathly cold treatment every night until it kills him too.” (Rushdie, 2025, p.168)

As Emmemm has always had an unexplainable fear that the dead Fellow has been pursuing him for revenge, he throws in the towel :

With a loud inarticulate howl, Lord Emmemm fled the room. “Now that was satisfying”, the Honorary Fellow said, “That was actually fun” (Rushdie, 2025, p.169)

Lord Emmemm, the Provost of the College, does not waste time to ‘confess way the ‘ghost’ wanted and is soon rightly served : The charge of “traitor to his own kind” finished him off. He resigned from the Provostship, retired to a small cottage in the West Country, withdrew from both public and academic life, and passed away in obscurity some years later, meriting only a

small obituary in *The Times*. Rosa watched the apology on television alongside the Honorary Fellow, who nodded his head vigorously at the end. (Rushdie, 2025,p.170)

3. Conclusion

In “Late”, Rushdie - through an afterlife fantasy and his wonted magic realism - synthesizes his life's work, examining the high cost of institutional ‘goodness’ vis-a-vis the enduring necessity of individual freedom. Through the phantom projection of S.M. Arthur, he illustrates that the sacrifice of one’s identity for the sake of professional security is a form of spiritual suicide that leaves the soul tormented and restless in the eleventh hour of life until the ‘unfinished business’ of the past is confronted (World Literature Today, 2025). Ultimately, “Late” is a celebration of the ‘unafraid way we choose to live’ (Goodreads, 2026) as well as the ‘liquid ,uncertain, metaphoric’ truth of the individual (Studylib,n.d.).The tale ends with a beatific vision :

“Where are you going , Arthur Chacha? ” she [Rosa] called to him. [...] “ Where else? ” the Honorary Fellow called back to her. “ Avalon ”.Then the punt passed under the bridge but did not emerge on the other side.(Rushdie, 2025,p.173) ‘Avalon ’ as we know , is a legendary /mythical island in Arthurian lore, famed as an earthly paradise and the resting place where King Arthur’s wounds were healed.

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