

When Rajiv Ghandi Met Captain Kirk: Patterns of Hybridity in Salman Rushdie's *East, West*

Carolina Sánchez-Palencia Carazo
Universidad de Sevilla, Spain

Although the composite quality of postcolonial subjectivity is made explicit at the very title of this collection, and the stories themselves have been analysed to illustrate the East/West cultural transferences inherent to Anglo-Indian literature, other areas of contamination and liminality have been left unexplored. Let me start with what Salman Rushdie said of *The Satanic Verses*, since it perfectly applies to these tales in their celebration of

hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. *Mélange*, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is *how newness enters the world*. It is the great possibility that mass migration gives the world and I have tried to embrace it...It is a love-song to our mongrel selves. (1991, 394)

First of all it should be noticed that the very structure of the present collection is explicitly based on the exchange of resident and diasporic voices; an exchange where questions of authenticity and perceptions of insidedness and outsidedness are radically re-considered. Rushdie distributes these nine stories into three sections: "East", "West" and "East, West". The three stories constituting the "East" part of the book are set in folksy India where characters are oppressed by cultural and religious traditions that prompt them to break out their respective rigid social system. "Good Advice is Rarer than Rubies", for instance, deals with the choices of a young woman who leads a decent life in Pakistan but who is wedded by her family to an old man in England. The unexpected twist to this story of arranged marriages and female lack of alternatives is that, having the opportunity to get a visa, the smart protagonist refuses the old narrator's advice and deliberately decides to fail the Consulate's test, getting herself banned from entry to England. The irony here lies in the contrast between the woman's free decision and everybody's assumption (especially that of western reader's) that she would be willing to emigrate. "The Free Radio" revolves around the disillusion of a rickshaw-driver who accepts sterilization in order to obtain a radio, a

policy that had been previously used by the Indian government as a form of population control, but that was already outdated when the protagonist “voluntarily” submitted to it.

“The Prophet’s Hair” is the parable of a money-lender who finds a hair from Muhammad’s head and gets himself and his family destroyed in his fanatic obsession to obtain financial benefit from the relic. It seems as if the aim of this first section of the book were to introduce the existence of an Eastern history through popular and folk-like tales. But this attention to Indian tradition is to be carefully counterpointed by the postmodern skepticism of an irreverent author who thus rewrites it with perverse and ironic twists.

A similarly defamiliarized perspective can be noticed in the “West” part, where in each of the three stories Rushdie projects a detached view of a significant Western myth. Therefore, “Yorick” offers an unconventional version of *Hamlet*, where Yorick the fool is married to Ophelia, and Hamlet, the spoiled child-prince, addresses the jester both as a servant and as a father. This farcical revisiting of the Shakespearean canon is full of witty echoes of Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and, as in the following overtly metafictional passage, of Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*:

Truly, a velluminous history! –which it’s my present intent not merely to abbreviate, but, in addition, to explicate, annotate, hyphenate, palatinate & permanganate –for it’s a narrative that richly rewards the scholar who is competent to apply such sensitive technologies. Here, dusty-faced and inky-fingered, lurk beautiful young wives, old fools, cuckoldry, jealousy, murder, juice of cursed hebona, executions, skulls. (64)

The second story of this section, “At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers” is a surrealistic parable of the American consumerist dream represented by a nightmarish auction of a pair of magical slippers, which, as the narrator says, are idolized “because of their powers of reverse metamorphosis, their affirmation of a lost state of normalcy in which we have ceased to believe and to which they [the slippers] promise us we can return” (92) . As his experience of cultural displacement has made Rushdie morally equidistant in his judgement of Eastern and Western beliefs, he might be suggesting that this fetishistic inclination to collect memorabilia (a very intricate part of our capitalistic Western society) is not so far removed from the fundamentalist devotion for a few relics from the head of Muhammad, as in “The Prophet’s Hair”, no matter how strange and ridiculously atavistic this foreign fascination may appear to Western eyes.

The last story of this section provides a further unfamiliar view of a familiar Western icon: Christopher Columbus, whose presence in this volume is relevant not only because he initiates the European (post)colonial enterprise, but also because, as other characters in the

collection, he faces the difficulties of journeying west from the east. The sexual and emotional intricacies of his relationship with Queen Isabella of Spain (he, “a coarse, flattering, drunkard, adventurous, supplicant foreigner”; she, “an all-conquering, omnipotent, absolute monarch”) offer an unexpected insight into this major historical episode and its protagonists; a typically poststructuralist example of the “petite histoire” undermining the sanctioned authority of the “grand narrative”.

It is in the last part of the volume, “East, West”, that the actual encounter of both hemispheres is made explicit in three stories of expatriates living in England but keeping controversial relationships with their Indian backgrounds. Sometimes the encounter takes place in a tragic setting, as in the last scene of “Chekov and Zulu”, where, during the last moments of his final agony, Chekov, the Indian agent, envisions a heroic ending in the fashion of the *Star Trek* fantasies that have presided his whole adult life.¹

Other times, the East/West, Modernity/Tradition encounter is given a tenderly comic touch: as when, on her first date with the old East European porter (the “Courter” of the story title) Mary, the old Indian housekeeper, gets her sari (a visible emblem of Indian tradition) stuck in the jaws of Picadilly Circus escalator and “as the escalator pulled at the garment it began to unwind. She was forced to spin round and round like a top and screamed at the top of her voice...It was Mix-Up who saved her by pushing the emergency stop button before the sari was completely unwound and she was exposed in her petticoat for all the world to see” (186).

Expatriates’ problems with language and culture acquisition (though humorous as the related mispronunciations and misunderstandings may be) reveal that postcolonial migration is not only a transnational but also a translational phenomenon. The experience of the postcolonial subject, forever caught between the Scylla of nationalist atavism and the Charybdis of metropolitan assimilation can be related to what Walter Benjamin has called “the irresolution or liminality of translation: that element in a translation which does not lend itself to translation” (Bhabha 224). Actually, in Rushdie’s diasporic scenarios there is always an element of resistance, a site of indeterminacy that focuses directly on the problem of culture’s untranslatability. His decision to contaminate standard English with Hindi borrowings –the Spanish edition of the collection includes a glossary of Anglo-Indian

¹ The circumstances of this character’s death (he was killed while accompanying Rajiv Gandhi when the Prime Minister was assassinated by a Tamil terrorist) are worth noticing since the episode has inspired the title for this paper.

terms— can be unequivocally considered as a linguistic manifestation of this claim to polycultural hybridity. The result is a creolized, prosthetic language that proves itself as the best medium to articulate the irresolvable, the untranslatable space of cultural difference.

When dealing with this liminal negotiation of cultural identity, the concept of “mimicry” as it is formulated by Homi Bhabha seems very illuminating. According to this Indian critic, postcolonial subjects try to imitate and assimilate the cultural forms of the powerful in order to avoid their characterization as “others”. But since assimilation is never fully achieved the process only serves to make cultural differences more evident; and the colonial mimic, far from being “authentic”, is revealed as a hybrid product, “almost the same but not quite (or “white”)” summarizes Bhabha, by echoing Freud’s thesis on the problematic nature of fantasy, caught between the conscious and the unconscious. “The visibility of mimicry is always produced at the site of interdiction. It is a form of colonial discourse that is uttered *inter dicta*: a discourse at the crossroads of what is known and permissible and that which though known must be kept concealed; a discourse uttered between the lines and as such, both against the rules and within them”(89). His definition draws attention to the liminal and ambivalent component of a phenomenon that basically deals with the problems posed by authority whenever representation of cultural difference is concerned. Bhabha evokes Lacan by affirming that “mimicry is like camouflage, not a harmonization of repression of difference, but a form of resemblance, that differs from or defends presence by displaying it in part, metonymically” (90).

Examples of this metonymic displacement can be noticed in some of Rushdie’s stories. When, for instance, the rickshaw driver cannot get his free radio because he missed the opportunity, he simply pretends he has received one, and the invisible radio stands as a phantom limb and as a painful reminder of his mutilated masculinity. Ramani’s “great expectations” of progress embodied in that “caricature of a radio”, as the narrator calls it, become self-deceiving and his efforts to mimick the supposed benefits of Western culture(technology, sterilization) turn into merely a façade.

A similar process can be perceived at the spectacle of the Muslim family of “The Courter” decorating a Christmas tree and singing Latin carols, both alien and alienating cultural norms that the sixteen-year old narrator observes from an ironic distance: “So this is family life, I thought. This is it. But we were only play-acting” (207). This performative emphasis implied in mimicry, “problematizes the signs of racial and cultural priority, so

that the ‘national’ is no longer naturalizable”; the result being a mode of representation that parodies and diminishes the power of the model, “that power which supposedly makes it imitable” (Bhabha 87-88). In this sense, the snobbish life-style of the 2 London-based Indian agents (playing squash, going to fashionable theatres and organizing cocktail parties) perfectly qualifies them as the *mimic men* V.S. Naipaul and other postcolonial writers have described in their fiction.

At this point it should be noticed how, despite his celebration of hybridity as if it were a ludic staging of postmodern *jouissance*, Rushdie constantly reminds us of that relationship of asymmetry and unevenness existing between the different cultures involved. And he agrees with other postcolonial scholars that, far from being a “subjectless” phenomenon, hybridity is also a symptom of the extreme pain and agonizing dislocations experienced by real individuals, who, in this fluid world have to sacrifice stability, enduring purpose and any sense of belonging (Radhakrishnan 314-15).

And yet, in Rushdie’s work, nomadism is always presented as an unavoidable cultural reality and as an occasion to re-consider identity as unstable. From their perspective of expatriates, nomads, travellers, exiles, immigrants or foreigners, most characters who people these stories experience diasporic deconstructions of identity where citizenship and nation (or we should rather say, after Bhabha and Derrida, “dissemiNation”) are free-floating signifiers that simultaneously evoke forms of burden and liberation. In this sense, the last words of the Indian born narrator of “The Courter”, who has decided to stay in London and apply for British citizenship, can be read as a typically Rushdiesque manifesto for in-betweenness:

And the passport did in many ways set me free. It allowed me to come and go, to make choices that were not the ones my father would have wished. But I too, have ropes around my neck, I have them, to this day, pulling me this way and that, the noses tightening, commanding, choose, choose. I buck, I snort, I whinny, I rear, I kick. Ropes, I do not choose between you. Lassoes, lariats, I choose neither of you and both. Do you hear? I refuse to choose.(211)

The protagonist of *The Satanic Verses*, though making the opposite choice, as he travels from London to Bombay to reconcile himself with his Indian background, reaches a similar conclusion; but instead of the image of the ropes he employs the typically postmodernist metaphor of TV zapping as a model for provisional and fragmentary selfhood: “O, the conflicting selves jostling and jogging within these bags of skin. No wonder we are unable to remain focused on anything for long; no wonder we invent

remote-control channel hopping devices. If we turned these instruments upon ourselves we'd discover more channels than a cable or satellite mogul ever dreamed of" (519).

Along these short stories Rushdie celebrates the erosion of boundaries and definitions and in doing so, he necessarily rejects the purity of dogmatic truths that threaten to confine the individual within uniform and totalizing categories. In this desacralizing vein, the whole idea of "home" is parodically worked out, and thus demystified in the plight of the migrant who is denied a unitary location because he/she is doomed to move back and forth between two cultures. In, for instance, "At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers", the disappointed narrator provides a seemingly serious and nostalgic reflection like "'Home' has become such a scattered, damaged, various concept in our present travails. There is so much to yearn for. There are so few rainbows any more" (93); but then he adds a satiric edge to it through the account of two anecdotes: The first one has to do with his beloved cousin's orgasms "especially when she chose to cry out at the moment of penetration: 'Home, boy! Home, baby, yes –you've come home'"(95). The second and no less irreverent anecdote focuses on the "sad case of the astronaut stranded on Mars without hope of rescue, and with diminishing supplies of food and breathable air...for the abrupt cancellation of the space exploration budget". The evocative image of this spacial exile whom the narrator ironically calls "The Martian –for he was now a permanent resident of that planet" (97), is too familiar and eloquent to go unnoticed in a postcolonial forum.

Nevertheless, as Rushdie has argued elsewhere, "the broken glass is not a mirror of nostalgia, but also a useful tool with which to work in the present" (1991, 12). And it is precisely from this perspective that we can notice how Indian past as counter-memory can coexist with a postmodern present dominated by Western popular myths. The everyday realities of these characters overlap with other virtual/fictional worlds that amplify their possibilities of meaning. That would explain why, in the last story, an adolescent tries to cope with his emotional frustrations through a suggestive repertoire of pop songs of the 50's and 60's ranging from Neil Sekada to Elvis Presley; and an ageing couple of exiles model their courting on the game of chess, having, as the narrator says, "the great formalization of war, transformed into an art of love" (196). Or why, in another story, Chekov and Zulu, the two London-based agents of the Indian Intelligence identify their missions with the *Star Trek* fantasies they are so fond of since their school days in India; their fascination with this popular icon leading them to the literal usurpation of the jargon,

and even the names of their TV idols. The function of these intertexts is to provide an alternative frame of reference against which the characters' limited experiences can be measured, justified and/or even parodied.

In this postcolonial rewriting of the Indian past and culture one can perceive echoes of Edward Said's orientalist theses about the East being an invention of the West, its exotic significant Other: the ironic narrator of "The Harmony of the Spheres" feels embarrassed at his wife's infatuation with his Indian background, and evokes the legendary visions of his home produced by Romantic poets: "She had never been to India, and my birth and childhood and continuous connections there made me, in her eyes, ridiculously glamorous, like a visitor from Xanadu. *For he on honey-dew hath fed/And drunk the milk of Paradise*" (140). Following Said, one could observe that the allusion to Coleridge provides a highly culturalized version of India, a no longer "real" land, but the imaginary landscape, the Xanadu, fashioned by canonical English literature.

Through the exercise of either intertextuality or mimicry, hybridity has been presented here as a primary cultural phenomenon, but its stylistic, and ultimately its ontological dimensions cannot be ignored. Actually, fragmentariness and discontinuity as unavoidable features of our subjectivity have always been a major concern for Rushdie, as he declares in the opening essay of *Imaginary Homelands*:

But human beings do not perceive things whole; we are not gods but wounded creatures, cracked lenses, capable only of fractured perceptions. Partial beings, in all the senses of that phrase. Meaning is a shaky edifice we build out of scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries, newspaper articles, chance remarks, old films, small victories, people hated, people loved; perhaps it is because our sense of what is the case is constructed from such inadequate materials that we defend it so fiercely, even to the death.(12)²

And indeed his merging of different styles and genres appears as a textual manifestation of this Third Space of enunciation at which he has decided to accommodate his writing. A polycultural space that turns interpretation into an ambivalent process undermining any

² This emphasis on fragmentariness can be connected with Donna Haraway's cyborg imagery. She argues that, in a context of technological innovations that have necessarily re-shaped the perceptions of our subjectivity, the cyborg symbolizes the collapse of the old humanist notion of a unified and centered subject and celebrates, instead, a hybrid model where identity has become partial, proteic and provisional. Just as Rushdie rejects the totalizing paradigm inherent to the very idea of God, Haraway closes her all-too-quoted "Manifesto for Cyborgs" with a similar vindication of modular and fractured identities by claiming "I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess" (386).

fixed notion of authority and purity. Rushdie, who often regards himself as a “bastard child of history”, displays in this collection a kaleidoscopic view of the world embracing both fable-like parables peopled by caricatured characters with oversimplified morality, and sophisticated parodies of contemporary global society where the reader can even face cyberpunk scenarios more congruent with some virtual-reality futurist utopia.

This carnivalesque mongrelization also erases the limits between the sacred and the profane, the cult and the popular, the tragic and the trivial; and it is only from this prism that one can understand the ironic and almost blasphemous conflation of widow-burning or arranged marriages with *The Flintstones*'s Yabba-Dabba-Doo or Pat Boone's songs.

In this context, the magic realism implied in some of these plots is worth pointing out inasmuch as it also involves issues of borders and mixing. We could, following many postcolonial critics, examine this specific narrative choice as the interaction of two conflicting perspectives: on the one hand, a rational view of reality, often connected with Western dominant logos, and on the other, the acceptance of the supernatural and fantastic as the heritage of indigenous peoples who have experienced colonialism.³ But for Rushdie, this amalgamation of reality and fantasy is not exclusive of a primeval Indian mentality (as it might be the case in “The Prophet's Hair”), but also an expression of the inharmonious arenas in our European super-civilization, those that conventional realist techniques can no longer illustrate. A good example of this would be the narrator of “At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers”, who, ventriloquizing the apostles of purity, warns us ironically about the increasing danger of this uncontrollable flux from the self to the other:

This permeation of the real world by the fictional is a symptom of the moral decay of our post-millennial culture. Heroes step down off cinema screens and marry members of the audience...There can be little doubt that a large majority of us opposes the free, unrestricted migration of imaginary beings into an already damaged reality, whose resources diminish by the day. After all, few of us would choose to travel in the opposite direction (though there are persuasive reports of an increase in such migrations latterly). (94-95)

It is not surprising that in the same piece, the bizarre and glamorous setting, the auction saleroom, is conceived as a huge melting pot, a metaphor for our saleable and

mercenary selves, for our disembodied and ghostly experiences in a hi-tech global world . The ending of this story with all its sophisticated echoes of *The Wizard of Oz*, is a parody of authenticity and a celebration of bastardy and contamination, and as such, it seems the best closure for this paper in which I have tried to explore Salman Rushdie's politics of otherness through his disturbing questioning of what is home, what is familiar and what has become strange:

Next week there is another auction. Family trees, coats of arms, royal lineages will be up for sale, and into any of these one may insert any name one chooses, one's own, or one's beloved's. Canine and feline pedigrees will be on offer, too: Alsatian, Burmese, saluki, Siamese, cairn terrier...Thanks to the infinite bounty of the Auctioneers, any of us, cat, dog, man, woman, child, can be, as we long to be; and as, cowering in our shelters, we fear we are not, *somebody*. (102-103)

³ Chanady, A.B., *Magical Realism and the Fantastic*. NY: Garland Publ., 1985; Cooper, B. *Magical Realism in West African Literature*. London: Routledge, 1998; Danow, D.K. *The Spirit of Carnival: Magical Realism and the Grotesque*. Kentucky: The UP of Kentucky, 1995.

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From their perspective of expatriates, nomads, travellers, exiles, immigrants or foreigners, most characters who people these stories experience diasporic deconstructions of identity where nation or citizenship are free-floating signifiers that (as in “Good Advice is Rarer than Rubies”, “Chekov and Zulu” or “The Courter”) simultaneously evoke forms of burden and liberation.

This paper will also examine intertextuality and “mimicry” (Homi Bhabha) as critical and fictional exercises on hybridity inasmuch as they allow the overlapping of different texts and traditions into polycultural palimpsests that undermine any fixed notion of authority and purity. Rushdie, who often regards himself as a “bastard child of history”, displays in this collection a kaleidoscopic view of the world embracing both fable-like parables (mostly set in India or Pakistan, in the “East” section of the book) and sophisticated parodies of contemporary global society (in the last section). This carnivalesque mongrelization also erases the limits between the sacred and the profane, the cult and the popular, the tragic and the trivial; and it is only from this prism that one can understand the ironic conflation of widow-burning or arranged marriages with *Star Trek* fantasies or Elvis Presley’s songs.

The magic realism implied in some of these plots (“The Prophet’s Hair” or “At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers”) also involves issues of borders and mixings if we are to examine this narrative choice as the interaction of two conflicting perspectives: on the one hand, a rational view of reality, often connected with Western dominant logos, and on the other, the acceptance of the supernatural and fantastic as the heritage of indigenous or aboriginal peoples who have experienced colonialism.

