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THE TRANSNATIONALISM OF SALMAN RUSHDIE: FROM A CONTRAPUNTAL TO A METAMORPHIC READING OF HISTORY

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Abstract: *One of the possible ways to conceptualize transnationalism is to analyze the special kind of consciousness it has given birth to, marked by dual or multiple identifications. A post-colonial writer concerned with what it means to be a migrant or diasporic subject, Salman Rushdie starts from what Said has called a “contrapuntal” reading of history, the setting against one another of home and host country in The Satanic Verses, where the fall from the sky of both Gibreel and Saleem embody “the unhealable rift...between the self and its true home” (Said). However, in his subsequent novels, the contrapuntal reading makes way for a plural and metamorphic reading of history. The initial awareness of the split self changes into an awareness of the irreducible plurality of the self’s identifications with the multiple histories of the spaces and times it inhabits. Thus in his following novels Rushdie gravitates towards a new understanding of the migrant’s identity as metamorphic, constantly changing in response to its environment. This new conceptualization of migrant and diasporic identities as metamorphic points to the emergence of a transnational consciousness, fostered both by postcolonial history and globalization.*

Introduction: exile as contrapuntal experience

In one of Said’s most famous meditations on the condition of exile *The Mind of Winter* he borrows the term ‘contrapuntal’ from music theory (contrapuntal motion) and applies it to the experience of exile: “For an exile, habits of life, expression, or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the new and the old environment are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally.” (442) He speaks about other contrapuntal juxtapositions occurring in the way one apprehends exile, then goes on to characterize the condition of exile as that of “the mind of winter”, which is refused both the ‘pathos’ of summer and autumn and the potential of spring. The contrapuntal is therefore taken to its logical development into a ‘mind of winter’, a cold unproductive medium from which nothing new can ever emerge. In music contrapuntal motion appeared as part of polyphonic music, which gradually came to replace the traditions of homophonism/monophonism in the Renaissance. In Renaissance music theory, contrapuntal motion was understood as a way to achieve a higher harmony, a way of progress towards perfection: from dissonance to

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imperfect consonance to perfect consonance.” (Christensen 105) The voices that participate in contrapuntal motion, although interdependent harmonically, have to preserve their independent rhythm and contour. A contrapuntal experience of exile thus seems to imply a polyphony of experiences, the memory of the past attuned to present experience, yet both remaining somehow remote from each other, incapable of mixing, blending or hybridity. In a contrapuntal apprehension of exile, the third space of negotiation is missing. Each memory is played - perhaps painfully, perhaps triumphantly - against the background of present experiences, without any possibility of fusion or the further production of a hybrid space which may serve as a translation. The past and present remain forever untranslatable, engendering ‘the mind of winter’, a condition of utter impotence.

The paradox of exile, Said admits is that, in spite of its being “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home”, “a condition of terminal loss”, the disease is highly productive, as “the canon of modern Western culture is in large part the work of exiles, émigrés, refugees.” (439) The mind of winter is paradoxically extremely prolific in literature. This may be explained by the compensatory nature of fantasy, which tends to turn loss and mutilation, by means of what Rushdie called “the alchemy of art” into visionary and original material. The exilic, diasporic or transnational writer, writing between two or more traditions, cultures and languages and across several borders engages in a multi-layered process of translation that goes both ways, from the host to the native culture/cultures and vice versa, filling in the gaps of each with insights from the other. Azade Seyhan calls “imagining and filling in omitted references to cross-cultural contexts and silences of history in the texts” an example of “contrapuntal reading” (14).

From the contrapuntal to the metamorphic: the emergence of a transnational consciousness

The reason for migration is important in shaping the transnational poetics of a writer like Salman Rushdie. While the flow of people, ideas and objects across borders occurs nowadays on an unprecedented scale, the phenomenon is not homogeneous and collapsing everything under an “umbrella” theory of globalization or transnational studies might prove detrimental to the analysis of specific cases. Rushdie’s fictional project can be better understood when considering that the reasons for his migration had less to do with the improvement of his economic situation (he was born into a relatively wealthy Muslim family) and more with a specific political, cultural and religious context that he found unacceptable. Like Said, a refugee for political and religious reasons, Rushdie finds any kind of tyranny unacceptable. Educated at Cambridge where he got his degree in history, he relocated with his family to Pakistan, a traditional Muslim country that refused him many of the liberties that he had been accustomed to in the India of his childhood and in Britain. Thus for him, as for Said, the writer’s role is essentially an oppositional one. Acting as a mouthpiece for its creator, the poet Baal in *The Satanic Verses* defines the writer’s task in the following terms: “To name the unnamable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world and stop it from going to sleep”(97). His fiction is premised on the opposition between the concepts of

private space and literature, on the one hand, and the public and political, on the other. In a speech he gave at Duke University *Public Events, Private Lives: Literature and Politics in the Modern World* Rushdie notes that writers have to oppose political leaders that claim a monopoly on the truth - in the same manner in which Said argued that the role of the public intellectual should be an adversarial one towards all power systems. The title of *The Satanic Verses*, as well as the identification of characters like the poet Baal and the writer Salman the Persian with Satan are not accidental: the figure of Satan is the archetypal oppositional figure (among other things, the Torah word for the devil, Ha-Satan, means he who opposes or he who accuses). Rushdie argued that:

Prose, the literary novel of the poet, has been historically and still is at the forefront of the opposition of tyranny. No one owns the novelist's vision except for the novelist...he has the power to make and remake reality and explore it in a manner and in the terms he chooses that are not dictated to him by anyone else. (qtd. in Lichter)

A fierce desire for independence and autonomy shaped Rushdie's prose from the beginning, even in fantasy novels like *Grimus* or in children stories like "Haroun and the Sea of Stories" or "Luka and the Fire of Life". In *Step Across This Line* he defines man as a "strange metamorph" and the "frontier-crossing being", a migrant from the old to the new, endowed with the will "to change the world" (408), whereas in *Notes on Writing and the Nation* he confesses to a long standing abhorrence of "closed systems"(67). The modern age, Rushdie argues, has often conceptualized writing as *Imagin/Nation* (mapping the nation) - ever since the parallel development of the "twin narratives" of the novel and the nation. It is only the uprooted intellectual (the transnational writer) that can write as only a "free intelligence can, going where the action is and offering reports."

As a transnational writer, Rushdie is first and foremost concerned with the critiques of the cultures and the nations across whose borders he establishes his fictional space. When one looks at all his novels as part of a fictional project he developed in the course of his literary career, one notices how these fictional constructs attempt to built new strategies for resisting successful assimilation and evading totalizing power systems. In *Midnight's Children*, *Shame* and *The Satanic Verses*, cultures and histories are read contrapuntally, India, Pakistan and Great Britain are set against each other and placed under close scrutiny. In line with the critique of Western modernity its concepts, the notion of national history is revealed as an artificial construction, detrimental to community building and self-identification, for instance in the analogy between Saleem's physical disintegration and the India's splitting up after the Independence. As a totalizing concept that excludes minor and peripheral histories and demands complete subjectification, national history operates as a powerful repressive mechanism for the individual, leading to his annihilation, mirrored in the literal cracking up of Saleem Sinai under the burden of History. On the other hand, his identification with India and its national history springs from an instance of magic thinking which is a specific product of Indian traditional culture: thinking in correspondences. Just because he happens to be born on the midnight of India's independence and because he

mistakenly reads the fisherman's finger as pointing towards Nehru's letter instead of directing him towards the ocean of travel and migration, Saleem gives up his capacity to choose his own destiny in favour of the identification with the destiny of his new-born country. Rushdie is thus equally critical of the traditionalism of India and Western modernity. On the one hand the Western notion of nation-building leads to the partition of India, the subsequent fragmentation of community and the blood-baths of communal confrontations. In *Shalimar the Clown* the traditional Muslim notion of honour and revenge leads to Noman's regimentation by Islamic extremist groups and transnational terrorism. The role of religious traditions comes under closer scrutiny in *The Satanic Verses*, the novel that brought a fatwa on Rushdie's head. His rewriting of the incident of the satanic verses (some verses that were allegedly introduced into the Koran by prophet Mohammed with a view to accommodate some idol goddesses and then erased) serves a double purpose: first it is meant to throw doubt both on the allegedly objective practice of writing history by showing how power politics can affect even supposedly divine texts and on religious practices, by revealing the changing human motives behind unchanging divine authority; secondly, it aims to reclaim the legacy of Sufi mysticism. Islam had not always been the uncompromising militaristic faith proclaimed by religious leaders like Khomeini. In fact the Mughal rule in India promoted an enlightened Islam represented by Sufi mysticism. Emperor Akbar¹, for example, had instituted a policy of public tolerance for all the religions in India - and his tolerance went to such an extreme that he even opposed such Muslim practices as cow-slaughtering (which could give offense to the Hindus). Akbar, in spite of the Qu'ranic injunction against the infidels, permitted religious debate between Muslims and non-Muslims in his religious establishment, The House of Worship. The major change that the Muslim community experienced after the British colonization was a resurgence and radicalization of religious faith. In the 18th century the tolerant stance was being gradually replaced by "attitudes of a more puritan aggressiveness" and by the time the British acquired supremacy in India, Hardy argues, "voices had been raised demanding, in effect, the rejection of the religious modus vivendi of medieval India in favour of a classical and indeed Arabic Islam." (24) The revivalist reform concentrated on the rejection of Sufi mysticism and the adoption of a purist Islam. The grounds for this reformation of Muslim faith were political: as the Muslims were losing control over their former empire "the religiously inspired logic" claimed that they "were doing so because they were no longer righteous". (28)

The effect of the reform was "the transformation of the Indian Muslim community from an aggregate of believers into a political association with a will for joint action." (58) Besides the beneficial role of forging a political community around Islamic ideals, the reform movement played a negative part by creating a rift between Muslims and Hindus. In this light, Rushdie's rewriting of *The Satanic Verses* appears less as a blasphemy against Prophet Muhammad and more as a commentary on the evolution of Indian Muslim political consciousness. One should keep in mind that Rushdie's professional formation was that of a historian (he read

¹ Rushdie takes the reign of Akbar the Great as the setting for his novel *The Enchantress of Florence*.

history, not literature at Cambridge). The depiction of Mahound in *The Satanic Verses* as a Machiavellian political leader resonates with the constitutive moment of Muslim political consciousness in India and its coalescence around religious reformers. Mahound's compromise with the pagan inhabitants of Jahilia and his introduction in the Qu'ran of the verses that celebrate the three goddesses may reflect the inclusive politics of the first Mughal emperors, while his subsequent repudiation of the verses mirror the 18th and 19th century reformist movements that advocated a return to a purist Islam. These two impulses, the impulse to compromise and forge an alliance with the Hindus and its opposite, the desire for purity and the insistence on difference characterize the historical development of Muslim politics in India. Writing between two traditions becomes thus the means to expose the rifts and gaps in both Western and Indian/Muslim history and to annihilate binary oppositions. In effect, the practice of setting one culture against another in order to criticize certain aspects is an old topos of Enlightenment letters. Both Montesquieu and Voltaire used the newly discovered (or invented Orient) in order to deal extensively on the shortcomings of home politics and social stratification. What is new is the scope of this strategy, which simultaneously employs both nations as mirrors for the other one's defective constitution. Because each one is used in turn as an ideal paradigm against which the other reveals its deficiencies, both nations change into "imaginary" Indias and Englands, Orients and Occidents of the mind, fictional constructs that deconstruct essentialist notions of the nation. A contrapuntal reading of Western and Oriental histories, while useful as a means of uncovering the ideological assumptions of each, leads simultaneously to a revelation of the similarities between the two. It turns into a strategy for probing into the historicity and constructedness of culture/nation as well, revealing them to be contingent and manufactured according to changing political interests.

Yet it should not be forgotten that the contrapuntal is engendered by 'the mind of winter', an imagination tainted by nostalgia for the past and tempted to resurrect it in ever infinite (re)constructions. Dislocation becomes a trauma whose re-enactment demands an obsessive recreation of the lost object- in this case, home or the home country. Fiction turns into a haunted house where the ghosts of the past are lovingly invoked. In the end, the obsessive reconstruction of what has been lost leads to the dissolution of the object itself into language, pure signifiers without a signified. Nabokov in *Speak Memory* noted that his obsessive fictionalization of the past made it vanish forever. The contrapuntal engenders a proliferation of histories and voices that come more and more to resemble a cacophony. In *Midnight's Children the MCC (Midnight's Children Conference)* disintegrates because the multitude of voices could not find a unifying purpose, a meaning (228).

Metamorphic history as empowering for the migrant

The transmigrant's contrapuntal histories give way to a conceptualization of history as metamorphic, constantly changing and shape-shifting. This seems to be the only mode of writing history in an age which Zygmunt Baumann defined as liquid modernity. No longer grand or petit récit, monolithic master narrative or repressed minor histories, migrant transnational history comes more and more to resemble its other, memory, in its endless composition, decomposition and re-

composition of reality. Rushdie resorts to the ancient trope of metamorphosis - shape-shifting, constantly changing form in order to define a history whose endless chains of representations cannot point to one stable reality. Similarly to Derrida's notion of *différance* that postpones meaning indefinitely, metamorphosis defers any stable and rigid form, and consequently excludes definition or appropriation by powerful political and economic actors. Under the imperative "The story you finished was perhaps never the one you began", metamorphic history allows the migrant subject full freedom of action, of changing direction, shape, purpose and identification; it dissolves useless life-forms and recreates them at will; and at the same time it takes away all certitudes and fixed points, the very ground beneath his feet.

History is the representation of the past. As such, the past cannot be changed. How can we speak then of a metamorphic history, a history that constantly changes shape? If we take into account Hayden White's differentiation between the practical past and the historical past, then a metamorphic history would be one that aims to represent the practical, rather than the historical past. The practical past, a concept White borrowed from Michael Oakshott, is a past motivated by a desire to ask the question: What should I do? The practical past is the everyday archive of experience upon which people draw for solutions when confronting present situations. Not motivated by scientific ideologies and thus not politically charged, the practical past comprises instances of experiences, ideas, memories, attitudes and values, resources that help people to judge and discern new situations. For the border-crossing migrant that has to adapt to new cultures, forge new alliances and at the same time preserve his cultural heritage, the practical past is invaluable. The histories/narratives he constructs are all metamorphic, designed to mediate between his old self and the construction of new identifications. Rai, the narrator in *The Ground beneath Her Feet* compares the chameleonic capacity of the migrant to adapt to new conditions with the gift of invisibility:

Long ago I developed a knack for invisibility. It allowed me to go right up to the actors in the world's drama, the sick, the dying, the crazed [...] and get my fucking picture. On many occasions this gift of dematerialization has saved my life. When people said to me, do not drive down that sniper-infested road, do not enter that warlord's stronghold, you'd do well to circumnavigate that militia's fiefdom, I was drawn towards it almost irresistibly.[...] When I got back people looked at me oddly, as if seeing a ghost, and asked how I managed it.[...] I just smile my self-deprecating smile and shrink into insignificance. By my manner I persuade the sniper I do not merit his bullet, my way of carrying myself convinces the warlord to keep his axe clean. I make them understand I'm not worthy of their violence. (14-5)

In *Fury*, Malik Solanka, a retired historian of ideas is freed from his all-consuming anger at having his fictional creation (Little Brain) appropriated by the media and turned into a mass-produced, mass-consumed object of entertainment by beginning to write the story of *Akasz Kronos and the Puppet Kings on planet Rijk*. *Let the Fittest Survive: The Coming of the Puppet Kings* turns from a linear progressive narrative into a web story branching into simultaneous lateral narratives, with endless possibilities. A new technology, the internet, where "everything exist[s]

at once” hosts the web story that stands for the way migrants access their past, drawing simultaneously on more cultural archives:

The back story was a skeleton that periodically grew new bones, the framework for a fictional beast capable of constant metamorphosis, which fed on every scrap it could find: its creator’s personal history, scraps of gossip, deep learning, current affairs, high and low culture, and the most nourishing diet of all—namely, the past. The ransacking of the world’s storehouse of old stories and ancient histories was entirely legitimate. Few Web users were familiar with the myths, or even the facts, of the past; all that was needed was to give the old material a fresh, contemporary twist. Transmutation was all. (190)

Transmutation, translocation, translation - these are the main practices of the transnational writer, who through his contact with a variety of cultures and more importantly with cultural difference itself, has mastered the gift of translation. Translation, by means of its possibilities and impossibilities, sheds light on the spaces of translability between cultures as well as on their incommensurability. The task of the transnational writer is to operate this system carefully, dwelling on the similarities and the common cultural heritage, yet at the same time preserving cultural differences. This imperative leads to a formal renewal of the poetics of the transnational text, to re-coding and code-switching, to narrative as well as poetic innovations. In *Midnight’s Children* and *The Satanic Verses* for example, the plural and multi-faceted India is translated in the novels’ multiplicity of story layers and the palimpsest of identities. Bad translations can occur too at the border between cultures. In *Fury*, Neela Mahendra’s apartment sports all manner of Indian memorabilia in what the author calls “the overemphasized manner of the diaspora” (208): filmi music, candles and incense, the Krishna and milkmaids calendar, the dhurries on the floor, etc. India in its objects is the worst possible kind of translation, as it dwells on the mass-produced signs of a culture and invites to reification. Since any translation is a translation of the Other, good translations must do justice to the Other and avoid reductionism. On the other hand, in Rushdie’s novels the Other is never seen as inscrutable or incomprehensible and difference is never radicalized. Difference is construed as one of the faces of multiplicity and that is why metamorphosis plays a key role in the re-conceptualization of migrant identities - both as an archetype for change and as the concept that translates a synchronic multiplicity into diachronic difference. The world becomes a dictionary, an infinite accumulation of details and perspectives that keep melting into one another as characters go through life-changing events. Barriers and thresholds are conceived as porous and flexible. There are no solid walls, no black holes in Rushdie’s universe: the ground shakes under the characters’ feet, Ormus crosses the “membrane” in the sky that separates East and West, Saleem connects to the midnight children through his nose, Luka saves his father by successively crossing from the real into the virtual.

Metamorphic history, the condition of liquid modernity, is empowering for the migrant. History on the road, in flux, constantly changing and shape-shifting turns into a means of resisting “the powers of description” that transform Saladin Chamcha into the Beast/Devil. Ascribing fixed and essentialized identities to migrants, a constant practice of colonial and neocolonial power systems becomes

more difficult in the absence of a linear and progressive History that dictates social roles and regulates political life. That is why in Rushdie's novels the responsibility lies mostly on individual identifications. The more an individual is capable of resisting identifications with supra-individual machines and relies on his own resources and choices in building identity, the freer he/she is. The challenge of the migrant is to renounce identifications with narrow and restrictive concepts such as Nation and History, to resist ascriptions and to re-conceptualize identity in metamorphic terms.

Conclusion

Salman Rushdie's literary career is one marked by revolutions. His novels follow a winding yet clear path away from narrow ethnic, religious and national identifications towards cultural hybridity, multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism. Thinking about the scope and extent of Rushdie's creative revolutions John Wood placed him in the category of 'world literature'². I would argue that he belongs to something we may call global literature, not the Goethean concept of world literature as the canon of universal writers, but a body of literature that is produced and consumed globally, and whose ideology can also be defined as global, or at least as one of the currents of globalization, oriented towards border-crossing, heterogenization and cross-cultural communication.

Parting ways with thinkers like Said or earlier postcolonial writers like Naipaul, Rushdie transforms the contrapuntal condition of exile and into a celebration of the metamorphic potential of the transmigrant. Therefore migrancy is no longer a condition of spatial and cultural alienation, a vacillation between incompatible identifications. It has a great liberating potential: "Migration, moving, for instance in flight, from one place to another. To fly and to flee: both are ways of seeking freedom" (86) he writes in *Shame*. Whereas Said and Naipaul dwell extensively on the downsides of being a diasporic writer, Rushdie is the first to see and celebrate the great creative potential of the cultural encounter, construed as a creative practice of translation.

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² When writers became exiles or emigres, when they began to write in their second or third languages, and above all when the experience of this displacement became the subject of their work, then world-literature was born, for better or worse. Salman Rushdie is the probably the purest example of this negative liberty. Literally homeless, Rushdie writes repeatedly about the actual and figurative centrifuges of modern life. [...] Like Jose Saramago (who, like Rushdie, has offended one of the monotheisms), W.G. Sebald, and Roberto Calasso, all of whom produce balloons of "world-literature," Rushdie's importance lies in his fruitful impatience with conventional fictional narrative, his apparent belief that the novel is not limited by its distinguished genes. (Wood)

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