

Eastern and Western Cultural Commingling in Rushdie's Stories *

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Abstract

Rushdie's *East, West* is a volume of short-stories which abound of Eastern and Western cultural commingling, issues which, in keeping with Rushdie's lifetime discourse, manage to close the gap between Eastern and Western mindsets. It is here, more than in any of Rushdie's writings, that the cultural space of 'in-betweenness', a term postulated by Homi Bhabha, opens up. *East, West* is the best example of a narrative displaying cultural mix, Eastern and Western stereotypes and, most obviously, the theme of hybridity. The comma in the title has been viewed by many critics as a separator between the two apparently irreconcilable worlds. My intention is to prove the opposite, i.e. that it acts as a pathway or unifier between these.

Key words: in-between-ness, cultural mix, Eastern, Western, migration, hybridity

Most of Salman Rushdie's writing has triggered a debate on the values upon which Western society is built. At the same time, it has become more and more apparent that these issues are often discussed in terms of a cultural clash between the West and the Orient. *East, West*, the volume of short- stories Rushdie published in 1994, makes some great contribution to this debate. What I intend to demonstrate in the following article is that these stories can help their readers look beyond the limits of the Manichaeian dualism that often seems to dominate this debate and focus rather on issues that unite the two apparently irreconcilable worlds. In my view, these stories abound of Eastern and Western cultural commingling, issues which, in keeping with Rushdie's lifetime discourse, manage to close the gap between Eastern and Western mindsets.

East, West is a collection of narratives about identity formation in cross-cultural circumstances. The originality of these stories may be detected by noting many features of Rushdie's novels that are not to be observed here. Rushdie's own statement that "literature is, of all the arts, the one best suited to challenging absolutes of all kinds" could taken as the motto of *East, West*, because this is exactly what the stories, individually and collectively, set out to do. (Rushdie 1991:424) The wonderful characters he portrays in these short-stories strike us through their ability to mix popular culture with philosophical remarks and informal expressions with subtle psychological awareness.

Structurally, the collection is divided into three sections: "East," "West," and "East, West" and it consists of nine stories, three in each section. The "East" section contains "Good Advice is Rarer than Rubies," "The Free Radio" and "The Prophet's hair" while the second section called "West" is made of "Yorick," "At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers" and "Christopher Columbus and Queen Isabella of Spain Consummate their Relationship." The third part entitled "East, West" includes "The Harmony of the Spheres", "Chekov and Zulu" and "The Courter." The purpose of these demarcations is not to suggest a facile fusion between the two worlds. Rather, Rushdie sets out to offer images of both worlds that connect them rhetorically while suggesting their difference. Terry Eagleton has observed in

* The background of his article is the subchapter *The Choice is In-between* from my book *Imaginary Everyman's Land* published at *Editura Universităţii Oradea*, 2009, pp.157-163. I revised, enlarged, updated it, and focused mainly on the Eastern and Western cultural mix Rushdie employs as a pathway between the two worlds.

his review of *East, West*, published in the *London Review of Books* on Oct 6th 1994, that the most important thing about the title is

the comma, because it can be seen both as a separator and a bridge. This demarcation seems to be an element of playfulness that invites readers not to take the two terms too seriously, and as each other's opposite, but to accept them because they exist anyway. (Eagleton '*Deadly Fetishes*')

Eagleton's view is shared by H. Bhabha, who in his commentary on *East, West*, asserts that the volume "furnishes the little room for literature with a voice that rises from the comma that both divides and joins East and West." (Bhabha qtd. in Reynolds and Noakes, 2003:179). Moreover, Bhabha considers that at a time when writers and critics are concerned with the 'hyphenated' realities of being Afro-Caribbean, or Asian-American, Rushdie writes from the more fluid perspective of the comma, where histories of cultural difference exist side-by-side, in a state of creative interruption or interpolation (180).

The cultural mix is, first of all, reflected in Rushdie's narrative style. His short fiction takes different forms: satire, allegory, parody, parable and postmodern historiographic metafiction. Rushdie's voice is detached, oral, autobiographical, it can be Joycean as it seems to be in "Christopher Columbus and Queen Isabella Consummate their Relationship," like Laurence Sterne's in "Yorick," it can be Shakespearean in "The Courter" and oriental, Sheherazadean in "The Prophet's hair." Rushdie's dialogic imagination has constantly made room for this kind of multiplicity as the writer himself remarked in his comment on his fiction: "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*." (Rushdie 1991:394) In keeping with these words, an important critic of the collection, John Carey remarks that the narrative style used in these stories is a mix of "different story-modes-Arabian Nights, 18th-century English, futurist' which create a 'hotch-potch' effect which is a 'counter-measure against ideas of purity-pure race, pure culture, pure religion-which have proved to be the seedbeds of atrocity'" (Carey qtd in Reynolds and Noakes 2003: 24)

In these tales, Rushdie investigates what happens when East meets West and measures the forces that pull his characters towards the two opposite directions. The stories focus on various cultural aspects of Western and Eastern societies - the lifestyles, events, stereotypes and prejudices that affect people in these areas, especially those who, like Rushdie, migrate from one to the other. Realism and imagination collide just as the rickshaw driver from "The Free Radio" writes letters describing his film star career in Bombay. Fantasy runs over reality in "The Courter" when a mispronunciation leads to an unusual love affair in sixties London or, in another story, when Christopher Columbus dreams of having an affair with Queen Isabella.

But what they manage to mostly do is, in my view, their successful undermining of our conventional notions of East and West. At the most obvious level, they do this by demonstrating that these two parts of the world are inextricably interrelated, above and beyond all those differences of culture and belief. The stories that have an Eastern setting, in Pakistan or India, introduce the reader to an Indian subcontinent that has been invaded by the Western civilisation, a place where buses, railway trains, radios, cinemas, and, last but not least, the language and icons of Western pop culture are omnipresent. Here, sterilization and vasectomy are means of birth control, Muslim money-lenders, in spite of the prohibitions of the Qur'an, take 75 per cent interest on loans, most people have relatives living in England, and women do not necessarily accept the idea of arranged marriages any more.

In "Good Advice Is Rarer Than Rubies," the first story of the "East" section, one quickly learns that a pretty young woman on the subcontinent will not accept a forged passport that would take her to England. We understand immediately, however, that it is her dread of the arranged marriage that awaits her in Britain, more than moral scruples, that prevents her from leaving a "Third" world she wants to escape for a "First" world where she knows she will also have to suffer.

Another example of subversion of the expectations is the second story: "The Free Radio." A blending of modernist *in media res* narrative and of postmodern collision between fantasy and reality, "The Free Radio" is a story about Ramani, a young rickshaw driver who undergoes a vasectomy for he mistakenly believes he will be rewarded with a free radio. Ramani is compared to great Bollywood actors: "Such a handsome chap, compared to you Shashi Kapoor and Amitabh (arguably two of the greatest bollywood stars of the seventies) are like lepers only, you should go to Bombay and be put in the motion pictures" (Rushdie 1995:22). He does realize this ambition but only at the cost of being deprived of his virility by the cruel hand of the "Widow." At the end of the story the narrator informs us that "he spent his days at the Sun'n'Sand Hotel at Juhu beach in the company of top lady artistes, he was buying a big house at Pali Hill (with) the latest security equipment to protect him from the movie fans." (31) Even though the story suffers from authorial intrusion, it surprises by the way it presents a cultural clash on birth control as a way to view dreams - of a free radio, of being a movie star.

Conversely, in the stories with a Western setting, many Westerners are shown to be deeply influenced by "orientalism": they are fascinated by the East, its art, its philosophy and its wisdom, often expecting from it some kind of solution to their own problems. Here, Rushdie undermines the Western stereotypes by playing with his readers. These stories have a Western setting but they seem to take place in more exotic places even than the Orient. Of the three "At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers" is the one that stands out as an acid satire of the Western fetishization of anything-literally everything can be turned into a commodity that can be bought or sold in the market. The setting of this short-story is an auction in a western city. Rushdie follows his essay "Out of Kansas" published in *Step Across This Line* and here he brilliantly illustrates the Western emphasis on movie stars and their fictional counterparts, to the extent of idolizing mere objects (in this case, Dorothy's slippers from "The Wizard of Oz.") The auction is in fact the parody of a religious ceremony. These very commodities have a quasi-religious character. Ironically, this feeling has been destroyed by the very market mechanism that is now expected to provide an adequate substitute. Rushdie satirizes the society that values such commodities: "We do not know the limit of their powers. We suspect that these limits may not exist" the narrator comments. (Rushdie 1995:92)

However, it is the third section of the collection, entitled "East, West," that best tackles the issues of Eastern and Western cultural commingling. Here, we read about migrancy and especially about migrants, who belong to both worlds and whose identity turns out to be a more or less complicated collage, a palimpsest of Eastern and Western elements.

The first one, "The Harmony of the Spheres," is the story of an Indian undergraduate at Cambridge University who encounters a paranoid schizophrenic, obsessed with the occult. He goes through the papers of a schizophrenic friend who has committed suicide and discovers scandalous letters involving his wife. What he believes are the rantings of a madman, however, turn out to be actual accounts of an adulterous relationship, as his partner later informs him. This story is told by a cross-cultural narrator who longs to make "a

bridge between here-and-there, between my two othernesses, my double unbelonging.” (141)

The second story of part three, “Chekov and Zulu”, which suggests the code names of two diplomats, is a story set in the historical context of Indian politics and mixes Western popular culture images in the unfamiliar context of Asian political circles. Here television science-fiction is a metaphor for rootlessness and the dream of global unity achieved in spite of human diversity. The two Indian diplomat-spies who share a boyhood love of “Star Trek” revert to the register of that television series during a dangerous, real-life mission. Based in London, they are “intrepid diplomats,” (150) operating under the supervision of the Indian Government's intelligence division. Zulu is “a shy, burly, giant” (149) Sikh; Chekov, in contrast, is “a small, slim, dapper man in grey flannels, stiff-collared shirt and double-breasted navy blue blazer with brass buttons.”(154) Chekov's religion is not explicitly stated, but there are some hints which suggest that he is a Muslim. The two have known each other, admiringly, since school days at the elite Doon school in the Himalayan foothills. The story opens in London on 4 November 1984, a few days after the assassination of Indira Gandhi in New Delhi. Chekov visits Zulu's home to inquire from his wife about him for he has not contacted the intelligence headquarters for two days. Zulu's wife has not heard from him either. She resents being called Mrs. Zulu for “it sounds like a blackie.”(152) Here, Rushdie depicts the gap Indians typically like to open between themselves and Africans. In any case, the proper name from Star Trek is Sulu. Zulu's wife is much distressed by the assassination and by the news on TV showing hundreds of “our decent Sikh people done to death, as if all were guilty for the crimes of one-two badmash guards.”(168). Although Chekov loves living in London, he is given to frequently comment that the British are “thieves, every last one...their fortunes and cities, built on the loot they took... one forgives, of course; that is our national nature.”(155) Zulu admonishes Chekov that ‘the colonial period is a closed book’ (156), but Chekov replies: “With my natural radicalism, I should not have been a diplomat. I should have been a terrorist. But then we would have been enemies, on opposite sides, muses Zulu, his eyes shedding genuine tears at the thought.” (156) The dialogues are built clearly depicting the tensions between the two friends, as one is trying hard to persuade the other about rebelling against compliance and his friend is pretending not to understand because he refuses to cross certain lines into radicalism as a career diplomat. Even though the two often clash due to their different religions and identities, they get on with one another because they share the same (Western, in this case) leisure activities-watching science-fiction films and listening to Western popular music.

The most acclaimed story as to Rushdie's position of ‘in-betweenness’, to use Bhabha's term, is “The Courter.” This is a story of a young Indian remembering the family flat in London in the 1960s and his Ayah, “Certainly-Mary,” who “never said plain yes or no; always this O-yes-certainly or No-certainly-not.” (176) Certainly-Mary, akin to her name, lives in a hyphenated world in England, trying to cope with both culture and language. Thus Certainly-Mary, through accidental transposition of letters and with “unintentional but prophetic overtones of romance” (178), renamed Mecir, the East European porter, “the courter.” Mecir, before going to London, was a chess grand master. Certainly-Mary developed a relationship with Mecir, and soon chess became “their private language” (195) and a means of secret flirtation. Hatred of immigrants destroys this silence when the Ayah and the narrator's mother, as victims of mistaken identity, experience a series of profanities from a pair of British youngsters. Mecir, knifed by one of these youngsters, goes back to work for a while; however, defeated by racial hatred, both Mecir and Certainly-Mary lose

their smile and turn inward. Homesick, Certainly-Mary returns to Bombay, and Mecir, who has no family, disappears into uncertainty. Despite the racial attack on Mecir, Certainly-Mary, and his mother, the young narrator carries on the immigrant struggle to survive in a foreign land. At sixteen, eager to break free from his father's control, he awaits his British passport. The passport does arrive, and although he acknowledges that it has saved him, he also has to confess to a dilemma that all immigrants share: "I ... have ropes around my neck ... pulling me this way and that, East and West, the nooses tightening, commanding, choose, choose!" (211). But in the end, in spite of all hardships and failures the narrator takes a stand of *in-betweenness*: "Do you hear? I refuse to choose." (211)

"The Courter" presents the troubles of the migrants and their failure of communication-yet it celebrates connection across the boundaries of race, nation, and language, and asserts the possibility of an identity that is not single but divided. At the same time, it is the affirmation of hybrid and divided migrant identities and of the innocent love between two outsiders who communicate in faltering English. Broken English gradually becomes a bridge, even at times uncertain between the Indian and English cultures. The courter is the porter, but he fulfils both onomastic functions; in a similar way, many of the characters are given nicknames, based on pun, similarity of sound, personal characteristics and so on, such as Certainly-Mary, Baby-Scare-zade, Mixed-Up, the Dodo, or they may even have several different names such as father, Abba or the Minotaur, suggesting multiple perspectives and the fact that identity is shifting and can only be defined by other people's perception within their cultural framework. More than that, what Rushdie earlier named in an essay "remaking (English) for our own purposes"(1991:17) is obviously shown where he "hybridizes" English by inserting Hindi terms into his text. Thus, words and expressions such as "Allah-tobah!", "sahib", "ayah" or ambiguous expressions associated with specific Indian usages translated in English such as "thrice," or "quarter-plate," abound in this palimpsestic narrative (1995:186). The text is also interspersed with pop songs lyrics comic strips, westerns, nursery rhymes and Christmas carols turning the text into a polysemantic narrative.

To conclude with, *East , West* proves that Rushdie deserves to feel rightly at home in both East and West and that home is neither, but somewhere in between. In these short-stories, Eastern and Western cultural elements collide and fuse just as fiction and reality blend under Rushdie's pen.

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