

The foreigner on the margin and the game of multitudes with two of S. Rushdie's novels

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Résumé: *La célébration de la multitude semble être une règle générale pour les romans de S. Rushdie. L'identité individuelle (et étatique) se révèle comme une collection variée et infinie d'influences, récits, expériences, relations etc. Toute tentative d'ancrage dans la dualité est minée et démythifiée en tant que convention recherchée afin de retrouver un ordre apparent et un sentiment de sécurité / contrôle. C'est ainsi que le « centre » perd son sens et cède la place à la « marge » en tant que principe définitoire. La question qui sert de point de départ à notre démarche est la suivante : qu'est-ce qui se passe, dans ce contexte, avec le personnage occidental, colonisateur – d'une manière ou d'autre – et avec son statut de centre de référence ?*

Mots-clés: *centre et marge, multitude, identité et altérité.*

Multitudes seem to stand at the basis of character drawing in Rushdie's novels and the most famous example probably comes from *Midnight's Children*, in the form of Saleem Sinai, who ties his destiny to that of the nation (or vice-versa) and tries to “mean something” by narrating himself. To quote Josna E. Rege:

Even though Saleem is cracking into as many pieces as there are Indians, as there are stories to tell, he has successfully told his story – imperfect, unreliable, distorted, needing endless revising, to be sure – but nonetheless triumphantly his own.

When Saleem Sinai tells his readers that they will have to swallow him and his story whole, “whole” does not imply unitary, seamless. Whole means multiple, fault-ridden, contradictory, “full of cracks” [Bloom, 2003: 169-170].

His case is particularly suggestive as it seems to stem from Rushdie's view of India itself, as described in *Imaginary Homelands*: “[...] the very essence of Indian culture is that we possess a mixed tradition, a mélange of elements as disparate as ancient Mughal and contemporary Coca-Cola American. To say nothing of Muslim, Buddhist, Jain, Christian, Jewish, British, French, Portuguese,

Marxist, Maoist, Trotskyist, Vietnamese, capitalist, and of course Hindu elements" [Rushdie, 1991: 67].

Nevertheless, Saleem Sinai is not the only example of fragmentary identity in Rushdie's fiction. To select just one other case, we could mention *Fury's* Solanka, who also finds himself as a collection of narratives in continuous dialogue and intertextuality with other characters' narratives. Accordingly, identity as unity is, once more, exposed as an illusion and the dual dialogue of I with other is, at the same time, a comforting device in the face of chaos and one of the basic steps (not the final one) in discovering the self (and the multiple othernesses within).

In this context, it may prove interesting to notice what happens to the foreign, western characters in those novels that include post-colonial themes. For this purpose, we selected *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*.

The first realization is that the characters identified with different Western locations in these two novels can almost be counted on the fingers of one hand. Their country of origin is always mentioned (be it England, Portugal, or Germany) and the fact that it is *other* than India or Pakistan is one of the marks they cannot escape. Most of them are clearly considered outsiders and tend to just disappear at one point from the 'Eastern' setting of the novels. They are like torrents that move over the Indian land and leave traces on their way out; while the traces remain, the waters are nowhere to be seen anymore. For a less abstract illustration, one may start from the images of the cities in the two novels.

The Palladian hotel described in *Shame* as flooded by light and colour (yellow, green, white) is said to be visited by the white colonists who want "to share the illusion of being colourful – whereas in fact they were merely white" [Rushdie, 1984: 12]. Therefore the glitzy personality of the occupants is shown as an attempt to make up for a lack, and thus the typical roles of the colonizer and of the colonized are reversed. It is an attitude specific to the novel in question, which is set 'at the edge of the world'. There, the Impossible Mountains are turned up-side-down in the perception of a child who believes that Paradise is down and Hell is up. It is a world where the colonizers are the ones observed and found strange or they are rapidly becoming ghosts of the past, although the traces they leave are still capable of shaping the reactions of those influenced.

In *Midnight's Children*, the description of the city still inhabited by foreigners shares the feeling that they are not really there:

You could not see the new city from the old. In the new city, a race of pink conquerors had built palaces in pink stone; but the houses in the narrow lanes of the old city leaned over, jostled, shuffled, blocked each other's view of the roseate edifices of power. Not that anyone ever looked in that direction, anyway. In the Muslim muhallas or neighbourhoods which clustered around Chandni Chowk, people were content to look inwards into the screened-off courtyards of their lives... [Rushdie, 1982: 69].

This could be seen as a sign of silent and enduring resistance against a presence that is felt as foreign. It may also show that changes and games of power normally take second place to matters of everyday life. A more extreme example of people enclosed in their living spaces and not wanting to have anything to do with the life outside is to be noticed in the case of Chhunni, Munnee and Bunny's father: "Old Shakil [...] had for many years remained immured in his high, fortress-like, gigantic residence which faced inwards to a well-like and lightless compound yard" [Rushdie, 1984: 12].

In such cases of *looking inwards*, the people's refusal to acknowledge the changes that take place and their determination to behave as if nothing happened seems to have double implications. On the one hand, it reduces the importance of the colonial experience, sending it to the background and only allowing it to pervade like a sound from the distance. On the other hand, it may be the cause for the mistaken assumption that after the 'aliens' are gone, things can return to what they used to be. The influence is there, however, and not even citadels like Old Shakil's are spared of it, since it is inferred that his future grandson is the illegitimate son of an Angrez. While this is mostly a suspicion in Omar's case, Saleem is openly stated to be the illegitimate son of an Englishman and an Indian woman, other than the people who raised him. Considering that his birth was hailed as the symbol of a nation's emergence, the revelation works not only on the individual and family level.

However, instead of being the central piece which, once removed, demolishes the entire construction, the discovery receives only marginal status: "When we eventually discovered the crime of Mary Pereira, we all found that it made no difference! I was still their son: they remained my parents. In a kind of collective failure of imagination, we learned that we simply could not think our way out of

our pasts” [Rushdie, 1982: 116]. In other words, a shared past experience is the basis for relations and identities, not shared blood or measures of blood “purity”. Or, to quote Søren Frank: “love is not dependent on ties of blood; rather, it seems to thrive in a common experience of lived life. Accordingly, identity is not produced through genealogical trees understood as vertical, parallel lines with fixed points of origin; instead, it is produced in horizontal, transversal communications that disturb the parallel evolution of tree structures” [2008: 136]. As throughout the novel, this realisation is extended to apply to the nation as well. Since India comes into being as a declaration of independence from the colonial intrusion, its beginning is marked by duality: *us* vs. *them*, which forces the idea of *us* as a unitary group with one voice and similar aspirations for the future. The illusion of unity, however, is dispelled rather quickly and the reaction in the face of the multitude of ‘voices’, concretely represented in the language marches and symbolically by the Midnight Children’s Conference, is to search for a new centre. Significant, in this respect, is the following comment:

All over India, I stumbled across good Indian businessmen [...] who had become or were becoming very, very pale indeed! It seems that the gargantuan (even heroic) efforts involved in taking over from the British and becoming masters of their own destinies had drained the colour from their cheeks... in which case, perhaps my father was a late victim of a widespread, though generally unremarked phenomenon. The businessmen of India were turning white [Rushdie, 1982: 179].

Therefore, the movement away from the colonial experience into an independent organization is also an event that takes place in the shadow of the centre-margin dichotomy. In the family circle, this is represented by the actions of another foreigner, Methwold, an Englishman. His contract for the sale of the villas he built seems to be designed with the particular intention to leave a mark. He sets an insignificant price on the buildings, but demands in exchange from the Indian buyers not to change one thing about them or what they contain before the day of the Independence. Although this seems annoying and strange to the Indian families, they decide to accept: “Selected by William Methwold, these people who would form the centre of my world moved into the Estate and tolerated the curious whims of the Englishman – because the price, after all, was right” [Rushdie, 1982: 98]. The plan behind Methwold’s terms is revealed when the new

inhabitants discover and gradually adapt to an English standard of life also starting to enjoy it:

things are settling down, the sharp edges of things are getting blurred, so they have failed to notice what is happening: the Estate, Methwold's Estate, is changing them. [When he] comes to call they slip effortlessly into their imitation Oxford draws; and they are learning, about ceiling fans and gas cookers and the correct diet for budgerigars, and Methwold, supervising their transformation, is mumbling under his breath [...] All is well [Rushdie, 1982: 99].

It is as if the Englishman were trying to secure a continuation of the process of colonization even after his departure from this land. As previously mentioned, he is also the father of Saleem, thus contributing to the latter's 'strangeness'. Methwold departs the day before the Independence and before going he renounces the reason for his power of attraction (his thatch of hair) and goes away disclosed. One could say that his gesture looks like a counterpart (a rather parodic one) for Prospero's renunciation of his books at leaving the island.

A more open disclosure occurs in another sequence: Amina's encounter with the white beggar, which has something of *The Wizard of Oz*. Amina's surprise may be said to parallel Dorothy's at the discovery of the frail man behind the supposedly impressive, all-powerful wizard and her embarrassment comes from feeling that she saw something she was not supposed to. At the same time, we may compare her reaction to what a traditional reader might feel at the end of *The Magus*, by J. Fowles, on reading the words: "the maze has no centre. An ending is no more than a point in sequence, a snip of the cutting shears. Benedick kissed Beatrice at last; but ten years later? And Elsinore, that following spring?" [Fowles, 2004: 645]. Amina Sinai's encounter with a white beggar on her way to Ramram Singh is marked by shock, pity and incredulity. She feels "embarrassment, because [...] begging was not for white people. [...] Wait, white woman, just let me finish my business, I will take you home, feed you clothe you, send you back into your own world" [Rushdie, 1982: 81-2]. The labyrinth has no centre, the white man inhabits the margin.

Marginality is the condition constructed by the posited relation to a privileged centre, an 'Othering' directed by the imperial authority. But the abrogation of the centre does not involve the construction of an

alternative focus of subjectivity, a new 'centre'. Rather the act of appropriation in the post-colonial text issues in the embracing of that marginality as the fabric of social experience. [...] Discourses of marginality such as race, gender, psychological 'normalcy', geographical and social distance, political exclusion, intersect in a view of reality which supersedes the geometric distinction of centre and margin and replaces it with a sense of the complex, interweaving, and syncretic accretion of experience [Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, 2004: 102-103].

Whereas Methwold is perceived as an eccentric, Ilse is a more tragic figure. She is one of the German friends who have an influence on Aadam Aziz, and, by 'contagion', on those around him. Through Aadam's memories she is shown to be one of the people who believed that India had appeared with its discovery by the Europeans; she mocks and downgrades him for his religious beliefs, and she finds his appearance hilarious. However, when she comes to see him in Kashmir after years she is changed. Germany was defeated in the World War, a name which strikes one as odd on the background of a Kashmir unaffected by its existence.

Ilse brings with her the news of Oscar's death and her story is particularly interesting since it seems to foreshadow Tai's own fate. "He went to talk to the army and tell them not to be pawns. The fool really thought the troops would fling down their guns and walk away. [...] As he reached the streetcorner across from the parade ground he tripped over his own shoelace and fell into the street. A staff car hit him and he died" [Rushdie, 1982: 29]. The fisherman also dies while trying to put some sense into the army's heads and he is the one to lead Ilse on her final voyage in his shikara like a Kashmiri Charon. Thus, her sense of equilibrium is challenged and the realisation of the marginality characterising her own corner of the world devours her.

We cannot end this list without dedicating a few words to Evie Burns, the American cow-girl who constitutes Saleem's first love interest. She comes as a whirlwind and gains supremacy of the courtyard with her bicycle acrobatics and her air-gun, only to be violently dethroned by the Brass Monkey after a 'great cat massacre'. A shamed and furious Evie is sent back to the States by her father and the only report about her is that she knifed an old lady and was put in a correctional facility. The lady was protesting at Evie's rough handling of a cat. The girl's destiny goes hand in hand with one of the story's messages: no attempt at total control over multitudes is

unending. The Widow wants to be the one God in a country of million deities and she fails. Evie makes the same mistake on a smaller scale.

Therefore, besides being rather scarce in the two selected novels, the western characters seem to have a tendency to disappear into the diversity that inhabits the two narrative worlds. Their influence on the narrators and characters upon which they intrude exists, but it does not seem to be a main partner in an identity-defining dialogue, but rather one mirror fragment among many. Their role may be connected to one other comment from *Imaginary Homelands*, where Rushdie writes: "What seems to me to be happening is that those peoples who were once colonized by the language are now rapidly remaking it, domesticating it, becoming more and more relaxed about the way they use it – assisted by the English language's enormous flexibility and size, they are carving out large territories for themselves within its frontiers" [1991: 64]. In other words, appropriating and then transforming, using it in new ways, independent of the source.

It is the fragmentation of Saleem Sinai that dominates the narrative of *Midnight's Children* as he engulfs a world and a myriad of voices which all want their chance to be heard, making him central and marginal at the same time and, thus, questioning the dichotomy. Whereas, in *Shame*, marginality is set at such a high rank, that the novel's main character prides himself as being marginal to his own story.

To end on the same note as we began, we will return to the description of the city in the opening of the novel *Shame*:

In his peroration the embittered old recluse rehearsed his lifelong hatred for his home town, now calling down demons to destroy the clutter of low, dun-coloured, 'higgling and pigging' edifices around the bazaar, now annihilating with his death-encrusted words the cool whitewashed smugness of the Cantonment district. These were the two orbs of the town's dumb-bell shape; old town and Cantt, the former inhabited by the indigenous, colonized population and the latter by the alien colonizers, the Angrez, or British, sahibs. Old Shakil loathed both... [Rushdie, 1984: 11-12].

Firstly, it is interesting to see how the two communities are separate in space but having equal standings, since the shape of the city is that of a dumb-weight. Secondly, something else worth noticing might be the fact that the old-man's hatred is also equally distributed.

This attitude seems to go hand in hand with the general tone of the two novels in which the interest may sometimes seem to be the clash between East and West, but it is actually more often than not in the human being and its attempt to cope with the multitude of perspectives and perceptions around them.

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