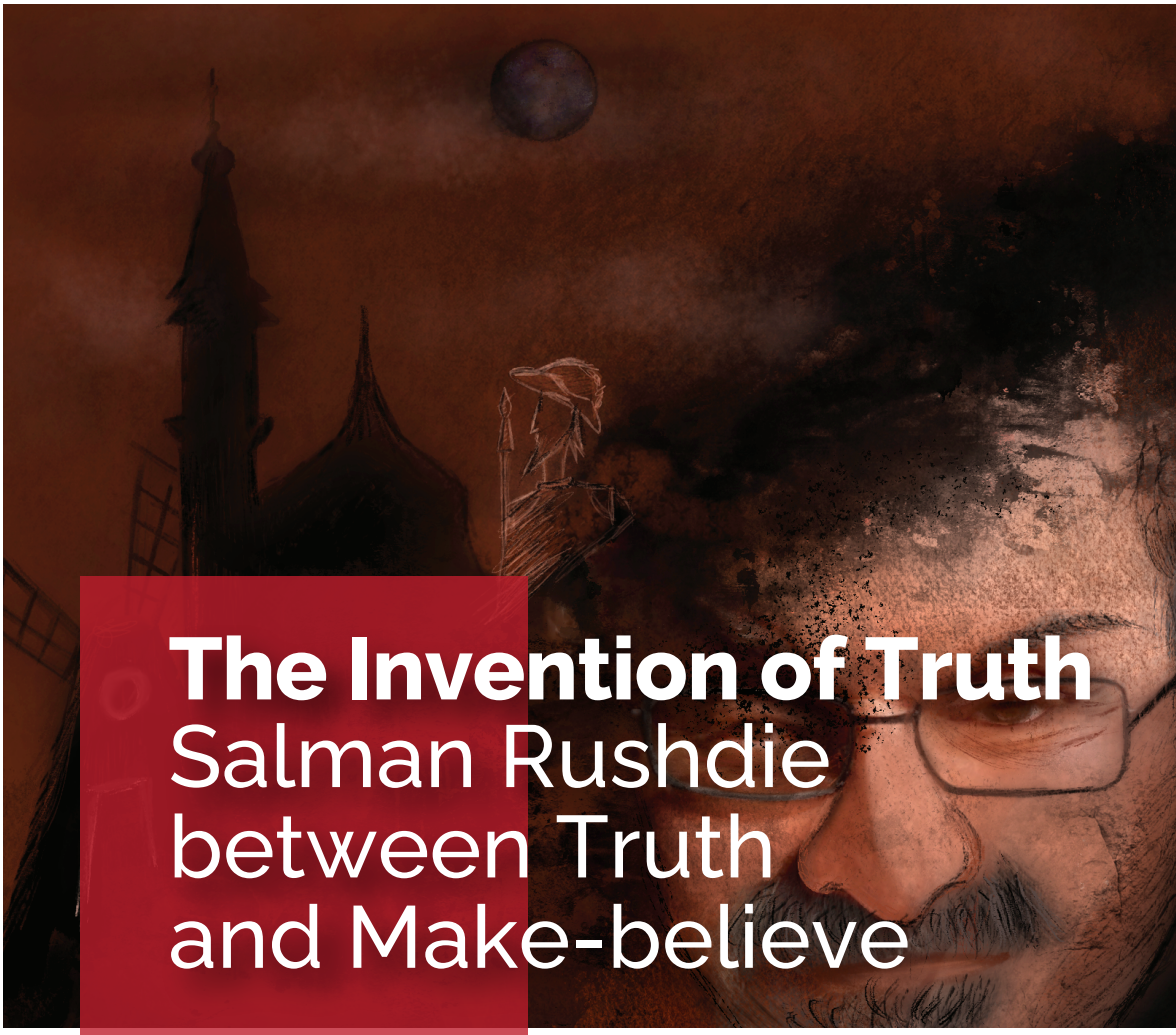
Quaderni della ricerca 9



The Invention of Truth
Salman Rushdie between Truth and Make-believe

UniorPress

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In copertina: *Image courtesy of Martina Piccirillo (piccirillomartina@gmail.com)*

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The *Quaderni della ricerca* series was established within the PhD programme in Literary, Linguistic and Comparative Studies to disseminate the scholarly work of the board of doctoral teachers and the selected proceedings of the *Graduate Conferences* organised by PhD students. The series serves as a repository for research conducted within the doctoral programme that examines the intersections of culture, literature, language and aesthetics from an interdisciplinary, transcultural and comparative perspective. The overarching aim of this scientific project is to explore the potential for intercontinental globalisation in the West by examining the interplay between medieval and early modern traditions with contemporary cultures. The main focus of the research encompasses contemporary forms of literary expression, entertainment and communication, as well as the reconstruction of cultural genealogies that provide insights into the historical circumstances of the present.

Φύσις κρύπτεσθαι φιλεῖ

Truth loves to conceal itself

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Chapter I

Introduction.
Reading Metaleptically

> ...it's very difficult, and in some cases, impossible, to give evident, and undeniable proofs, of the certainty of undoubted matters of fact.
> Suppose anyone shou'd say, there never was such a scene of action, as the Trojan War, grounding his bold affirmation, on the seeming impossibility, of some of the material circumstances, which attended it...; how cou'd we convince him of his gross mistake, when so many fables, being interwoven with the Body of the History, are so readily, and so universally believ'd? ... how could we demonstrate the whole account is true?
>
> Origen, *Contra Celsum*

1.1 *Rushdie's aporia*

"Think Different" was a catchphrase from an old Apple advertisement for one of its most popular computer lines. It was used in 1997 to promote the company's products and brand identity, and the exhortation not to conform but to think differently was accompanied by a series of television commercials, billboards and print ads featuring illustrious personalities and iconic figures, mostly innovators from history such as Mahatma Gandhi, Albert Einstein and Martin Luther King Jr, who had made a difference or challenged the status quo.[1] The presence of Mahatma Gandhi among these personalities could not escape one of the best interpreters of our generation, Salman Rushdie. In "Gandhi, Now" (2003) the Anglo-Indian author was not so much concerned with the use of his image for publicity purposes, but with the subsequent adaptation of the figure. It was ironic that a major American computer company had appropriated Gandhi to promote cutting-edge electronic technologies that the real man would never have approved of. Rushdie criticised the way Gandhi's historical meaning was emptied and replaced with content from a

[1] The campaign aimed to encourage people to think creatively and set new standards of excellence. It was designed to distinguish Apple from its competition in the technology industry by positioning it as a company that valued innovation and originality. The advertisements were highly successful and contributed to the establishment of Apple as a leading brand in the industry.

completely different context and a message that was in direct opposition to the character to whom it was attributed. In a sense, Gandhi had been transformed into something else, something completely new and different. Gandhi had been practically reinvented:

> Such is the present-day power of international big business. Even the greatest of the dead may summarily be drafted into its image campaigns. Once, a half-century ago, this bony man shaped a nation's struggle for freedom. But that, as they say, *is history*. Now Gandhi is modelling for Apple. His thoughts don't really count in this new incarnation. What counts is that he is considered to be "on message," in line with the corporate philosophy of Apple. (Rushdie 2003, 100, emphasis is mine)

Rushdie here describes Gandhi's historical achievements and representation with an ironic phrase: "that […] is history." Through the process of rewriting meanings in industrialised and globalised societies – which Guy Debord (1995) called 'societies of the spectacle'[2] – false realities are created that render history irrelevant in the sense that what was once real is now untrue. Truths may hold some meaning in a particular time and place, but they can also be repurposed to mean something quite different, even diametrically opposed, in another context. Since postmodern societies are fundamentally ahistorical,[3] everything can be appropriated, distorted, and rewritten as one sees fit.

> Gandhi today is up for grabs. He has become abstract, ahistorical, postmodern, no longer a man in and of his time but a free-floating concept, a part of the available stock of cultural symbols, an image that can be borrowed, used, distorted, reinvented, to fit many different purposes, *and to the devil with historicity or truth*. (*ibid.*, emphasis is mine)

Rushdie contrasts the unstable and ephemeral nature of postmodernism (which seizes images and symbols, crushes them, tears them apart, and then empties them of their essential content depending on the circumstances) with the verifiability

[2] Guy Debord's concept of 'societies of the spectacle' refers to a social condition in which people's experiences and understandings of the world around them are mediated by the images and messages they consume through mass media, especially television. It is characterised by the commodification of all aspects of social life, including culture, politics and even personal relationships, as well as a false sense of unity and consensus among the people when in actuality they are isolated from one another.

[3] Postmodern societies are considered ahistorical, or lacking a sense of history, for a number of reasons, such as emphasis on the present moment and a loss of interest in the past, which is often attributed to rapid technological and social change. Another reason is that they are marked by fragmentation and the feeling that there is no shared sense of history or cultural identity.

and provability of historical facts. In our example, Rushdie notes, the truth was to be derived indirectly from the involuntary comedy of a Westernised Indian and former lawyer who, having returned to a primitive lifestyle, now urges us to use computer text editors half-naked and with a pencil in hand, and more generally to adopt a lifestyle clearly at odds with that depicted in the Apple advertisement.

According to Rushdie, this 'posthumous' Gandhi is boring, flat, unlike the 'real' Gandhi, whose contradictions made him much more fascinating. He points out that Gandhi was an inspiration and a source of strength for protesters against apartheid in South Africa and South America.[4] Rushdie further notes that although he was not afraid to challenge the most powerful and oppressive empire in history, the British Empire, he slept with a lamp nearby because he was afraid of the dark; he led a life of asceticism, yet its poverty equally burdened public resources and depended on the financial support of patrons like Ghanshyam Das Birla;[5] his fasting prevented riots and massacres,[6] but he once advised the workers of his capitalist protector not to strike against the harsh conditions they endured at his hands. Rushdie argues that, according to Gandhi, passive resistance and constructive nonviolence were crucial to India's independence. However, the brutality of Nazism, which weakened Britain's control over the subcontinent, and violent protests within India had the same, if not greater, impact on this achievement. Most importantly, in constructing Indian identity, Gandhi preferred to be inspired by the religious tradition of the people and the fragmentary body of ancient narratives 'about' India rather than by the official history 'of' the country.[7] And just as Gandhi

[4] He was able to accomplish this due to his philosophy of non-violence, which he called *satyagraha* or 'truth power,' along with his belief in the potential of civil disobedience to bring about social change. There is no need to resort to violence in order to resist injustice and oppression, according to Gandhi. Several protesters against apartheid in South Africa and South America were inspired by his thought.

[5] Gandhi was not a wealthy man and had no regular source of income, so was financially dependent on the support of patrons like Ghanshyam Das Birla at certain stages of his life.

[6] During his campaigns for social and political change in India, Gandhi used fasting as a form of non-violent resistance. His belief was that it was an effective means of demonstrating the sincerity of one's cause and appealing to the conscience of one's opponents. Gandhi, for example, used fasting in 1947 to protest against the communal violence that broke out after India's partition, contributing to its cessation.

[7] Gandhi's life and work were shaped by his spiritual beliefs and by the cultural and religious traditions of India. He drew on these traditions in his work and writings, often using stories and symbols from Indian mythology and spirituality to convey his ideas and values to others.

used myths and traditional stories to make Indian history, Apple now entered the story with a powerful advertising campaign that used Gandhi's myth and personal history: "These days, few people pause to consider the [...] ambiguous nature of his achievement and legacy [...] These are hurried, sloganizing times, and we don't have the time or, worse, the inclination to assimilate many-sided truths." (ivi, 101)

Yet, not only is Rushdie not afraid to talk about the historical and actual Gandhi, but he claims that right for himself. To hell with historicity, he exclaims indignantly about Apple's business practices. Although he acknowledges that it is impossible to separate Gandhi's story from the fiction about him, and to distinguish Gandhi's voice from the indistinct buzz of the common people talking about him, he implies that he somehow knows the 'real' Gandhi, the one who must be carefully protected from the fictional reinventions, mystifications, and distortions that have followed over the years.

Gandhi used similar methods of reclaiming and adapting ideas in his efforts to gain independence from Britain, which makes it difficult to fully understand his legacy and personality. Of course, the issue is not that reality does not exist. Reality is very much there. The problem is that Rushdie claims to possess a true historical understanding of Gandhi while simultaneously admitting that he cannot distinguish between the real and simulated aspects of his life. The author bases his understanding of Gandhi on personal preference rather than objective truth, implying that truth is determined by the selective interpretation of facts. In his argument, the author chooses one version of Gandhi as the 'true' one and discards the others.

Rushdie's approach of arbitrarily selecting one version of the truth as the real one contains a logical flaw, hidden in the prudence of the intellectual, which is acknowledged but not fully addressed when he says "The real man, if it is still possible to use such a term after the generations of [...] reinvention." In order for the paradox to continue, the author must not be aware of his own subjective choice, as acknowledging it would force him to consider the distinction between reality and fantasy and potentially lead to a sense of meaninglessness. Like Saleem in *Midnight's Children* (2021c), Rushdie may also fear absurdity above all else (22). The central theme of this volume is precisely the relationship between truth and fiction as represented in Rushdie's writing, with a particular focus on how the author handles this tension.

The distinction between reality and fantasy in art, or between reference and absence of reference, has always played an influential role in the artistic creative process and in theoretical discussion (Doležel 1980). Literary critics of the early to mid-20th century tended to be sceptical of the idea of literary

verisimilitude. Followers of Gottlob Frege's[8] philosophy (Mendelsohn 2005), for example, argued that literary propositions are neither true nor false in and of themselves, but that they are either true or false depending on the circumstances in which they are made. Similarly, structuralists[9] and some poststructuralists[10] did not consider the concept of truth useful when it came to literature (Mukařovský 1977). Over time (Heintz 1979; Pavel 1976), the view developed that a literary statement can be true in the fictional world in which it is expressed even if it has no historical or material equivalent.[11] In the context of the play, the statement that Hamlet is mortally wounded by Laertes is true despite the fictional nature of the story. The result is that literature is imbued with a degree of truthfulness that overlaps and blurs with historical reality so that it eventually becomes a part of it. 20th century novelists were particularly interested in exploring the contamination between truth and reality. Modernist literature, as explained by McHale (1987), sought to uncover the most authentic truth and therefore placed a strong emphasis on understanding knowledge. However, the inability to arrive at a clear and certain truth led novelists to

[8] Gottlob Frege was a German philosopher known for his contributions to the development of modern logic and philosophy of language. Frege argued that propositions consist of two components: the sense and the reference. The sense of a sentence is the meaning or content of the statement, while the reference is the object or thing to which the sentence refers. A sentence's truth or falsity depends on whether it's reference corresponds to reality, according to Frege.

[9] The concept of truth in structuralist thought is often viewed from a relativistic perspective, which means that it is viewed in relation to the structures and systems in which it is situated. What is considered true in one system or structure may not be considered true in another. In the structuralist approach to language, the truth of a statement or sentence is not determined by its correspondence in an external reality, but by its place within the language system.

[10] Truth, according to poststructuralism, is a construct of the social, cultural, and historical context in which it is produced and consumed rather than an objective reality. In addition, it contends that there is no single, universal truth, but a multiplicity of truths that are shaped by the various discourses and practices in society. Poststructuralists thus also challenge the idea of objective knowledge and the notion that it can be detached from the subject who produces it. In their view, knowledge is always shaped by personal and collective perspectives, prejudices, or interests, and therefore cannot be understood in isolation from them.

[11] In such fictional worlds, the veracity of a statement or sentence is not determined by its correspondence to external reality, but by its place in the fictional world the author has created. A statement or sentence can be considered true in the context of the fictional world, even if it is not true in the real world. For example, a character in a fantasy novel may make a statement about the properties of a magical object, and that statement may be considered true in the context of the fictional world of the novel, even if it is not true in the real world.

focus on issues of existence, trying to determine what is real and how it can be distinguished from what is not. Because of this difficulty, constructivist approaches paradoxically evolved into panfictionalism[12] in the second half of the 20th century. Panfictionalism regards everything as fiction and as a meaningless, often humorous game of constant contamination. Some critics argue that postmodernist novelists like Rushdie use quotations and cross-references instead of plot to try and convey deeper meaning to the reader. This book examines how Rushdie's novels explore the relationship between reality and fiction and the literary techniques and devices he uses to suggest that reality is always more complex and multifaceted than its historical and adapted versions, which are irreversibly influenced by each other.

As an author, Rushdie is undoubtedly in the late stages of his artistic and literary career. So far he has published fourteen novels and a collection of short stories (*East, West*, 1994). With Elizabeth West, he co-edited *Mirrorwork* (1997), an anthology of contemporary Indian literature, and he co-authored *The Best American Short Stories*, considered by many to be the best anthology of American short stories of 2008. The author is a member of the British Royal Society of Literature[13] and has won a number of major literary awards, including the Best of the Booker[14] in 2008, the Whitbread Award for Best Novel[15] (twice), the Writers Guild, the James Tait Black, the Aristeion for Literature, and was named Author of the Year in England and Germany. His interviews

[12] The term panfictionalism, which was coined in the 1980s, refers to the idea that all fiction, regardless of genre or form, is fundamentally interconnected and that the boundaries between different genres are permeable and fluid. Therefore, it challenges traditional notions of genres and the classification of literary works into categories such as science fiction, fantasy, or realism.

[13] As one of the oldest literary societies in the world, the British Royal Society of Literature (RSL) was founded in 1820 by George IV. It has a number of objectives, including supporting and promoting the writing and reading of literature in all its forms. It also awards a number of prestigious literary prizes.

[14] Prize awarded to Rushdie on 10 July 2008 for his *Midnight's Children* (1981), which had already earned him the Booker, obtained in the same year of the novel's publication, and the even more resounding Booker of Booker award in 1993. The Booker Prize is a prestigious literary award presented annually to the best original full-length novel written in English and published in the United Kingdom. The prize is named after its sponsor, the Booker Prize Foundation, which was established in 1968 with a donation from the Booker McConnell Foundation, a multinational food distribution company. The Booker Prize is widely regarded as one of the most prestigious literary awards in the world and has a reputation for honouring the best contemporary novels.

[15] The Whitbread Award for Best Novel is a literary prize awarded annually by the Whitbread Book Awards, established in 1971 to recognise excellence in British and Irish literature.

with newspapers and TV around the world, his speeches at conferences, and his writing that can be classified as nonfiction have extended his influence from the literary to the academic landscape and launched some of the most productive critical debates of recent decades (Ciocca 2017). Rushdie is a highly productive and diverse writer whose work spans several decades and encompasses various literary trends and movements. Even though it would be easier to categorise and understand his writing retrospectively, even now we can see how Rushdie's writing has generated numerous interpretations, often resulting in conflicting definitions and new areas of critical analysis. Rushdie is known for his sharp, sarcastic irony, which is a characteristic of postmodernism (Bădulescu 2014; Fletcher 1994; Hutcheon 1986, 1987; Krishnaswamy 1995). He also writes with the thoughtfulness and introspection of modernism (Grant 2012; Riquelme 2013; Spenser 2010; Walkowitz 2006), and is skilled in using the illusions and techniques of magical realism (Aldea 200; Arva 2008; Bassi 1999; Faris 2002, 2004; Hart, Ouyang 2005; Roh, Gunter 1995; Rosenberg 2001; Warnes 2005). He is seen as sincerely committed to postcolonial issues (Ball 2003; Laudando 2013; Marzec 2007; Mishra, Salgado 1995; Morton 2007; Warnes 2009), and is recognised for his portrayal of migrant life, although he has also been criticised for being a privileged ambassador of cultural and ethnic hybridity. Theorising translation as a form of transgression (Bădulescu 2011; Mann 1995; Prasad 1999; Ramone 2013; Rundholz, Kirca 2021; Rushdie 2003), he has explored the impact of linguistic contamination and globalisation (Crăciun 2019; Mendes 2012) as a poet of 'borders' (Mitchell 1989) but also as a chronicler of the frontier (Ashcroft 2016; Needham 1994).

While Rushdie is often referred to as a postmodernist writer, it is difficult to place him firmly in either the modernist or postmodernist literary movements of the 20th century. Surely, he began writing during the height of the postmodernist period. Drawing on Vladimir Nabokov, McHale claims in his now classic reading that postmodernism is characterised by an ontological dominant,[16] that is a focus on ontological questions, or the nature and essence of the world and its relationship to other worlds. Postmodernist literature often explores the instability and uncertainty of reality and how our understanding of the world is influenced by language and other cultural systems. Postmodernist writers frequently challenge traditional forms of representation, disrupt

[16] In literary theory, the concept of literary dominant has been mainly employed by Russian-born American novelist and literary critic Vladimir Nabokov to refer to the central theme, idea or motif that shapes and organises a literary work, its driving force source of meaning.

conventional ideas about truth and meaning, and draw attention to the subjectivity and contingency of our perceptions and experiences. This emphasis on ontological issues is seen in the way postmodernist literature experiments with form and genre. It often emphasises the role of the individual subject and how our understanding of the world is shaped by language, culture, and history. Overall, the focus on ontological questions in postmodernist literature reflects a broader shift in intellectual and cultural attitudes towards the nature of reality and our place in the world. It encourages readers to think critically about the ways in which our understanding of the world is constructed and mediated. In the words of van Huyssteen (1997):

> Typical of postmodernism is its scepticism concerning the central role assigned to reason and rational thought. Over against indubitable truth-claims, an overconfident faith in science, and a metaphysical way of reasoning, the interrelatedness of truth-perspectives, ethical pluralism, and cultural relativism is typical of the postmodern perspective. (187)

Conversely, McHale observes that modernist literature was characterised by an epistemological dominant, which means that it was primarily concerned with the transmission and acquisition of knowledge. According to McHale, modernist literature is characterised by a scepticism towards traditional forms of knowledge and a distrust of grand narratives and metanarratives or overarching frameworks for understanding the world. Modernist writers often challenge and deconstruct these narratives by attempting to expose their underlying assumptions and biases. In doing so, they draw attention to the subjective and provisional nature of knowledge and the ways in which it is shaped by culture, history and individual experience. This emphasis on epistemological issues is evident in the way modernist writers break with traditional modes of representation and challenge the conventions of realism. As well-documented, modernism was strongly influenced by the psychoanalytic theories that were emerging at the time, which contributed to gaining insights into the elusive nature of the human mind as not purely rational in its processes. One of the major themes of modernism is the idea that language is an inadequate and unreliable means of understanding and representing the complexity of the human psyche. Writers often portray the psyche as fragmented, multidimensional and resistant to straightforward representation. They also explore the ways in which language is shaped by the individual psyche and how it can be used to express and convey our innermost thoughts and feelings. Modernist writers recognised the ambiguous relationship between the psyche and language, the latter serving as a mediator between the inwardness of emotions and the

outwardness of the material world. For this reason, writers often focused on thoughts and sensations in order to penetrate into the uncharted psychic territories of their characters, where the co-existence of diametrically opposed or contradictory personality traits is possible in the same individual. Modernist novels ultimately aimed to reconcile the diverse and conflicting aspects of the psyche with an increasingly elusive and incomprehensible material universe. As a result, modernist literature was concerned with defining knowledge and its limits, with the individual's role in the world, and with how knowledge changes as it is perceived and described by its many recipients (Huyssen 1986, Butler 1994, Berman 2011).

The distinction between dominants reflects a subtle shift of emphasis rather than a dichotomous separation. McHale's observation that epistemological questions came to the fore in modernism does not mean that ontological issues were neglected, quite the contrary. They merely receded into the background, just as epistemological questions serve as a backdrop against which ontological concerns are posed in postmodernist literature. In hindsight, according to McHale, the transition from one to the other was inevitable, since epistemological inquiries naturally lead to ontological issues and vice versa. These variations seem to reveal the fluctuations in individual and collective sensibility when we try to understand the world or our environment. The preoccupation with a particular subject generates a force that gradually shifts the focus to an opposite or complementary one, and many of these fluctuations can be seen throughout developments of art and literature.

Postmodernism inherited modernism's interest in the human psyche. This interest, however, was woven into a period of globalisation and the most rapid technological advancements in human history. Additionally, the advent of digital technologies has resulted in the emergence of new forms of expression and art, a dramatic shift in our communication and working modes, as well as the creation of permanent virtual worlds in which people can reinvent themselves and interact within a variety of communities where traditional notions of race, gender, and class can be discarded or repurposed. Postmodernism has taken up the challenge of understanding how everything and everyone can be affected by events and circumstances that are geographically and historically distant from them. It has had to adapt to both the convergence and divergence of cultures, as well as to operate in a dynamic environment in which everything can be about whatever one chooses. Consequently, the literature and art that have developed under its aegis are primarily concerned with expressing ontological claims, developing skills that can handle multiple (even contradictory) perspectives, and ethical pluralism, or the ability to deal with con-

flicting moral standards and suspend judgement between different points of view.[17] Postmodern consciousness has further complicated the search for truth and made it ephemeral by exposing modernity to a multiplicity of conflicting, symmetrical or mirroring realities.

1.2 *Playing on duplicity and hyphenation*

The mixing of elements and perspectives is a hallmark of Rushdie's entire narrative production since his first novel, *Grimus* (1975). It was published six years before *Midnight's Children*, in 1975, a time when postmodernism was at its height and some would even argue nearing its end. According to Fawzia Afzal-Khan (1993), the novel is a "mishmash of myth, fantasy, and science fiction" (144), an opinion that explains why the novel has gone largely unnoticed by critics and the general public. In his review of *The Ground beneath Her Feet* (1999), titled "Losing The Plot", in April 1999, Peter Kemp of *The Sunday Times* referred to *Grimu*s as "a ramshackle surreal saga based on a 12th-century Sufi poem and copiously encrusted with mythical and literary allusion, nosedived into oblivion amid almost universal critical derision." In the same review, Kemp compares The *Ground Beneath Her Feet* to a collection of quotations rather than a coherent whole. Rushdie's writing has often been accused of being too fluid and full of allusions that detract from the coherence of the text. Although Afzal-Khan believes that this avoids the 'petrifying' effect of myths, many feel that the abundance of mythological and scholarly quotations sometimes makes it difficult to follow the thread of his texts. In most cases, this is achieved by combining different elements, some of which are antagonistic and can come from sources as diverse as mythology, comics, epics and science fiction.

Although *Grimus*' naivety is obvious, it is a natural starting point for Rushdie as it contains many elements, concerns and interests that are essential to understanding his later works. Among these is the coincidentia oppositorum, the meeting or reconciliation of opposites.[18] The novel is a chaotic mixture of

[17] A fundamental principle of ethical pluralism is the importance of tolerance, respect, and dialogue in resolving ethical conflicts and promoting understanding and cooperation among different groups and cultures. As well as promoting critical thinking about one's own ethical beliefs and values, it promotes an openness to different perspectives and ways of understanding the world.

[18] Coincidentia oppositorum, also known as 'meeting of opposites,' is the concept that opposing ideas, phenomena, or forces can exist simultaneously and be reconciled or integrated into a

many elements, characterised by the proximity of opposites or contrasting features. The protagonist of the story is Flapping Eagle, a Native American from the Axona tribe. His mother died during childbirth, which is why he is called Born from Dead, a nickname that juxtaposes death and birth as if life emerged from the former. Death is not only the end of life, but also the source of it. His father died soon after, leaving him in the care of his 13-year-old sister, Bird-Dog. In his tribe, people are generally dark-skinned and short in stature, while he has a fair complexion and is quite tall. Furthermore, the protagonist is born a hermaphrodite[19] who takes on male characteristics as he ages. Axonas distrusted him because of his mutation, believing he was an abomination or a black magic prodigy. As a result of his displaying both male and female characteristics, Flapping Eagle was originally named Joe-Sue, a combination of a male and female name. His sister presents a similar ambiguity. She is a klutzy cook but an experienced huntress, i.e., she is incapable of doing what her tribe expects of a woman, namely preparing food, but excels in a male prerogative, hunting. As a hunter with breasts, Bird-Dog was anathema in her society. Performing manly chores, she was known as the 'manly sister' as she combined supposed opposites.

Due to their unfortunate parental circumstances, as well as their sexual and body duplicity, Flapping Eagle and his sister are disliked and ostracised by the rest of their tribe. Despite not being expelled from their community of origin, the siblings are outcasts and marginalised, reduced to quasi-Pariah status. They are neither inside nor outside their community. For this reason, they eventually decide to leave it and migrate to a place where they could establish new relationships and live fully integrated, without being discriminated against. Afzal-Khan refers to Flapping Eagle as a 'peripheral' hero, similar to the character Omar Khayyam in *Shame* (1995). Moreover, in many

whole. In philosophy, it is often seen as a way to bridge the gap between dualistic and monistic worldviews, which view reality as consisting of either two opposing forces or a single, unified force. As a way of bringing together seemingly opposing or contradictory elements, coincidentia oppositorum is often used in literature and art.

[19] The idea of coincidentia oppositorum can be applied to the figure of the hermaphrodite as a person or being who has both male and female qualities or characteristics. A hermaphrodite represents the idea that seemingly opposite or contradictory elements can coexist and be reconciled within one individual. Hermaphrodites have a long history in literature and art, and have often been used as symbols of unity, wholeness, and complexity. Many cultures view the hermaphrodite as a symbol of balance and integration. As a symbol of fluidity and complexity of gender and identity, the hermaphrodite challenges rigid and restrictive gender roles.

ways his birth is similar to that of Saleem from *Midnight's Children*, who is not an orphan but appears to have been born as the result of circumstances out of his control, dictated by timing and destiny. While Saleem considers his to be a fated event in history, it is death that defines Flapping Eagle's origin. Both children share a fateful connection: temporal factors predominate over biological or territorial ones.

There is a strong sense of ambiguity surrounding both characters in that they seem to be constantly caught in a tension between two polarities, where one element appears to oppose or contradict the other. Other characters, too, often have more than one given name in the novel. Grimus (an anagram of the mythical bird Simurg) is also known as Sispy. The United States is also referred to as Amerindia. Bird-dog's name is self-given, the real one is never revealed. In Western culture, the hermaphrodite is considered to be the archetypal example of coincidentia oppositorum. *Grimus* presents a protagonist who is at all levels a prototype for both Rushdie's characters and his writing style, as he combines duplicity through processes of hyphenation.

1.3 *Opalescence, metaxy and palindromes*

In Snakes and Ladders, a game referred to in *Midnight's Children*, ladders are positive because they lead upwards, while snakes are negative because they lead downwards. This game has a moral aspect as it illustrates the fact that human existence is characterised by dualistic tendencies. However, the game lacks a fundamental human feature, which can be summarised as the ambiguity that the narrator believes connects all things, the inherent ambiguity of existence.[20] In the words of Booker (1990):

> ...this Nietzschean – Whitmanesque mode of accepting contradiction might serve not only as a central theme of *Shame*, but of all of Rushdie's fiction. That fiction consistently embraces contradiction, privileging the plural over the sin-

[20] "All games have morals; and the game of Snakes and Ladders captures, as no other activity can hope to do, the eternal truth that for every ladder you climb, a snake is waiting just around the corner; and for every snake, a ladder will compensate. But it's more than that; no mere carrot-and-stick affair; because implicit in the game is *the unchanging twoness of things*, the duality of up against down, good against evil; the solid rationality of ladders balances the occult sinuosities of the serpent; in the opposition of staircase and cobra we can see, metaphorically, *all conceivable oppositions*, Alpha against Omega, father against mother; here is the war of Mary and Musa, and the polarities of knees and nose... but I found, very early in my life, that the game lacked one crucial dimension, *that of ambiguity* – because, as events are about to show, it is also possible to slither down a ladder and climb to triumph on the venom of a snake." (Rushdie 2021c, 212, emphasis is mine)

> gular, the polyphonic over the monologic. One of the clearest ways in which it does so is through the careful construction of dual oppositions, like the snakes and ladders of Sinai's children's game, only to deconstruct those oppositions by demonstrating that the apparent polar opposites are in fact interchangeable and mutually interdependent.
> The most obvious way in which Rushdie launches his attack on dual thinking is through the use of paired characters. All of the most important characters tend to be shadowed by doubles in Rushdie's texts. (978)

In *Midnight's Children*, Booker argues that Saleem and Shiva share a number of characteristics that make them essentially interchangeable (e.g. that they were born at midnight on 15 August 1947 and being switched at birth by Mary Pereira). There is, in fact, an oscillatory movement in the narrative that allows Saleem to 'function' as Shiva, or Shiva to take Saleem's positions, depending on the circumstances. Many characters in Rushdie's later novels are linked by this recurring pattern, including Iskander Harappa/Raza Hyder and Harappa/Maulana Dawood in *Shame*, Gibreel Farishta/Saladin Chamcha and Gibreel/Mahound in *The Satanic Verses* (2011), Noman Sher Noman/Max Ophuls in *Shalimar the Clown* (2006), or Ismail Ismail/Sam DuChamp in *Quichotte* (2019). In addressing Rushdie's ambiguity, this volume aims to highlight the oscillatory, hence 'metaleptic', mechanism that breaks through the static nature of binarism. Rushdie's "pervasive tone of uncertainty" (Couto 1982, 62) allows him to create an "internal dialectic" (Rushdie 1995, 242) capable of "holding [the] large numbers of wholly irreconcilable views" (ibid.) that bind binarisms together.

I intend to examine the aesthetic canons and narrative devices that enable Rushdie to become both master and recipient of his own contradictions in his attempt to describe how multiplicities interact. In addition, I will discuss literary, theoretical, and religious themes that Rushdie explores at the intersection of reality and fiction as he weaves and unravels paradoxical connections between them and human history. Rushdie uses writing to ask himself and the reader whether truth and fiction should be considered as two separate and opposing realms. This question often involves careful consideration of language. Rushdie is indeed a writer who emphasises language's ability to create sign systems whose subjects survive by naturalising and becoming flesh through human performance.

The critical insights offered here may contribute to interrogate Rushdie's comprehension of the Orwellian decoupling between meaning and signifier, between sign and referent. This can help us understand the reinforcement of the illusion of subjective sovereignty, the use of violence on an ethnic or racial

basis, and the recent consolidation of nationalism on a global scale, the delegitimization of knowledge in social networks, and the spread of mistrust fueled by irrational emotions and feelings to protect us from unpleasant realities. By looking at Rushdie through this lens, we may gain a deeper understanding of the diminishing trust in democratic institutions, the recent delegitimization of established knowledge in favour of unexamined snippets of information that claim equal or greater value, and also how certain political systems can rely on the validation of 'post-truth regimes' in which emotions sabotage logic and reason. More generally, it means recognising the reasons Rushdie's work will endure.

Following this introductory chapter, the rest of this book is divided in three main parts. The second chapter highlights Rushdie's 'postmodern' humour as his most significant literary device. *Midnight's Children* combines myths from various religions with the author's own childhood memories to create a narrative with multiple layers of meaning. As Kortenaar (2004) notes, it should be remembered that Saleem's story is a fictionalised recreation of Rushdie's youth in Bombay, when he lived in a house called Windsor Villa on Warden Road overlooking the Breach Candy Swimming Pool. The term 'recreation' has been used here since Rushdie is not interested in providing an authentic autobiographical account of those years. As a matter of fact, the main difference between Saleem and Rushdie is that, despite wandering around Pakistan and Bangladesh, Saleem never actually moves to a Western country. Unlike Rushdie, he is also able to return to Bombay, where he was born and raised and where he can work at his ayah's factory while "pickl[ing] his memories and write his memoirs." (Kortenaar 2004, 7)

According to Linda Hutcheon (1989), the author/character and India/West specularities give rise to the novel's intertextual plots: "They are, on the one hand, from Indian legends, films and literature and, on the other, from the west – *The Tin Drum*, *Tristram Shandy*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and so on." (62) Dipesh Chakrabarty (1992, 2009), however, criticised this remark, pointing out that in highlighting this duplicity, Hutcheon only cites references that she is familiar with and can identify in a Western context, leaving out those that relate to Indian culture. According to the scholar, this ignorance is only partially concealed by the omission, since it comes to light indirectly. Kortenaar further notes that:

> Hutcheon and Chakrabarty are both wrong if they assume that the doubling of Rushdie's references is symmetrical. Hutcheon names only the intertexts that need to be identified because, while very conspicuous, they are left unstated by the novel itself. She leaves unglossed the references to the Quran and to Hindu mythology because they are already explicit: Ganesh and Mount Sinai, Gabriel

> and Kali are directly invoked by Saleem. The references that the novel does not gloss, which are all Western, do not belong to Saleem but to Rushdie. (2004, 7)

While Chandrabarty's critique is certainly accurate, it is perhaps overly harsh given Rushdie's desire to avoid procedural accuracy in order to create a pastiche in which all the 'flavours' or ingredients are deliberately difficult to reassemble.

Matters are further complicated when one considers that Rushdie, playing on the ambiguity of his irony, masterfully incorporates into his narrative an indeterminate series of oversights and errors (whether they relate to historical events or to myths and legends prevalent in various cultures) difficult for any scholar to detect. To expose them explicitly would require encyclopaedic knowledge. With varying degrees of awareness, Saleem recognises the limitations of his memory and the 'impurities' it contains, and warns the readers of the tricks it might play on him. There is a point in recognising that Saleem is not an unreliable narrator simply because his memory has gaps or inaccuracies, but that he is an interested party in the story which he influences and is influenced by. In fact, he may wish to orient it by omitting details or arranging others to create a perspective that is primarily convenient for him, so he can be the first to accept it.

I want to illustrate how Rushdie wants the reader to constantly doubt Saleem's reliability as a narrator, not only because of his accuracy of recollection, but also because of gaps, errors and contradictions that reveal a reflective quality, drawing on Roman Ingarden's (1973) concept of opalescent narrative elements, which arises from the narrator's possible biases and leads to a web of otherwise unsuspected narrative paths. I will show how Rushdie uses irony to construct a dialogic framework of doubt in which many key elements can have different qualities depending on the reader's point of view. A close examination of the text reveals that the ambiguity of magical realism allows the reader to vacillate between belief and disbelief and to consider several hypotheses at once. As with the narrator and author of the story, readers will ultimately only remember the narrative they chose to believe.

By exploring what might have been possible and what might still be, Rushdie proves himself a versatile writer, able to hold multiple versions of the world at once. *The Satanic Verses*, his fourth novel which I discuss in the third chapter, demonstrates this not only in narrative and structural terms, but also in the extremely polarising perception that the novel generated among critics and audiences. With disarming irony, Rushdie describes the vacillation between certainty and doubt that characterises the perspectives of the two Indian-born migrants Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha, as well as his own contradic-

tory sentiments in relation to religion, nationalism or any prevailing orthodoxy, questioning where and whether a principle of authority can be sought in their respective narratives. In this way, he creates a text with three intertwined narrative strands, each converging on the traces of a dualistic opposition between Gibreel and Saladin, faith and nationality, historical reality and dream.

My contention is that Rushdie displays a renewed aesthetic sensibility that makes him a pioneer of metamodern writing as defined by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van der Akker (2010). I will focus in particular on the concept of metaxy to show that the dualisms that characterise the novel are not based on the static opposition common to binarisms. Two levels of reality (the historical and the dreamlike) coexist and interact simultaneously throughout the narrative, according to a rhythmic movement of affirmation and negation, i.e. a principle of 'palinodic' narrative development that defies chronology and linear progression. Following Josh Toth (2017), it is argued in this context that the narrative of *The Satanic Verses* is 'historioplastic' because it relies on the unlimited pliability of the narrative material in both spatial and chronological terms. Rushdie is able to address instances that are typical of both modernism and postmodernism, approaching the notion of metamorphosis or intercultural transformation from a dynamic perspective that takes into account the potential of the migrant subject to be both one thing and its opposite.

Accordingly, the concluding section of this volume examines Rushdie's writing as an expression of a palindromic relationship between art and life that does not subordinate one to the other but allows both to emerge in response to reciprocal influences. Thus, past and future can contaminate each other. Interestingly, many clues in *Quichotte* indirectly address Rushdie's realisation that his novels gave him glimpses, hints and visions of what his future would be like. Through art, he was not only exploring his past and his inner self, as he had always believed since *Midnight's Children*, but also his future without being aware of it. In the process of writing his latest novel about the fictional character Quichotte, protagonist and author Sam DuChamp realises that what he has written is also what his future holds. Through Quichotte's tragicomic search for his beloved Salma, amidst a thousand television quotes and accompanied by Sancho (the son he envisions having in the future with Salma), Sam realises how much love he has lost in his life and is determined to reclaim it with some success. Sam thus gains a palindromic, or reciprocal, perspective on life and art and realises that he has unknowingly created his own future through his artistic inventions. It is a humbling insight that unites Sam and Rushdie himself, a writer who finally realises that the foundations of his life rest on the invention of his past works and stories.

Chapter II

Dialogic Imaginations. Opalescence and Tentative Acceptance in *Midnight's Children*

> Rather than being innocent victims of suspicion, literary works are active instigators and perpetrators of it. That we have learned to read between the lines has everything to do with the devices deployed in modern works of art: unreliable narrators, conflicting viewpoints, fragmented narratives, and metafictional devices that alert readers to the ways in which words conceal rather than reveal.
>
> Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique*

> Who would want to believe that they never met again, never fulfilled their love? Who would want to believe that, except in the service of the bleakest realism? [...] No one will care what events and which individuals were misrepresented to make a novel. I know that there is always a certain kind of reader who will be compelled to ask: But what *really* happened?
>
> Ian McEwan, *Atonement*

2.1 *A story rooted in history, myths and inconsistencies*

Midnight's Children is Rushdie's first major novel. The story of Saleem Sinai, while chronologically Rushdie's second literary work, is undoubtedly his first notable novel, often considered his masterpiece. A recurring sense of humour is no accident in this work. Rushdie uses irony to explore the relationship between fact and fiction with different techniques. In general, narrative is characterised primarily by a strongly allusive tone. There is no overt playfulness, as references are mostly indirect, transversal or undefined.

Claire Colebrook (2004) explains that irony is a mode of speech or expression in which the opposite of what is actually meant is said or implied, often in a humorous or satirical way. Since irony generally contradicts what is intended, it is an extremely flexible tool to mock something or someone, and it can also be an effective means of criticism and dissent. She clarifies that

the word originates from the Greek word εἰρωνεία, eirōneía, which means 'dissimulation' or 'feigned ignorance', and was originally used in Plato's Socratic dialogues[1] to describe Socrates' ambiguous ability to simultaneously tell the truth and lie, or, more precisely, to lie and pursue his true intentions. Irony combines truth and lies by definition. Colebrook argues that irony can be ambiguous and paradoxical, as it often says one thing and implies another, making it difficult to determine what the speaker is truly trying to convey. It presents us with the fundamental difficulty of finding out what the author really thinks and how to ensure the sincerity and authenticity of the discourse. It is unclear whether the author's statements are true or false and how much information is being conveyed.

Brian McHale (1987) contends that postmodern irony emerges from the reinterpretation of the relationship between author and God in terms of a quasi-divine or demiurgic power. According to McHale, the idea of the poet as a divine being arose after the Renaissance, when people lost their understanding of humanity's place in the universe. The orderly view of the world of poets like Sidney eventually gave way to a new perspective influenced by the philosopher Blaise Pascal.[2] This new understanding recognised the gap between the limited capacity of the human mind and the vastness of the universe, which is impossible to fully grasp. To compensate for this shortcoming, humanity began to paradoxically treat the universe as something that could be controlled and manipulated, a toy subject to its whims, rather than as something infinitely vast and mysterious. The human mind eventually became larger than the universe from which it emerged. From this point of view, postmodern irony results from humanity reducing the universe to a game it controls and plays in the face of complexities it cannot understand,

[1] A series of philosophical conversations recorded by Plato in which the philosopher Socrates discusses with various interlocutors. In the Socratic dialogues, irony is often used as a method to question and challenge conventional knowledge and traditional forms of authority. Irony is a tool Socrates uses to expose contradictions and inconsistencies in his interlocutors' arguments and to make them question their own assumptions and beliefs. It involves rhetorical questions and apparent agreement with the opponent's position to expose contradictions and weaknesses. For example, Socrates may seem to agree with an interlocutor's position and then ask a series of questions that expose their inconsistencies or logical fallacies.

[2] According to Pascal, the complexity of the world and the vastness of the universe are beyond human comprehension. Humans are faced with the reality that there is so much we do not understand and may never fully comprehend as a result of this gap, and this should serve as a reminder of our limited knowledge.

explain, or contain. With the realisation that the universe is infinite and beyond human comprehension, artistic consciousness begins to play with it. Until everything was closed and hierarchically comprehensible, the universe was something to be taken seriously, and one had to respect everyone's role in it, their position, their nature, and their means of cognition. After realising that they could not comprehend reality, writers stopped creating fictional worlds and began to show their creative abilities in other ways. As one of the most influential writers of postmodernism, Rushdie uses irony as one of these devices.

Consider, for example, Saleem's approach to telling his own story. He is born at midnight on August 15, 1947, when India gained its independence from the British Empire. For this reason, he is endowed with the power to intercept people's thoughts and connect them. Before reaching that point, however, Saleem says that if he wants to tell his story, he must go all the way back to the beginning, to the moment when his grandfather, Aadam Aziz, returning to Kashmir after studying medicine in Germany, fell in love with Naseem Ghani: "I must commence the business of remaking my life from the point at which it really began, some thirty-two years before anything as obvious, as *present*, as my clock-ridden, crime-stained birth." (Rushdie 2021c, 22, emphasis is in the original) Going so far back in time indicates a desire for precision in the narrative. This stance gives the impression that the narrator is trying to provide as much historical and situational background as possible, probably to avoid ambiguity and confusion. Saleem seems to promise that he is performing a particularly difficult feat of memory for the sake of verisimilitude. In the same breath, however, it is noteworthy that he uses the word 'remake' to refer to his work of narrative reconstruction. In doing so, he is subtly saying that he will do the opposite of what he has just implied. In fact, a remake is the process of enriching old material with new elements.

From this point on, Rushdie intersperses a series of humorous allusions, the meanings of which can be inferred only from the contrast between what is said and what is implied. Saleem recounts how in 1915, while praying, his grandfather Aadam hit his nose on the ground, whereupon three drops of blood flowed from his nose and crystallised into rubies. That day he met Naseem, who would later become his wife. The three drops of blood are mentioned again after the couple is married, when the sheet on which Aadam and Naseem sleep after their wedding night is stained with three drops of blood, symbolising the bride's virginity and fertility. The name Aadam clearly refers to the Christian myth of Adam and Eve. It gives narration a mythological basis for the union of the two 'original' characters in the story.

The congealing drops of blood also symbolise the origin of human life, as the Qur'an states that an embryo is a clot of blood.[3] The drops, then, represent the origin of life itself, for from Aadam and Naseem's love will come three daughters: Alia, the firstborn, Mumtaz and Emerald.[4] With the Bible and the Qur'an, the two sacred texts of the Abrahamic religions, Rushdie crosses two myths of origin. *Midnight's Children* is also inspired by Rushdie's own childhood memories of growing up in Bombay: "The novel I was planning was a multigenerational family novel, [... and it] needed to be [...] deeply rooted in history, [...]. And, because it was to be a novel of Bombay, it had to be rooted in the movies as well, movies of the kind now called 'Bollywood' [...]." (ivi, 8) The novel weaves together memories, history, myths, religion, and legends of the Indian subcontinent and beyond. It is also important to note that by intertwining his own memories with those of Saleem, the author creates a postmodern pastiche[5] that blends reality and fantasy in a humorous manner.

This approach sprinkles subtle hints that may initially go unnoticed or even escape the reader altogether; eventually, the latter begins to grasp a narrative composed of many layers of meaning. A statement is one thing, but its implications are quite another, and the reader will soon realise that one plot cannot be unravelled without understanding the other. Rushdie's narrative as a whole can only be understood by recognising how the humour evolves as it jumps between levels or blends them together. For every piece of information, there

[3] The blood clot mentioned in the Qur'an refers to a passage in Surah Al-Muminun in which God speaks of the creation of human beings: "And indeed, We created man from a clot of blood. Then We placed him as a drop of sperm in a safe repository. Then We made the sperm into a clinging clot, and We made the clot into a lump of flesh, and We made the lump of flesh into bones, and We clothed the bones with flesh. Then We developed him into another creation. So blessed is Allah, the best of creators." (Qur'an 23:12-14) In this passage, the Qur'an describes the process of human creation, which begins with a clot of blood and goes through various stages of development until the final creation of a human being. Some interpretations suggest that the clot of blood refers to the earliest stages of human development, when the fertilised egg begins to divide and develop into the various organs and systems of the human body.

[4] They will have two more sons, Hanif and Mustapha, for whom the reference to the three drops of blood obviously does not seem to be relevant.

[5] Pastiche is a term that refers to the imitation or incorporation of elements from various sources, often in a humorous or ironic way. In the context of postmodernism, pastiche involves the use of elements from various artistic, cultural, and historical sources in a way that challenges traditional notions of authenticity and originality. It is often characterised by not committing to a particular style or genre, but playfully experimenting with different forms, conventions, and elements from different time periods and cultures, as well as mixing of high and low art forms.

is always a slightly different interpretation, depending on how well we are able to discern its possible references. Humour in Rushdie's work creates a kind of multiple exposure[6] that allows the reader to mix different elements of the narrative and gain a whole new perspective. The author can use narrative confusion to introduce absurd, even ridiculous, elements. Saleem's initial request to the reader sets the tone for the narrative that follows:

> *Please believe* that I am falling apart. I am not speaking metaphorically; nor is this the opening gambit of some melodramatic, riddling, grubby appeal for pity. I mean quite simply that I have begun to crack all over like an old jug – that my poor body, singular, unlovely, buffeted by too much history, subjected to drainage above and drainage below, mutilated by doors, brained by spittoons, has started coming apart at the seams [...] I ask you only to accept (as I have accepted) that I shall eventually crumble into (approximately) six hundred and thirty million particles of anonymous, and necessarily oblivious dust. This is why I have resolved to confide in paper, before I forget. (ivi, 61, emphasis is mine)

Leaving temporarily aside the dualism with the Indian nation expressed in this passage, the reader is asked to accept an impossible event, namely that Saleem's body is crumbling and cracks can be seen in his skin. Saleem makes it clear that his decay is not metaphorical, but literal. Fearing that the end is near, he has begun to write down his story. By writing, he is trying to preserve his memory and give meaning to his life so that it has not been in vain. For some readers, this may be a tall order. Saleem also shares his story with Padma, his present lover. Padma is the one who allows the story to be told, and that is why she plays such an important role. She does not passively accept the narrative, but actively contributes to its development with her questions, reflections, and even her doubts. As we will see later, she performs an indirect auctorial function. Saleem's particular physical condition allows him to tell his story as a survivor's struggle against time: "Now, however, time (having no further use for me) is running out. I will soon be thirty-one years old. Perhaps. If my crumbling, over-used body permits [...] *I must work fast,*

[6] Multiple exposure is a technique in photography and cinematography that involves superimposing multiple images or frames to create a single composite image. Here I use the phrase metaphorically to describe the layering or intertwining of different narrative strands, themes, or perspectives in a text. I also wish to highlight the relationship of different characters or events within a narrative and to explore the overlap and interplay of various time periods or perspectives.

faster than Scheherazade, if I am to end up meaning [...] something." (ivi, 22, emphasis is mine)

Whether this battle will be successful also depends on Padma's contribution. Saleem compares himself to Sherazade, the heroine of the *Arabian Nights*. She hides the end of her daily tales from the Persian king Shahryar in order to seduce him and make him learn them the following night. Thanks to the meticulously planned interruptions of her stories, she survives and prevents the death of other slaves. Padma is an eager listener too. She is fascinated when Saleem interrupts his narrative and then resumes. She urges him to continue his story. As Padma listens to the narration, she interferes with questions, comments, and doubts. Therefore, she will prove to be a crucial part of Rushdie's ironic treatment of Saleem's memory.

Taking a closer look at one of Saleem's errors in remembering events will help us better understand this theme. Ganesha, one the most revered deity in Hinduism, is the son of Shiva[7] and Parvati.[8] He is the god of beginnings and the remover of all obstacles. He has a human body with an elephant head and a pronounced belly. Ganesha's love for sweets is the reason for his big belly.[9] The elephant head, on the other hand, was actually the result of a misunderstanding. According to legend, one day Parvati asked Ganesha to guard her shower. When Shiva saw him, he mistook him for a lover or an intruder

[7] The figure is named after an important Hindu deity. In Hindu mythology, Shiva is often depicted holding a trident, which represents the three gunas (qualities or attributes) of creation, preservation and destruction.

[8] Hindu goddess Parvati is the consort of Shiva. Many influential symbols and stories are related to Parvati in Hindu mythology. She represents Shakti, the divine feminine energy that is the source of all power and creation, and is often depicted as a loving and devoted wife. The goddess of fertility and fertility rituals, Parvati is also linked to the power of creation and growth.

[9] Especially laddu and modak. The former is a spherical sweet made of milk, sugar and flour, the latter is a kind of sweet dumpling from the state of Maharashtra, served mainly during the festival dedicated to the god, Ganesh Chaturthi. There are other meanings associated with the figure of Ganesha. The whole tusk symbolises the existence of the one truth. The imperfection of the material world is represented by the broken tusk. In this way, the two tusks symbolise the coexistence of truth and imperfection. The lotus stands for purity: being in the world without being consumed by it. The noose he holds in one hand represents the ability to approach desires and remove obstacles. The accompanying mouse stands for the desires that we must control and not give free rein to. Ganesha also controls Muladhara, the first chakra located between the anus and the genitals at the base of the spine. In this space lives Kundalini, the divine energy that lies dormant in man. It is reasonable to assume that Ganesha is probably the most revered deity in Hinduism because of this feature.

and cut off his head. Parvati then rebukes Shiva and sends him in search of a head to replace the old one, but he can only find the head of an elephant. *Midnight's Children* picks up an old story about Ganesha, which explains why he has a broken tusk. Legend has it that when Vyasa began the Mahābhārata,[10] he asked Ganesha to write it according to his dictation. Ganesha agreed on the condition that Vyasa recite it in its entirety in a single continuous stretch, without pausing or interruption. Vyasa also agreed that he should not continue each time Ganesha came across a verse he did not understand. However, as the Mahābhārata is a very long and complex work, Ganesha's pen broke while he was writing, and not wanting to give up his task, he broke one of his two tusks to continue.

This is only one of the many stories that provide an explanation for the broken tusk; there are many others that contradict each other. In another variant of this story, for example, Vyasa soon found himself in need of a break. Rather than stop dictating, he began to tell a story within the story of the Mahābhārata, which Ganesha continued to write down. This story within-the-story went on for so long that Ganesha found himself in a difficult position. He knew that he could not stop Vyasa from dictating. To resolve this situation, Ganesha is said to have used his divine powers to create a demon called Vika-Purusha to act as a buffer between Vyasa and Ganesha. Vyasa dictated the Mahābhārata to Vika-Purusha, who then dictated it to Ganesha, who wrote it down. In this way, Vyasa could take breaks when needed, while Ganesha could fulfil his promise to write down the entire Mahābhārata in one piece.

Not surprisingly, the stories about these deities have been taken up and revised by other religions, such as Buddhism. Uma Krishnaswamy (1996) clearly states that in Indian mythology, tales and legends sometimes contradict each other, resulting in a disorganised or confused picture. She recalls, for example, how Ganesha is created by Parvati as a small child in the story "Ganesha's Head", while in another known as "In the Beginning" he is an adult before anything else is present in the universe: "Again, this can be best understood by remembering that these legends were not all written down at one time but evolved over many generations of people and across a geographical area of more than a million square miles." (Krishnaswami 1996, x)

[10] The Mahābhārata is an ancient Indian epic that tells the story of the Kuru dynasty and the conflict between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. It is one of the two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India, the other being the Rāmāyaṇa. The Mahābhārata is also one of the longest epic poems in the world, with over 100,000 verses.

Juxtaposing different versions of the same story can also lead to a time paradox. When all the stories about Ganesha are considered together, no coherent picture emerges. He may appear as an adult in one story in which he is portrayed at a younger age, while in another, chronologically sequential story, he is portrayed as a child. Ganesha has at least 108 known names. He is sometimes depicted with two arms, sometimes with four, and sometimes with ten. Saleem's tale also exhibits this kind of factual and chronological inconsistencies. Because of the distinctive features of his nose, Saleem is called Snotface,[11] Snotnose, Snoop, The Nose, Cucumber-nose, Pinocchio, Goo-face; because of his head, he goes by names such as Mapface, Stainface, Piece of the Moon, Baldy; when he loses his memory, he is called Buddha. He refers to himself as a basketed ghost and a would-be saviour, among other things. Throughout Saleem's narrative, we learn to accept the possibility that a thing might have happened differently than it is described. Moreover, the characters are often presented as having fantastic or mythological qualities related to the particular deities or supernatural beings to which they refer, but without necessarily implying complete identification with them.

To give a few examples: in Saleem's family, it is the nose that enables Saleem and his grandfather to detect danger, just as in the myth of Ganesha, whose trunk symbolises his ability to recognise, 'sniff out', and distinguish good from evil, danger from safety. Likewise, Ganesha's belly is so large because it contains the whole world, just as Saleem describes himself as a container for as many stories as there are people in the Indian nation.[12] As his work progresses, Rushdie draws indiscriminately on mythology, stories, and official histories from India. A more constant feature of Rushdie's work will be the ambiguous integration of elements from his life with the lives

[11] The nickname derives from the fact that Saleem has a particularly runny nose, which his mother finds annoying and amusing. Throughout the novel, Saleem is addressed by his family and friends with this nickname, and it becomes an important part of his identity. Although it is a somewhat derogatory nickname, Saleem accepts it and even sees it as a source of pride. Saleem's runny nose is a symbol, among other things, of his fluid identity and the fluid nature of the story.

[12] "And there are so many stories to tell, too many, such an excess of intertwined lives events miracles places rumours, so dense a commingling of the improbable and the mundane! I have been a swallower of lives; and to know me, just the one of me, you'll have to swallow the lot as well. Consumed multitudes are jostling and shoving inside me; and guided only by the memory of a large white bedsheet with a roughly circular hole some seven inches in diameter cut into the centre, clutching at the dream of that holey, mutilated square of linen, which is my talisman, my open-sesame, I must commence the business of remaking my life from the point at which it really began, some thirty-two years before anything as obvious, as present, as my clock-ridden, crime-stained birth." (Rushdie 2021c, 22)

of his characters, and this will become increasingly important until his final book, *Quichotte* (2019). Rushdie has never written a purely autobiographical work. Rather, he uses factual data and his own personal memories, even if inaccurate, to play with his characters. Rushdie acknowledges that in writing Saleem's story he was inspired by places, people, and situations from his own memory, and that he and his character share some similarities. He modelled Saleem's family on his own, but with some crucial differences that, oddly enough, helped him understand his own relatives better than ever when writing the novel. Still, the two characters do not quite align:

> But in spite of these echoes, Saleem and I are unalike. For one thing, our lives took very different directions. Mine led me abroad to England and eventually to America. But Saleem never leaves the subcontinent. His life is contained within, and defined by, the borders of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Also, in case there's any doubt, I was not swapped at birth with another baby. [...] As a final proof that my character and I are not one and the same, I offer another anecdote. When I was in Delhi to do one of the first Indian readings from *Midnight's Children*, I heard a woman's voice cry loudly as I walked out onto the stage, 'Oh! But he's got a perfectly ordinary nose!' (Rushdie 2021c, 17)

As mentioned earlier, at a certain point in the novel Saleem makes a reference to the legend that Ganesha copied the Mahābhārata under the dictation of the Sage Vyasa. In the version told by Saleem, however, Ganesha sat at the feet of the Indian poet Vālmīki, rather than Vyasa, and wrote the Hindu epic Rāmāyaṇa, instead of the Mahābhārata, according to his dictation. For almost any Indian Hindu reader, Saleem is making a glaring error. Rushdie certainly intended this oversight, which can be justified in part by Saleem's Islamic background. In his own words, it was "a way of telling the reader to maintain a healthy distrust." (Rushdie 1991e, 32)

The error is revealing because it allows us to see how Padma's presence conceals a religious reference to Ganesha's writing of the Mahābhārata, a foundational Hindu text. As a result, new meanings are given to the narrative's dialogical nature. It is equally important to understand the context in which he places this mistaken reference, as he laments the absence of Padma, the narratee of his story and his "necessary ear" (Rushdie 2021c, 224), sometimes sleeping at his feet (ivi, 311), without whom he feels that a balance has been disturbed and cracks in his body are spreading ever faster.[13] It seems that

[13] "It has been two whole days since Padma stormed out of my life. For two days, her place at the vat of mango kasaundy has been taken by another woman – also thick of waist, also hairy

Saleem associates his deterioration with the possibility of not only writing, but also telling his story. Without Padma, Saleem's destruction accelerates. Through storytelling, Padma's ear becomes essential for Saleem to write and survive. Ganesha's broken tusk thus has a dual significance: on the one hand, it connects Padma and Saleem with Ganesha and Vyasa. On the other hand, it illustrates once again the extent to which unacknowledged inventions and misunderstandings contribute to the 'remaking' (ivi, 22) of Saleem's story, as well as India's history:

> Other men have recited stories before me; other men were not so impetuously abandoned. When Valmiki, the author of the Ramayana, dictated his masterpiece to elephant-headed Ganesh, did the god walk out on him halfway? He certainly did not. (Note that, despite my Muslim background, I'm enough of a Bombayite to be well up in Hindu stories, and actually I'm very fond of the image of trunk-nosed, flap-eared Ganesh solemnly taking dictation!) (ivi, 224)

Not only is Saleem mistaken without the reader realising it, but Rushdie plays on this fallacy by claiming that he is familiar with these stories because he grew up in Bombay and has a strong connection to them. In fact, he claims to be particularly fascinated by or attached to the image of Ganesha. By saying that he is sure he is right and citing his own childhood as proof, Rushdie subtly pokes fun at Saleem's misconception. Those who do not have Saleem's background, as is likely to be the case with most readers who come from outside India and are unfamiliar with the subject, would not think of disagreeing with Saleem, questioning him, or even suggesting that he might be wrong, especially when he is so confident and knowledgeable about the subject. Once one becomes familiar with Rushdie's irony, however, Saleem's claim that he is an expert should be a warning sign that one is in fact dealing with a deception. This is also indicated by another clue, namely the possible contamination of his Muslim background with the prevailing Hindu culture in Bombay.

Inconsistencies like this abound in the novel. For example, Saleem complains that Mumbadevi, the city's patron deity, is in decline because no festival day is dedicated to her, although actually there is one. Consequently, Saleem is either telling the truth and the calendar of the India he is reporting on is not

of forearm; but, in my eyes, no replacement at all! – while my own dung-lotus has vanished into I don't know where. A balance has been upset; I feel cracks widening down the length of my body; because suddenly I am alone, without my necessary ear, and it isn't enough. I am seized by a sudden fist of anger: why should I be so unreasonably treated by my one disciple?" (ivi, 224)

the real one (if so, we should consider him in a different time dimension than we are), or he has made a mistake that calls his memory into question.[14] Similarly, Saleem claims that the Pakistani army surrendered to Sam Manekshaw on December 15, 1971, when in fact it was Jagjit Singh Arora.[15] It should be noted that Saleem is neither particularly stupid nor indifferent to India's history. Nevertheless, he is clearly unreliable as a narrator, which means that we cannot always take his statements literally or as fact.

Saleem himself is aware of the possibility of errors in the narrative, and he warns the reader about them. He can also see disbelief in Padma's face, but reassures her: "Padma, if you are a little uncertain of my reliability, well, a little uncertainty is no bad thing." (ivi, 212) Saleem points out that he cannot remember all the details, that his memory has many gaps, and he urges the reader not to overlook certain facts simply because they may be wrong or historically inaccurate. Historical accuracy is neither his goal nor his priority.

[14] The passage reads as follows: "As for Mumbadevi – she's not so popular these days, having been replaced by elephant-headed Ganesh in the people's affections. The calendar of festivals reveals her decline: Ganesh – 'Ganpati Baba' – has his day of Ganesh Chaturthi, when huge processions are 'taken out' and march to Chowpatty bearing plaster effigies of the god, which they hurl into the sea. [...] but where is Mumbadevi's day? It is not on the calendar." (ivi, 141)

[15] "Sometimes, mountains must move before old comrades can be reunited. On December 15th, 1971, in the capital of the newly liberated state of Bangladesh, Tiger Niazi surrendered to his old chum Sam Manekshaw." (ivi, 540) Pakistan's invasion of East Bengal (present-day Bangladesh) in 1971 was a military operation within the framework of the Bangladesh Liberation War, a conflict between the Pakistani government and the Bengali national movement in East Pakistan. It arose from long-standing political, cultural and economic differences between East and West Pakistan, which had been united as a single country in 1947 but separated by more than 1,000 miles. In 1971, tensions between the two regions reached a tipping point when the government of West Pakistan, led by General Agha Muhammad Yahya Khan, launched a military campaign against the Bengali national movement in East Pakistan. The campaign, which involved the deployment of Pakistani troops and paramilitary forces, was aimed at crushing the Bengali nationalist movement and consolidating control over East Pakistan. The war began on December 3, when Indian forces, aided by the Bangladeshi independence movement, launched a coordinated attack on East Pakistan. The invasion was characterised by human rights violations, including the indiscriminate killing of civilians, widespread rape and sexual violence, and the forced displacement of millions of people. Pakistani forces in East Pakistan were quickly overwhelmed, and on December 15, the Pakistani army surrendered to the Indian and Bangladeshi forces. This effectively ended the war, and East Pakistan declared its independence as the new nation of Bangladesh. It is estimated that the Bangladesh Liberation War cost the lives of between 300,000 and 3 million people, making it one of the deadliest conflicts in modern history.

His most important end is getting his story across, a story in which inventions have the same dignity as objective facts:

> ...a little confusion is surely permissible in these circumstances. Re-reading my work, I have discovered an error in chronology. The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi occurs, in these pages, on the wrong date. But I cannot say, now, what the actual sequence of events might have been; in *my* India, Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time. *Does one error invalidate the entire fabric?* Am I so far gone, in my desperate need for meaning, that I'm prepared to distort everything *– to re-write the whole history of my times purely in order to place myself in a central role*? Today, in my confusion, I can't judge. I'll have to leave it to others. For me, there can be no going back; I must finish what I've started, even if, inevitably, what I finish turns out not to be what I began. (ivi, 248, emphasis is mine)

The moment Saleem realises that he was wrong about Gandhi's assassination, he does not seem to care any further and claims that he is only interested in the development of his story. The story must go on, despite everything.

Critical reflection inevitably raises several questions at this point. Firstly, there is the epistemological aspect, which is: how are we to understand the things Saleem tells us if we cannot trust his reconstruction of the historical events in India or the fictional events in his life? Saleem is described as an unreliable narrator by Rushdie in his essay titled "'Errata': Or, Unreliable Narration in *Midnight's Children*" (1991). Here, Rushdie recounts that many people have approached him to point out the many inaccuracies in Saleem's narrative, including the use of nonexistent ranks for the Indian Army and the reference to certain bus routes in Bombay. During a trip to Bangalore, a person who noticed the exchange between Vālmīki and Vyasa asked him the following question, "If you're going to use Hindu traditions in your story, Mr. Rushdie [...] don't you think you could take the trouble to look it up?" (ivi, 30) The person who asked him this question was convinced that Rushdie was the one who had made the mistake, not Saleem. An author who plays with inaccuracies in this way is, of course, aware that he runs the risk of being misunderstood. Nevertheless, Rushdie has noted that readers who recognised Saleem's errors took pleasure in pointing them out to him. There was a "reader's delight at having 'caught the writer out,'" he says (*ibid.*).

Rushdie has admitted, however, that while he intentionally lets Saleem make mistakes, the narrative also contains some errors of his own making. And that he is not sure which mistakes belong to which character. One of Rushdie's errors, for example, was to write that before the Amritsar massa-

cre[16] Brigadier R. E. Dyer had entered Jallianwala Bagh at the head of fifty white troops. Only later did Rushdie discover that although there were indeed fifty troops, they were not white. After discovering the error, he endeavoured to correct it and remove it from the story. Over time, however, his position changed. The author felt that the error was not really his, but Saleem's. He even went so far as to say, "its wrongness feels right." (*ibid.*)

In the same essay, he also admitted that he intentionally inserted errors in passages that did not contain any, and that he accentuated the inaccuracies he noticed during the revision process. This is because his original intent for *Midnight's Children* changed during writing. Rushdie's underlying initial intention was a Proustian one, to recapture the lost time of his childhood in Bombay through the lens of memory and migration. As the novel was being written, however, it evolved into an exploration of the workings of memory and migration. In more detail: "my subject changed, [sic] was no longer a search for lost time, had become the way in which *we remake the past to suit our present purposes*, using memory as our tool." (ivi, 31, emphasis is mine)

2.2 *Reliable fabrications: a narrative of bias and doubting*

Saleem's unreliability serves Rushdie's purpose, for history and stories are interwoven, that is, history contains many imponderables and details that can be as infinitely varied as the accounts that reproduce them. His irony is based on his disillusionment with the possibility of achieving an objective and truthful account of the facts, and that any comparison or reconstruction of history is bound to contain errors or inaccuracies. It can be seen, then, that the epistemological question posed earlier leads to another of an ontological nature, namely, does Saleem's India become invalid as a result of its errors? Furthermore, how much concern should we have over the possibility that Saleem may deliberately manipulate the narrative in order to appear to be the protagonist? Saleem, and Rushdie through him, eventually admits that he'll "have to leave it to others." (Rushdie 1991, 31)

[16] On 13 April 1919, the Amritsar Massacre, also known as the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, took place in Amritsar in the Punjab region of India, which was then part of the British Indian Empire. On that day, a large crowd of unarmed civilians, including women and children, had gathered at the Jallianwala Bagh, a walled garden in Amritsar, to protest the arrest of two Indian independence activists. As the crowd rallied peacefully, a British army regiment under the command of Brigadier General Reginald Dyer opened fire on the crowd, killing hundreds and wounding thousands. The international community strongly condemned the massacre as a traumatic and devastating event for the Indian people. It is considered one of the most significant and tragic events in India's struggle for independence from British rule.

From this point of view, a specific passage in the novel appears to be particularly significant. When he wants to expose the secret affair between Homi Catrack and Commander Sabarmati's wife Lisa, Saleem cuts letters from newspaper headlines and hides an anonymous note under the Commander's clothing. He describes this behaviour as "my first attempt at rearranging history." (ivi, 379) In the same way that Commander Sabarmati immediately hires a private investigator to ascertain the truth when his wife's fidelity is questioned, Saleem challenges his readers to question his own words and consider all possibilities, the potential chances that "had always made me a little afraid." (ivi, 284) This is no longer just a matter of distinguishing the true from the false, but rather of recognising oneself as an active participant in the making of the story, rather than just a recipient. If mistakes and inconsistencies in his tale no longer matter, as long as they are woven into a story that is perceived as coherent, then perhaps it makes more sense to focus on the narrative devices that call us to act like Saleem does, which is to manipulate, bend, sort, and rewrite the elements of the story in ways that make sense to us. This is doubly important because, as already mentioned, this operation concerns not only Saleem but at the same time the Indian nation in search of the meaning of its own history:

> As a people, we are obsessed with correspondences. Similarities between this and that, between apparently unconnected things, make us clap our hands delightedly when we find them out. It is a sort of national longing for form – or perhaps simply an expression of our deep belief that forms lie hidden within reality; that meaning reveals itself only in flashes. Hence our vulnerability to omens ... when the Indian flag was first raised, for instance, a rainbow appeared above that Delhi field, a rainbow of saffron and green; and we felt blessed. Born amidst correspondence, I have found it continuing to hound me ... while Indians headed blindly towards a military débâcle, I, too, was nearing ... a catastrophe of my own. (ivi, 435)

The way Saleem, the "perennial victim" (ivi, 348) who "yearned after a place in the centre of history" (ivi, 457), reinvents his story by establishing arbitrary relationships between seemingly contradictory information is (as with many other characters inhabiting the Indian and his story) a banal expression of a contradictory attitude that binds all humanity more or less consciously: the desire to "claim a place at the centre of things" (ivi, 348), to make sense of a world beyond our grasp, to identify ourselves as protagonists of a story much larger than ourselves and transcend our limitations. This mechanism enables us to identify ourselves as individuals and to participate in the 'affective economy' of the gaze and language envisioned by Jacques Lacan (1977,

1991).[17] In Saleem's case this allows to fill the "hole in the centre [...] which was my inheritance from my grandfather Aadam Aziz [and which] was occupied for too long by my voices." (ivi, 284) After discovering that he can act as a catalyst and facilitator for the nightly meetings of the midnight's children, Saleem finally feels valuable and is able to free himself from the humiliations he has suffered during the day: "awake I was obliged to face the multiple miseries of maternal perfidy and paternal decline, of the fickleness of friendship and the varied tyrannies of school; asleep, I was at the centre of the most exciting world any child had ever discovered. Despite Shiva, it was nicer to be asleep." (ivi, 332)

By admitting that his use of memory is not limited to reporting facts as they occurred, and that he may even deliberately tell a story that corresponds to his desire to be the protagonist in a certain way, it is clear that his story may also serve other purposes. What might these be? Saleem explains at the beginning of the novel that his existence is a search for meaning. After discovering that he has telepathic powers that can connect a group of 1001 magical children, he tries to use this faculty to provide other super-powered children with the opportunity to use their abilities for the benefit of their country. In this way, Saleem could fulfil the role of "mirror of the nation" (ivi, 371, 615) that he believed Nehru[18] had assigned to him by writing a letter to all the children born when India gained independence, recognising their role as harbingers of a new era and inextricably linking the fate of the nation to their dreams and aspirations.

This is in contrast to Shiva, the child with whom he was exchanged at birth by Mary Pereira, who is bent on destruction. Shiva's first angry objection to Saleem during one of the midnight conferences is a consequence of his in-

[17] Jacques Lacan was a French psychoanalyst who developed a theory of the human psyche strongly influenced by Sigmund Freud's work. In Lacan's theory, the gaze and desire play an important role in the development of an individual's sense of self and their relationships with others. According to Lacan, the gaze is a crucial element in the development of self-consciousness, as we become aware of our own image through the gaze of others. Desire, in turn, is a fundamental aspect of human experience driven by the lack or absence of something. It is also closely linked to the concept of the 'Other,' which represents the outside world and the expectations and desires of others.

[18] Jawaharlal Nehru was one of the leaders of the Indian independence movement and is considered the architect of modern India. After receiving his education in England, he returned to India and worked closely with Mahatma Gandhi and other leaders to achieve freedom from British rule. After India's independence in 1947, Nehru became the country's first Prime Minister, serving until his death in 1964. He played a key role in shaping the country's foreign and domestic policies.

ability to find a meaning for his own existence, or at least for the events that determine it without our assistance. Still ignoring the fact that Saleem had unwittingly 'stolen' his life by being switched with him at birth, Shiva challenges Saleem's meta-narrative convictions regarding what meaning can be derived from their magical powers by emphasising the fundamental principle of history and all narratives for him – chaos: "What purpose, man? What thing in the whole world got reason? For what reason you're rich and I'm poor? Where's the reason in starving, man?" (ivi, 220) When Indira Gandhi's Emergency derails Saleem's dreams and strips him of any meaning at all, he tries to succeed at least through writing. In Rushdie's own words, Saleem:

> is no dispassionate, disinterested chronicler. He wants so to shape his material that the reader will be forced to concede his central role. He is *cutting up history to suit himself*, just as he did when he cut up newspapers to compose his earlier text, the anonymous note to Commander Sabarmati. The small errors in the text can be read as clues, as indications that Saleem is capable of distortions both great and small. He is an interested party in the events he narrates. (Rushdie 1991e, 31, emphasis is mine)

Saleem is obviously emotionally invested in the events; Rushdie does not present him as an objective narrator. He may be distorting and instrumentalizing the events without being aware of it. As Rushdie, his own author, obviously could do through him.

In Saleem's story, there is another narratee besides Padma whose status as addressee is rarely acknowledged, but whose presence should not be overlooked: Saleem's son Aadam, born to Shiva and Parvati but raised by Padma and Saleem. The child, who will be one of the characters in *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995), is an invisible listener, for he is projected into the future when Saleem imagines himself as already dead:

> I said: 'My son will understand. As much as for any living being, I'm telling my story for him, so that afterwards, when I've lost my struggle against cracks, he will know. Morality, judgment, character ... it all starts with memory. ... and I am keeping carbons.' [...] I say yet again, 'Memory's truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but *in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events*; and no sane human being ever trusts someone else's version more than his own.' (Rushdie 2021c, 310, emphasis is mine.)

Saleem's hope to make amends for his failures and that of his generation is embodied in Aadam, the child with elephantine "flapping ears" (ivi, 647), who

represents a new generation of midnight's children born on June 29, 1975, the day Indira Gandhi declared the Emergency. Saleem projects onto his son the same expectations of greatness and social redemption that had been imposed on him and the previous generation of midnight's children by his father and the nation as a whole.

In this context, it is worth remembering that the misfortune of Saleem's father, Ahmed Sinai, is in some ways the result of his failure to seek historical truth through narrative reconstruction:

> He was never a happy man. He smelled faintly of future failure; he mistreated servants; perhaps he wished that, instead of following his late father into the leathercloth business, he had had the strength to pursue his original ambition, the re-arrangement of the Quran in accurately chronological order. (He once told me: 'When Muhammed prophesied, people wrote down what he said on palm leaves, which were kept any old how in a box. After he died, Abubakr and the others tried to remember the correct sequence; but they didn't have very good memories.' (ivi, 125)

Using Ahmed's unhappiness to foreshadow one of the central themes of *The Satanic Verses* (1988), the novel that would earn Rushdie the fatwa (the death sentence by a section of the Islamic world), Saleem notes that, according to Islamic tradition, Muhammad received the revelations that make up the Qur'an[19] over a period of 23 years, beginning at the age of 40. These revelations were written down by Muhammad's followers on various materials, including palm leaves, animal hides, and bones.[20] After Muhammad's death in 632 CE, his companions, including the first caliph Abu Bakr, attempted to compile the written revelations into a single, orderly text. This was a challenging task, because the revelations had been written down on a variety of materials and in different orders, and furthermore, the integrity of the text had to be preserved. Abu Bakr assigned a group of scribes the task of collecting the written revelations and compiling them into a single text. They worked to put the revelations in chronological order and to verify the authenticity of the written records.

[19] Qur'an means recitation, or text to be read aloud, and is considered the literal word of God. It is important to know that the Qur'an is not a book in the conventional sense, but a collection of 114 chapters or suras arranged roughly in descending order. Each sura consists of verses or ayat, which are also arranged in descending order of length.

[20] This is similar to the Cumaean Sibyl who wrote the words of Apollo on oak leaves, which were then confused by the wind and were therefore unable to provide any information to the people who questioned her.

The resulting text became known as the Mus'haf and formed the basis for the Qur'an as we know it today. In the passage quoted above, Rushdie subtly pokes fun at the way the Qur'an was handed down, and thus at the accuracy of the sentences it contains. The original support on which they were transcribed is also susceptible to benign and malicious errors. In the present analysis, what is of significance is Ahmed's desire to find the truth, to find meaning in his life through writing, by reconstructing the correct order of the sacred texts of Islam. His failure to do so would ultimately lead to his unhappy marriage and violent death. The fact that the Qur'an was written under dictation is perhaps another humorous reference to the way Ganesha wrote down the Mahābhārata.

According to Rushdie in the preface to a later edition of the novel, *Midnight's Children*, despite its surrealist elements, should be considered a historical novel, that is, a novel that attempts to answer the big questions about the relationship between the individual, history, and modern societies: "Are we the masters or the victims of our time?" (Rushdie 2021c, 9) he asks. In this context, it is also noteworthy that Saleem is so convinced of the reciprocal relationship between his personal events and those of official history that he feels in some sense 'responsible' for the great historical events of his time. These in turn would take place for the very purpose of changing Saleem's life and that of his family. Saleem confesses, among other things, that he is directly responsible for the partition of the state of Bombay on 1 May 1960,[21] which resulted in Gujarat and Maharashtra being formed and linguistically separated, and for the bloody invasion of East Bengal by Pakistan in 1971.[22] He also insinuatingly links Nehru's death to that of his grandfather, as if they were causally linked (both of them died of heart attacks).[23] Conversely, he

[21] "In this way I became directly responsible for triggering off the violence which ended with the partition of the state of Bombay, as a result of which the city became the capital of Maharashtra." (ivi, 403) Maharashtra and Gujarat were split into two separate states in 1960 as a result of a political and linguistic realignment of Indian states. Previously, Gujarat and Maharashtra were both parts of the Bombay Presidency, an administrative region that covered much of western and central India.

[22] "I remained responsible, through the workings of the metaphorical modes of connection, for the belligerent events of 1971." (ivi, 508)

[23] "One last fact: after the death of my grandfather, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru fell ill and never recovered his health. This fatal sickness finally killed him on May 27th, 1964." (ivi, 405) Jawaharlal Nehru died on May 27, 1964, at the age of 74, due to a heart attack. He had been in poor health for some time, suffering from various ailments including diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart problems.

claims that the Indo-Pakistani war was waged with the tacit intention of destroying his family.[24]

The assumption of being responsible for history is a statement that may seem absurd at first. Even Padma is described as perplexed by this consideration and lapses into "unscientific bewilderment" (Rushdie 2021c, 349) in the face of it. Saleem therefore takes his time in clarifying his position, starting from Nehru's statement to children born on India's Independence Day that their lives would be "the mirror of our own." (ivi, 348) Saleem wonders how to interpret this claim: "in what terms, may the career of a single individual be said to impinge on the fate of a nation?" (*ibid.*) By oscillating between two qualities that can be located in as many pairs of terms, active/passive and literal/metaphorical, Saleem explains how he has interpreted the Prime Minister's assertion and claims to feel connected to history. A key word isn't to be found in one of the terms or in a pair of terms in particular, but in the 'both/and' that connects them: "this is why hyphens are necessary: actively-literally, passively-metaphorically, actively-metaphorically and passively-literally, I was inextricably entwined with my world." (*ibid.*) The two pairs illustrate not only how culture and history affect Saleem's fictional life, but also how Saleem's actions can change culture and history in literal and metaphorical ways.

This is in line with Rushdie's belief that we all participate in the course and development of history. Human beings and fictional characters alike. As we will try to discuss in the following chapters of this book, even an imaginary *personnage* like Saleem can assume an incisive part of the responsibility for historical developments, especially when we understand how blurred the line is between a 'real' person and a fictional character. Rushdie makes it clear, however, that if Saleem is truly to blame, it is because he takes himself too seriously, that he holds himself solely or primarily responsible for the Indian tragedies.

> ... people get the history they deserve. History is not written in stone. It isn't inevitable or inexorable. It doesn't run on tramlines. History is the fluid, mutable, metamorphic consequence of our choices, and so the responsibility for it, even the moral responsibility, is ours. After all: if it's not ours, then whose is it? There's nobody else here. It's just us.

[24] "Let me state this quite unequivocally: it is my firm conviction that the hidden purpose of the Indo-Pakistani war of 1965 was nothing more nor less than the elimination of my benighted family from the face of the earth." (ivi, 487)

> If Saleem Sinai made an error, it was that he took on too much responsibility for events. I want to say to him now: *we all share that burden*. You don't have to carry all of it. (ivi, 11, emphasis is mine)

Other important ethical questions follow then from this considerations: what responsibilities do characters and stories bear in shaping the course of history? How much and what kind of responsibility do authors, readers, listeners, and reporters share? Immediately, we anticipate that these questions will not be answered in this volume, not least because there seem to be no answers in Rushdie's work. Rushdie's awareness that it is impossible to find definitive and accurate solutions to these questions is at the heart of his humour. As a writer, he is conscious from the beginning that he cannot complete the investigations he undertakes, like a translator who, following Derrida (2001), is aware of the impossibility of translating a text completely from one language to another.[25] Therefore, he uses humour to raise doubts, hypothesise alternative interpretations, and compare as many realities as possible rather than provide authoritative explanations or solutions. Through his masterful use of irony, he creates a sense of uncertainty that keeps the reader open to different scenarios and engrossed throughout the novel and beyond.

Rushdie's work is characterised by an awareness of the fractures that mark history and stories, the processes that connect them, the boundaries that divide them, and the methods by which they are transgressed and contaminated. Knowing that it is impossible to adequately describe or approach the problem directly, he resorts to irony to make mistakes, sprinkle hints, and make more or less direct jabs or jibes. Saleem's story is composed of a series of tales drawn from an extraordinary number of life experiences, as many as there are millions of Indian lives, along with facts, places, events,

[25] Jacques Derrida's essay "What is a 'Relevant' Translation?" is a reflection on the nature of translation and the problems that arise when trying to translate one language into another. Derrida argues that translation is always a complex task and that it is impossible to translate one language perfectly into another. He contends that translation involves loss and that every translation is in a sense incomplete. He also discusses the concept of 'fidelity' in translation, which refers to the extent to which a translation accurately reflects the meaning of the original text, distinguishing it from faithfulness, i.e. how much a translation is repurposed by the translator. Both concepts are problematic because it is impossible to determine the 'true' meaning of a text and that any translation is inevitably influenced by the context, language and culture of the translator. As such, translation is a dynamic and ongoing process involving negotiation and interpretation, and its relevance depends on its ability to engage with the complexities of language and culture.

rumours, hearsay, and unverified stories, in a complex web of the ordinary and the extraordinary. Rushdie uses memory as a tool to explore the known and the unknown. On the one hand, Saleem sees writing as a way to preserve memory "from the corruption of the clocks" (ivi, 62) or from the voracious "maw of the darkness." (ivi, 129) From the beginning, he asks us to believe seemingly impossible things, namely that his body is cracked like a pot, a wall, or a road. Conversely, Saleem assures the reader that he also wants to give voice to doubt, ambiguity and suspicion, which he calls "a monster with too many heads." (ivi, 133)

Like a cook preparing chutneys, Saleem recognises that through memory he creates a heterogeneous but coherent vision of history. Memory, then, is about finding coherence in heterogeneity, a vision that provides balance and stability and satisfies the palate, as a chutney can. This is why memory is not objective but partial, adapting to the 'taste' of those who savour it. In order to deal with History and the multitude of minor stories that make it up, one must also know the taste of the person(s) passing it on or transmitting it: what gives them pleasure, what interests them (and what they will tend to emphasise or highlight), what makes them suffer (and what they will therefore tend to discard, reduce or hide). Despite Saleem's desire to pass on the truth about his life, these considerations must also help us understand what he really means when he declares that he wants to pass on 'his' story.

In a nutshell, Saleem acknowledges that the act of remembering itself should serve as an objective recollection of past events among a jumble of facts, fading memories, and hearsay. At the same time, he also admits to being biased in his recollections. *Midnight's Children*, as with much of Rushdie's work, explores contradictions and limitations of memory to illustrate how it can simultaneously function as an instrument of invention 'and' recording. It creates as it records, almost like a daydream. As Saleem attempts to convince us that his memory is omniscient and all-knowing (ivi, 133), we should become more doubtful of his ability to use memory and what he is really trying to convey... and conceal. Rushdie's writing gradually teaches us to doubt what we read.

2.3 *Opalescent writing and tentative acceptance*

Rushdie repeatedly implies that Saleem is unreliable, that the number of invented elements is greater than he is willing to admit. Many of his clues are provided by Saleem's humour, which lends an air of playfulness to his narrative. However, once one begins to question the veracity of what he is saying, many puzzling doubts and possibilities become apparent. Saleem admits that he, like his mother and grandfather, was good at seeing ghosts, and that this

ability is especially intensified during beginnings and ends, times when emotions are stronger: "Like my grandfather at the beginning, in a webbed corridor in a blind man's house, and again at the end; like Mary Pereira after she lost her Joseph, and like me, my mother was good at seeing ghosts." (Rushdie 2021c, 133) It is possible that his mother's premature senility, which causes her to see ghosts, is due to her regret over missed opportunities and anguish over past misunderstandings, from losing her unfulfilled love for Nadir Khan, to the exchange of her biological son when Shiva and Saleem were still in their cradles. Although the dual-identity mother, who was born Mumtaz Aziz but had her name changed to Amina Sinai, has always maintained that the exchange did not affect her in any way, many years later, when "all kinds of ghosts welled out of her past to dance before her eyes" (ivi, 133), she confides the following wish to the same peepshow man she had rescued after publicly declaring that she was pregnant: "Well, let me tell you this: I wish I'd understood what your cousinji meant- about blood, about knees and nose. Because who knows? I might have had a different son." (ivi, 133)

There is an obvious connection between ghosts and missed futures, pasts and present moments in all of Rushdie's work. But even if they exist only virtually, as regrets or pure potentiality, they are still capable of shaping reality. The more we age, the more opportunities we miss, the more disappointments we experience through unfulfilled hopes, the more these 'ghosts' find a way to communicate with us and influence our lives. Aadam's unhappiness, as we have seen, was closely related to his inability to pursue his own aspirations because he allowed himself to be intimidated by the will of his family and especially his father. In the ongoing catastrophe that is history itself, not only women but also men become victims of the patriarchal system made up of male traditions and authority.

At this point, history begins to appear in the form of phantasms: not only as an objective account of what happened, but also as a multifaceted vision, a series of intersecting or overlapping perspectives that border on all the alternative histories that never happened, the stifled aspirations, the broken dreams, what was never spoken or written, the signs of desire that can be discovered in the form of looks, sighs, and actions that seem to happen (or not happen) for one reason but hide another. These are the unrecorded or spectral stories whose presence lives on in official history through iridescent reflections that mirror their shapes. If we know how to pick up clues, make connections, and trace links, we can both reconstruct the fragments that show us what else is missing, and look at it from an angle that reveals new colours, the things that might have been or might be considered to exist: "All stories are haunted by the ghosts of the stories they might have been" (Rushdie 1995, 117), Rushdie writes in *Shame*.

The epistemological uncertainty in *Midnight's Children*, a characteristic feature of modernist fiction arising from the unreliability of the narrators, is reflected in the intermingling of different interpretations that Rushdie endows with equal ontological dignity thus highlighting the coexistence of different realities typical of postmodernism. The consequence of such ontological plurality is that epistemological inquiry and ontological affirmation constantly oscillate. Therefore, ambiguous sentences can project dubious objects and situations not only temporarily, but permanently as well.

Drawing on McHale (1987), I am referring to Polish philosopher Roman Ingarden's (1973) definition of opalescent writing precisely to describe the in-between state of the story's logical structure: its amphibian existence as neither true nor false in a limbo between belief and disbelief. Ingarden's concept of opalescent writing refers to a style of writing characterised by the absence of clear and unambiguous meaning and instead marked by a shimmering, ambiguous quality. By encouraging readers to think critically and creatively, it allows them to engage with the text on a deeper and more personal level and to draw their own interpretations and meanings from it. According to Umberto Eco (1979), classical logic knows three categories: necessity, possibility, and impossibility. Real-life propositions and fictional worlds fall into the first and second categories, respectively, because they require the suspension of belief and disbelief. Eco, however, excludes the possibility of worlds belonging to the third category, that is, impossible worlds where both true and false propositions exist simultaneously. In his view, *tertium non datur*, there can be no middle ground. Contradictory worlds in which something can be true 'and' false at the same time are impossible, subversive critiques of how worlds are built. The notion of opalescent, or iridescent, writing contradicts the last statement. In opalescent writing, the objects represented are arbitrary and lack the fullness of real objects. Iridescence allows what Ingarden calls the metaphysical qualities of the text (the grotesque, the sacred, the tragic, the sublime, the horrific, the comedic) to appear not as separate layers, but as a function of the object or world that presents them all simultaneously:

> ...the proper effect of such narrative constructions (be they sci-fi novels or avant-garde texts in which the very notion of self-identity is challenged) is just that of producing a sense of logical uneasiness and of narrative discomfort. So they arouse a sense of suspicion in respect to our common beliefs and affect our disposition to trust the most credited laws of the world of our encyclopaedia. They undermine the world of our encyclopaedia rather than build up another self-sustaining world. (Eco 1979, 234)

Rushdie uses this technique to ensure that all aspects of the novel remain essentially dubious and indeterminate. Depending on which truths one chooses to believe, characters and situations may gain or lose certain qualities as readers progress through the narrative or retrace their steps. In essence, Rushdie asks his readers to do the dirty work for him, to assemble the elements of the narrative as they see fit, to compose their own story, as Saleem must. *Midnight's Children* works precisely because it contains a series of characters, objects, and events that can take or lose certain functions intermittently or alternately. If there were no bi- or poly-functionality, they would cease to exist. Suspicion and doubt are not limiting, but linguistically and semantically empowering because they provide the ideal conditions for the creation and exploration of possible worlds and multiple scenarios that coexist simultaneously in the same narrative. If, as postmodernist novelist Ron Sukenick (1985) has argued, "the essential trope of fiction is hypothesis, provisional conjecture, a technique that requires the suspension of belief as well as disbelief," (99) then reading Rushdie requires just that: the embrace of multiplicity, the continuous movement from one state to another.

The humour that makes *Midnight's Children* stand out is precisely of this sort: it does not treat the narrative as an unequivocal reconstruction of the past. It is not about finding out that something remembered as true was in fact false, or that something that did not happen actually did. Rather, it is a matter of accepting that much of what is false, imagined, opaque, or invisible is nevertheless contained in what did happen, because the latter is the result of a compromise with an enormous amount of uncovered truth. Rushdie is primarily interested in what might be called the residual or 'waste' in official history. He is also interested in examining the extent to which so-called fiction or false realities are informed by truth. Ultimately, it is doubt rather than certainty that impels the reader to inquire, to suspect, to uncover what has been buried, to discover what has been hidden from view, to consider interactions that have yet to be explained or acknowledged. As a masterful writer, Rushdie always leaves room for alternative interpretations of his works, which would not be possible if there were only one way to look at the plot.

Speaking of the announcement of his own birth, Saleem realised that he had been in the background of his story up to that point. In describing events concerning his parents and grandparents, the author referred to a series of situations that he could not personally have witnessed, "all of it foreshortened by my high-in-the-sky point of view." (Rushdie 2021c, 114) With the announcement of his birth, Saleem felt excited at the thought of finally being able to relate something that directly affected him. This, however, will not greatly

improve his reliability as a narrator, as is already anticipated in the chapter that immediately follows the announcement, the section devoted to the suspicion and slanted storytelling. Here we can also appreciate the significant role Padma plays as she is the only character listening to Saleem's narrative. The remarks she makes to him as she listens, and more generally her reactions to the content of the narration, are a particularly useful aid to understanding Rushdie's humorous way of framing Saleem's story.

This is evident in the following quote, in which Padma forces Saleem to 'interrupt' his tale because she is concerned about the claims that his body is breaking down. She then calls in a doctor, one Dr. N. Q. Balliga, to determine his condition. As it happens, Saleem is forced to suspend his reminiscing of the past for a brief moment and is brutally thrown 'back' into the present. Saleem regrets that he acted like a puppeteer who, feeling sure in his authorial position, exposed the threads that might make him untrustworthy and his narration invalid: "I must interrupt myself. I wasn't going to today, because Padma has started getting irritated whenever my narration becomes self-conscious, whenever, like an incompetent puppeteer, I reveal the hands holding the strings; but I simply must register a protest." (ivi, 117) Despite the fact that his lacerating physical condition is constantly reaffirmed, it is never observed by any third character, or used to develop a situation in the novel. As a matter of fact, when Saleem is examined by Dr. Balliga, he explicitly states that there are no cracks to be seen on Saleem's body. This infuriates Saleem:

> ...the charlatan, whom I will not deign to glorify with a description, came to call. I, in all innocence and for Padma's sake, permitted him to examine me. I should have feared the worst; the worst is what he did. Believe this if you can: the fraud has pronounced me whole!
> 'I see no cracks,' he intoned mournfully, [...] his blindness [...] the inevitable curse of his folly! Blindly, he impugned my state of mind, cast doubts on my reliability as a witness, and Godknowswhatelse: 'I see no cracks.'
> In the end it was Padma who shooed him away. 'Never mind, Doctor Sahib,' Padma said, 'we will look after him ourselves.' On her face I saw a kind of recognition of her own dull guilt ... exit Baligga, never to return to these pages. (ivi, 117)

There are no signs of cracks in Saleem's body, so the doctor declares him whole. For this statement, Saleem calls him a charlatan, not a doctor or a man of science, but a ju-ju man, a kind of sorcerer. Baligga's position is completely delegitimized. His is a voice that directly contradicts what Saleem is saying, undermining the very reason he is telling his story. As a result, even a physical description of this doctor is denied because it would make him a character in

the story and 'glorify' him as such. Saleem completely disallows this character to have any role to play in the narrative; in fact, he repudiates him because he contradicts the very foundations of Saleem's narration. A stupefied Saleem even challenges the reader to "believe this if you can."[26] Saleem deems the doctor's refusal to acknowledge his cracks to be utter nonsense, an outrageous claim that one should not even consider for a moment. However, the reader knows better. It cannot be an accident if Rushdie takes the trouble to mention this, but serves precisely to leave the reader with the sense that something is not quite right with Saleem's narrative. It should also be remembered that Saleem's memory was impaired in the past after he was hit by a spittoon following an explosion. There is a possibility that he did not recover it in its original state. His memory may contain holes or be damaged. There is also a chance that Saleem does not even fit on his head anymore, as he might have lost a few screws in the meantime.

We see the many-headed monster of suspicion in action before our eyes. This anecdote from Baligga may seem like only an amusing digression, but it has profound implications for the overall economy of the narrative. An element of apparent common sense, namely that a human body cannot crumble like a jar, is rejected and presented as absurd. In contrast, the absurd is consistently presented as true and plausible. A dangerous menace to the coherence of the story, the doctor is literally thrown out of the narrative, out of the pages, never to return. Padma's reaction provides no insight into Saleem's mental or physical state, just as we are not told the real reason she sent the doctor to him. Padma could have known about the cracks on Saleem's body and complained to the doctor about them. Most likely, she cannot see them either and she called the doctor to determine Saleem's mental state and not his health. This may explain why she dismisses Baligga with a general statement such as "we will look after him ourselves,"[27] which neither confirms nor contradicts what the doctor said. Or why Saleem can notice a guilty expression on her face.

As Rushdie's irony plays on the edge of juxtapositions such as this, he creates a space in which contradictory qualities can coexist within the same element. This happens in a number of interesting ways and is of considerable importance. There is a subtle irony that passes off common sense as absurdity when Saleem complains about the doctor's testimony, because the specialist's failure to diagnose Saleem's condition is not accompanied by evidence that refutes the doctor's credibility. As readers, we are asked to ignore the closest

[26] As in the above quotation.

[27] As stated in the previous quote.

thing to an objective refutation of Saleem's narrative in order to accept his version of events as such. Because the emotional influx triggered by Saleem's story has completely taken over the plot, it is easy for Dr. Baligga to be pushed out of the narrative without anyone noticing.

When Padma asks him the exact day of the 1957 general election, Saleem finds that he has moved the date after his birthday.[28] It is obvious that Saleem has made the day dependent on his birthday. But "although I have racked my brains, my memory refuses, stubbornly, to alter the sequence of events." (ivi, 326) Although aware of the error, Saleem does not correct it, probably out of concern that it will undermine his narrative. It is Rushdie's art to humorously manipulate the reader's emotions to determine how much attention such a clue receives and how it is felt to relate to the overall plot.

Before dismissing Baligga, Saleem makes a general remark, which reads as follows: "But good God! Has the medical profession – the calling of Aadam Aziz – sunk so low? To this cess-pool of Baliggas? In the end, if this be true, everyone will do without doctors." (ivi, 101) This reflection, sincere for Saleem but ironic for Rushdie, anticipates the cynical growth of distrust of science and, more generally, of institutions, which has exploded in recent years and which he will continue to expand, especially in his recent literary work such as *The Golden House* (2017). We tend to delegitimize anyone who contradicts what we believe and want to live by. In this particular case, Saleem compares the current state of the medical profession to a sewer or cesspool and concludes that if this trend continues, everyone will have to do without doctors. In the wake of the Coronavirus pandemic of recent years, this consideration seems an ominous sign of how fiction can invade and 'pollute' reality, leading to disastrous results. When reality becomes a vehicle for unpleasant feelings, it must be delegitimized, removed, and rewritten, as Umberto Eco predicted. The extent to which we adhere to a message or a 'fact' does not depend directly on the reliability associated with it, but rather on the extent to

[28] The 1957 general election in India was the second general election to be held in the country after independence in 1947. It was held on 26 February 1957 and was contested by more than 1,500 candidates from over 200 political parties. The Indian National Congress, led by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, won a decisive victory and a comfortable majority with 371 seats in the Lok Sabha (the lower house of the Indian Parliament). The Bharatiya Jana Sangh, a right-wing political party, came second with 35 seats, while the Communist Party of India came third with 15 seats. This unexpectedly made the Communist faction a strong opposition party with around twelve million votes. The 1957 election was seen as a significant milestone in India's post-independence history as it was the first time that a single political party won a clear majority in the Lok Sabha.

which it validates the narrative we want to believe. This becomes especially problematic when storytellers must convince the audience that what is being said is true. Since Padma is Saleem's 'necessary ear', he tries in spite of himself to respond to her demands or to dispel her doubts in order to continue the narrative. Similarly, sage Vyasa interrupted his own narration so that Ganesha could understand and accept everything he said. Our analysis of the dialogic nature of the narrative will show that it becomes increasingly taxing when it requires the consent and agreement of the listener.

The example just given is useful to introduce the analysis of a more significant passage contained in the same section of the novel, titled "Many-headed monsters". In the story, the phrase refers to mobs, violent crowds, and suspicions. The analogy to mobs is justified, of course, by the fact that mobs consist of hundreds or thousands of people, each of whom has their own individual head, but also because they are animated by a variety of histories and motives, as well as a set of grudges and resentments that form a collective flow. When it comes to suspicions, the comparison is logical because we are dealing with multiple hypotheses and scenarios at once, many of which are difficult to identify or of uncertain origin, much like the often unfounded rumours that fuel crowd outrage.

The metaphor of 'many-headed monsters' is effectively illustrated, however, when Amina receives a prophecy from RamRam about the birth of her son. Saleem and Padma are inevitably confronted with the monsters lurking in the narrative as they reflect on these moments. That passage is also key to understanding Rushdie's humorous use of his unreliable narrator, opalescence and ensuing doubts. Due to contradictions and blind spots in Saleem's explanations, his mother becomes a prime suspect and raises a series of alternative narratives that could change his story. Saleem recounts his mother's visit to RamRam, but shortly after reporting the seer's words, he gives himself some pause for reflection:

> But now, because there are yet more questions and ambiguities, I am obliged to voice certain suspicions. Suspicion, too, is a monster with too many heads; why, then, can't I stop myself unleashing it at my own mother? ... What, I ask, would be a fair description of the seer's stomach? And memory – my new, all-knowing memory, which encompasses most of the lives of mother father grandfather grandmother and everyone else – answers: soft; squashy as cornflour pudding. Again, reluctantly, I ask: What was the condition of his lips? And the inevitable response: full; overfleshed; poetic. A third time I interrogate this memory of mine: what of his hair? The reply: thinning; dark; lank; worming over his ears. And now my unreasonable suspicions ask the ultimate question ... did Amina, pure-as-pure, actually ... because of her weakness for men who resembled Nadir Khan, could she have ... in her odd frame of mind, and moved by the seer's illness, might she not ... (Rushdie 2021c, 133-134)

Saleem dwells on what he has just said. He tries to discover the truth about what really happened and interrogates his memories for fragments of meaning that might be helpful in reconstructing the facts. Saleem begins to think about the many reasons that cast serious doubt on why Amina went to the slums in the first place. It seems strange that Amina would travel to a notorious slum in Delhi, a slum that could hold many dangers and traps for a supposedly unsuspecting woman like her, to speak with a self-proclaimed seer who could very well have been a charlatan. It is possible that this event is one of Saleem's unsolved mysteries, which he desperately tries to hide or avoid in the narrative, just like the one concerning Dr. Baligga, since his mother could have exploited the visit as a possible pretext or cover to contact her ex-lover Nadir Khan and tell him that she was expecting a child, possibly from him.

Saleem also recalls the mysterious telephone conversations in which his mother listened in silence for minutes to the words of mysterious wrong-dialers, at the end of which "Amina Sinai resumed her recent practice of leaving suddenly [...] on urgent shopping trips." (ivi, 314) Saleem must thus choose between the desire to believe that it is merely a coincidence and the terrifying prospect that his mother is seeing her secret lover instead. Depending on his choice, he will determine whether his mother is sincere or whether her behaviour is all make-believe. Both in and out of the novel, it is our choice as much as his. Each of us is confronted with the same inner conflict when we are asked to interpret reality, that is, when we are asked to discern how much of the people and institutions around us is real and how much is fictional.

The problem is not so much his mother's infidelity, but the ghostly presence of a hidden truth that causes a rift in the story about Saleem's upbringing. Saleem admits that at this point in his story he is faced with many questions, ambiguities, and doubts, and he cannot contain the many-headed monster of distrust that lies between him and his mother. As in the case of Baligga's denial of Saleem's broken body, suspicion weaves its way into the narrative to cast doubt on Saleem's paternity, thus complicating his position as a child whose life intersects with events and power relations related to Indian colonial history under British rule and the religious turmoil between Hindus and Muslims following independence. According to Saleem's narrative, he is the biological son of Methwold and Vanita, the wife of Wee Willie Winkie. Thus, in the version approved and accepted by the narrator, he is the last descendant of an illustrious English colonial family. William Methwold, in fact, is also the name of the merchant and official who was the principal architect of the negotiations that would eventually lead to the acquisition of Bombay as a strategically important port by the East India Company in 1668. Saleem, then, would be the hybrid result of

the territorial and sexual appropriation that the English made on Indian soil, the perfect hero candidate chosen by fate to be born on India's Independence Day, making him inseparable from the story of his nation's redemption. In this chapter, however, a doubt is raised that can shake the entire narrative, namely that Saleem could actually be the son of Nadir Khan and thus would have come into the world as a result of his grandfather's shattered dream of an India controlled by the Islamists, for it was from that shattered dream that the murder of Mian Abdullah resulted, which in turn led Nadir Khan to the house of Aadam where he and Mumtaz fell in love. The two possible fathers represent two opposing figures in India's colonial power dynamics, the charismatic native insurgent and the foreign land-owning colonialist, which lead to two very different genealogies. Doubt would contribute to his obsession with the search for beginnings, which he displays at the outset of his novel. Saleem's origins oscillate between the two extremes represented, on the one side, by his grandfather Aadam, who was a follower of Mian Abdullah, and, on the other, his father Ahmed, who was Methwold's business partner and from whom he also received his house.[29]

The uncertainty, however, opens up the possibility for Saleem to invent his own past, and for Rushdie to play ironically with the mix between what Saleem knows and what he thinks he knows, between what he chooses to tell and what he may have left out. Padma firmly rejects the suggestion of suspicion, insisting that Saleem's mother is innocent. Saleem would also like to dismiss these doubts, but he is unable to do so and must discuss them further in what I consider one of the crucial passages in the whole novel:

> 'No!' Padma shouts, furiously. 'How dare you suggest? About that good woman – your own mother? That she would? You do not know one thing and still you say it?' And, of course, she is right, as always. If she knew, she would say I was only getting my revenge, for what I certainly did see Amina doing, years later, through the grimy windows of the Pioneer Café; and *maybe* that's where my irrational notion was born, to *grow illogically backwards in time*, and arrive fully mature at this earlier – and yes, almost certainly innocent – adventure. Yes, that must be it. But the monster won't lie down ... 'Ah,' it says, 'but what about the matter of her tantrum – the one she threw the day Ahmed announced they were moving to Bombay?' (ivi, 134, emphasis is mine)

[29] Joseph Campana delves into this kind of ambiguity about Saleem's origins in his dissertation entitled *Charting the Development of the Artistic Imagination While Undermining the Writer's Story: Meta-fictive Contemplation and Narrative Indeterminacy in Salman Rushdie's '*Midnight's Children*'*, Umi Dissertation Publishing, 2012.

Padma, too, begins to wonder why Amina was initially opposed to her husband's proposal to move to Bombay. Amina complained that she had just gotten used to her home and that if she left, she would have to change all her habits and start over. Padma wonders if this was the expression of excessive zeal in the marriage or a disguise to hide the fact that she was continuing her secret affair with Nadir. Saleem confesses that he has a nagging doubt in the back of his mind about this, fueled by the question of why his mother did not tell her husband about the trip to RamRam. Padma defends Amina again, saying that perhaps she feared her husband's wrath. No matter how hard Padma tries to avoid misunderstanding and defend Amina's image as a faithful spouse, it is clear that the bills do not add up and we should reconsider the way the previous events were reported. The situation also raises the question of how Saleem knows all the things he claims to know. If he had listened to his parents' arguments and disagreements, he could have reconstructed those memories by piecing together the fragments of his recollection that were then connected, or better stabilised by the narrative he accepted as true.

However, it is equally possible that these doubts are the product of the narrative itself, that is, the grey areas, the blind spots, the subtext that was always there, invisible, underestimated. These areas allow the narrative to persist and be coherent as long as they remain unchecked. For Rushdie, the invisible plays a crucial role in how subjectivities are constructed through discourse and grand narratives. He confesses that he was fascinated by the way he himself preferred a false memory to truthful information when the latter contradicted his larger story and that he transferred this desire to Saleem in the novel:

> I was interested to find that even after I found out that my memory was playing tricks my brain simply refused to unscramble itself. It clung to the false memory, preferring it to mere literal happenstance. I thought that was an important lesson to learn. Thereafter, as I wrote the novel, and whenever a conflict arose between literal and remembered truth, I would favour the remembered version. This is why, even though Saleem admits that no tidal wave passed through the Sundarbans in the year of the Bangladesh War, he continues to be borne out of the jungle on the crest of that fictional wave. His truth is too important to him to allow it to be unseated by a mere weather report. *It is memory's truth, he insists, and only a madman would prefer someone else's version to his own*. (Rushdie 1991e, 31, emphasis is mine)

Acceptance of the invention is determined by its verisimilitude, that is: "the ability of a discourse to be recognized as acceptable [...], according to a

series of signposts [...]. Subsequently, in order to be accepted by the reader, truth itself needs to become plausible." (Spiridon 2010, 32)[30] In fact, according to Saleem, after Mary Pereira revealed that Saleem had been switched at birth, "never once, [...] did [my parents] set out to look for the true son of their blood; and I have, at several points in this narrative, ascribed this failure to a certain lack of imagination – [...] that I remained their son because they could not imagine me out of the role." (Rushdie 2021c, 436) He concedes, however, that this was the narrative he wanted to believe. Another hypothesis he did not want to consider, perhaps the most obvious, was that perhaps his parents' love was "stronger than ugliness, stronger even than blood." (*ibid.*) Instead, all the grotesque physical features he develops in the course of the narrative and the magical powers he attributes to himself, as well as those Rushdie wants to attribute to the Indian nation through him in the communal process of reconstruction, may reflect Saleem's doubts and uncertainty about his own origins. As protagonist and author, Saleem gives them an allusive yet significant role in his story and allows them to have an impact on it.

Saleem himself acknowledges that "Reality is a question of perspective; the further you get from the past, the more concrete and plausible it seems – but as you approach the present, it inevitably seems more and more incredible." (ivi, 247) In this context, he gives the example of a spectator in a cinema who gradually moves away from the last row of seats until his head is glued to the cinema screen. During the process, the projected images, which appear absolutely realistic and convincing when viewed from a distance, become so large that even the smallest details take on grotesque qualities, similar to what Gulliver experienced in the second book of *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). Eventually, "the illusion dissolves or rather, it becomes clear that the illusion itself is reality." (*ibid.*) Saleem warns readers that his perception is influenced by his perspective, so that the illusions in his field of vision may fall into place as reality. Moreover, he will increasingly suffer from distortions and errors of perspective as he gets closer to the images, that is, as he moves towards the present events. It becomes gradually more difficult to distinguish illusions from reality when the eyes are so close to the image. Despite all the distortions created by proximity, they can appear perfectly logical and credible. As a result of this closeness, anything unbelievable can be believed and accepted, whether it's the special powers of the midnight's children or the grotesque qualities of many other characters.

[30] See also Habibi 2013.

It would thus appear Saleem manipulates his own history to create the conditions for his existence. Having cultivated an understanding of the fine line between fiction and reality, Rushdie plays with the fact that even the most unbelievable stories can be accepted if they 'fit' within certain emotional and narrative parameters, or at least do not violate them. In particular, I am referring to the notion that authenticity can be defined in relation to its apparent opposite, inauthenticity, rather than as a contrast to it, as suggested by Fritzman (2009). The primary concern is not just to provide readers or listeners with a satisfying ending, but rather a more important issue is at stake: altering the story in a way that makes the imagined seem more genuine than the actual, in order to legitimise the invention and gain acceptance of it. Whether or not an event really took place is ultimately irrelevant to whether its story is believed to be true.

As readers, we should be aware of Saleem's efforts to shape the story to suit his own desires, highlighting or hiding certain emotions or motivations. As he himself acknowledges, he is confronted with many dissatisfactions and will never be able to write a completely coherent and unquestionable story that resolves them all.

> The process of revision should be constant and endless; don't think I'm satisfied with what I've done! Among my unhappinesses: an overly-harsh taste from those jars containing memories of my father; a certain ambiguity in the love-flavour of 'Jamila Singer' [...] which might lead the unperceptive to conclude that I've invented the whole story of the baby-swap to justify an incestuous love; vague implausibilities in the jar labelled 'Accident in a washing-chest' [...].
> ...yes, I should revise and revise, improve and improve; but there is neither the time nor the energy. I am obliged to offer no more than this stubborn sentence: It happened that way because that's how it happened. (Rushdie 2021c, 661-662)

Eventually, Saleem takes pains not to add to his suspicions by recalling the compelling evidence his mother is said to have provided. This is the same evidence he invokes elsewhere in the novel when his suspicions about his mother resurface. Saleem recalls that they often received calls at home from people who had obviously dialled the wrong number. He did not suspect anything at first, but these memories also suggest that Amina had an unpleasant secret: "... and a tiny seed of suspicion was planted in me, a tiny glimmering of a notion that our mother might have a secret – our Amma! Who always said, 'Keep secrets and they'll go bad inside you; don't tell things and they'll give you stomach-ache! – a minute spark which my experience in the washing-chest would fan into a forest fire." (ivi, 238)

Saleem identifies precisely in the missing portions of his story the origin of his irrational notion that his mother has committed infidelity, a conviction that arises during the development of narration but whose effects are felt retroactively as the story progresses. In other words, despite his attempts at self-deceit, Saleem begins to realise that the first parts of his narrative are already influenced by the rending doubts that will later arise from the unfolding of his story. He would then incorporate into the narrative the resentment he may have wrongly felt towards his mother for making him suffer these doubts as they have always existed without him being aware of them ("maybe that's where my irrational notion was born, to grow illogically backwards in time, and arrive fully mature at this earlier").[31] No matter how hard Saleem tries to construct a narrative as coherent and free of contradictions as possible to fill the gaps in his memory, there are always wrinkles where unspeakable doubts creep in, furrows which can only be "smoothed out" (ivi, 32) with the passage of time.

> History is always ambiguous. Facts are hard to establish, and capable of being given many meanings. Reality is built on our prejudices, misconceptions and ignorance as well as on our perceptiveness and knowledge. The reading of Saleem's unreliable narration might be, I believed a useful analogy for the way in which we all, every day, attempt to 'read' the world. (Rushdie 1991e, 32)

Self-deception, suspicion and opalescence are narrative devices found in several postmodernist works. Consider Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, in which Briony creates a happy ending that allows her to accept her story before her readers do.[32] In this respect, however, *Midnight's Children* bears a striking similarity with a novel in which we see, perhaps for the first time, an author helplessly surrender to the blending of reality and fiction. In *Absalom!, Absalom!* (1936), William Faulkner explores racism in the southern United States through

[31] As previously quoted.

[32] In the novel, Briony Tallis is a young girl who becomes embroiled in a series of events that ultimately lead to a tragic misunderstanding. One of the ways Briony manipulates the story is through her own perception of events. As a child, Briony is highly imaginative and prone to seeing things in a dramatic and distorted way. This leads her to interpret the actions of others in ways that are not always correct. For example, she misinterprets the relationship between her sister Cecilia and Robbie Turner and believes that Robbie is responsible for a crime he did not commit, falsely accusing him. Throughout the novel, Briony struggles with guilt and the desire to make amends for the consequences of her actions and the damage she has caused. In the end, she tries to make up for her mistakes by writing a novel about her story. However, she attempts to make things right by changing the true course of events.

the memories of his characters. Like the protagonists in some of Henry James' and Joseph Conrad's novels, Quentin and Shreve are caught in a dialogic act of remembering in order to reconstruct the past. Brian McHale suggests that they "sift through [the] evidence" (1987, XX) to gather from witnesses with varying degrees of reliability.[33] McHale notes the only exception to this is Chapter 8, where modernist poetics breaks down. Shreve and Quentin, completely captivated by the story, try to visualise it from the perspective of Charles Bon (the child rejected by Sutpen[34]). They compare their hypotheses, but as soon as they reach the limits of their knowledge about Sutpen's murder, Quentin and Shreve abandon all criteria of authority and plunge into pure speculation.[35] The two do nothing but invent, from the remnants and detritus of old stories and rumours, persons who may never have existed, shadows of shadows, situations that may never have occurred, but which serve to explain the story. Of all these hypotheses, one 'must' be true and represent the truth for the story as a whole to be coherent, to make sense.[36] At a certain point, it becomes necessary to 'believe'

[33] The epistemological uncertainty is a typical modernist device, and is expressed in the novel by transferring the difficulties of seeking knowledge from the characters to the reader. Disjointed chronology, indirectly provided or 'withheld' information is intended to simulate for the reader the difficulties Quentin and Shreve have in uncovering the truth.

[34] Sutpen is the central character of the novel, a man driven by a desire for power and status. He is an enigmatic, wealthy plantation owner obsessed with creating a legacy for himself and his family. He marries Ellen Coldfield, a woman from a prominent local family, and they have two children together: Henry and Judith. However, Sutpen's pursuit of social status and wealth leads him to make a series of selfish and destructive decisions that have far-reaching consequences for his family and the community.

[35] There are no longer any reliable epistemological tools or evidence to rely on to solve the mystery of the murder, only a hypothesis about what might have happened. In order to circumvent the unsolvable problems of the real world, both characters enter an imaginary world that allows them to 'solve' the mystery and eventually reach a conclusion that can be applied to the real world.

[36] As they ponder numerous hypotheses, an explanation finally emerges for why Bon, after being killed by Henry, carried not the image of Judith, but a picture of his former family with an octoroon. Among the multitude of possible explanations, Quentin and Shreve have decided on the following hypothesis and are convinced that Bon had previously exchanged the photo in order to make his wife believe he was a villain: "'...why the black son a of bitch should have taken her picture out and put the octoroon's picture in, so he invented a reason for it. But I know. And you know too. Don't you? Don't you, huh?' He glared at Quentin, leaning forward over the table now, looking huge and shapeless as a bear in his swaddling of garments. 'Don't you know? It was because he said to himself, 'If Henry don't mean what he said, it will be all right; I can take it out and destroy it. But if he does mean what he said, it will be the only way I will have to say to her, I was no good; do not grieve for me.' Ain't that right? Ain't it? By God, ain't

a certain thing to be true, and this decision entails the partial concealment of the fact that the full truth is neither known nor can be known.[37] Bon 'must' have been aware that in some way he had already been condemned to atone for his father's sins.[38] In the economy of the novel, the decision of Shreve and Quentin is linked, with appropriate distinctions, to Henry's earlier rejection of the truth about his half-brother, which his father had just revealed to him. Henry rejected this truth not because it changed the nature of his relationship with Bon and made them half-brothers, but because it entailed another implication, namely that Bon had always known the truth and therefore his intentions had always been malicious. This possible truth would call into question everything Henry had believed to be true up to that point, so he categorically rejected it.[39] He refused to accept Bon as his half-brother in order to preserve their relationship, even though he was aware of the ambiguity about his origins. He chose to believe the untruth because it did not negate 'his' story.[40]

it?' 'Yes,' Quentin said." (Faulkner 2011, 46) As a result, they yield to the weight of conditionals in order to hide under Quentin's reassuring "yes."

[37] Taking the lead from Jakobson, McHale concludes that with this decision *Absalom! Absalom!* moves from an epistemological to an ontological dominant. In other words, it shifts from problems regarding knowledge to questions concerning being and existence. Possibly at this point, Faulkner's novel touches on and crosses the boundary between modernist and postmodernist writing. Within a primarily modernist novel, this is a fully postmodern scene, one that clearly illustrates the tension between reality and fiction.

[38] As these hypothetical possibilities run rampant in their minds, they hear the ticking of clocks announcing midnight. Quentin and Shreve conclude that the difficulty in capturing the past lies not in its 'weight' or quantity, but in its fluidity, in the way information mixes and dissolves into itself like a liquid: "a sort of hushed and naked searching, each look burdened with youth's immemorial obsession not with time's dragging weight which the old live with but with its fluidity: the bright heels of all the lost moments of fifteen and sixteen." (Faulkner 2011, 46)

[39] "So the old man sent the nigger for Henry," Shreve said. "And Henry came in and the old man said 'They cannot marry because he is your brother' and Henry said 'You lie' like that, that quick: no space, no interval, no nothing between like when you press the button and get light in the room. And the old man just sat there, didn't even move and strike him and so Henry didn't say 'You lie' again because he knew now it was so; he just said 'It's not true,' not 'I don't believe it' but 'It's not true' because he could maybe see the old man's face again now and demon or no it was a kind of grief and pity, not for himself but for Henry, because Henry was just young while he (the old man) knew that he still had the courage and even all the shrewdness too ..." (*ibid.*)

[40] However, when he found out that his half-brother was half-black, he changed his mind. It is only when racial factors enter his life that he decides to kill his half-brother to prevent his marriage to his sister: "So it's the miscegenation, not the incest, that you can not stand." (*ibid.*)

Similarly, when Padma complains that she has been misled about Saleem's birth, the origins of the storyteller, Saleem explains that it makes no difference: neither he nor his family members were capable of thinking beyond their past or imagine life any other way. Truth was primarily defined by what they believed to be true and how they were able to define themselves. Saleem's parents considered him as their son in every respect, and loved and raised him as one of their own, regardless of the genetic data that is unknown to us. In the same way, Saleem had always considered his adoptive parents as such, despite the fact that they were not biologically his parents.

Saleem's conclusion notwithstanding, Rushdie provides us with clues to help us draw our own. A series of internal signals lure us into making connections between seemingly unrelated events. It's Rushdie's ability to spice up the numerous references and connections that mark his magical realism. As its name implies, magical realism is considered an intimately hybrid mode of writing due to its fusion of often incompatible elements. This is why Rawdon Wilson emphasises that magical realism is an especially effective literary style for dealing with "the doubleness of conceptual codes" (Wilson 1995, 210) in order to enfold "distinct kinds of fictional world [...] together." (ivi, 222) Rushdie's magical realism differs from that of other writers, particularly Latin American writers, in the irony that permeates his descriptions. Make-believe is the reason why protagonists seem to possess almost supernatural abilities, landscapes and inanimate objects seem alive and endowed with a conscience, and crucial circumstances in the lives of his characters seem synchronised with historical events. The key word here is 'seem': even in the cases where Saleem's magical actions seem most obvious, there is not a single situation in the novel that could not be explained as Saleem's invention. None at all. For every magical event Saleem describes, we can always come up with an alternative and perfectly rational explanation.

The idea of make-believe is illustrated in part by the story of Aadam's 'planned' affair with Naseem, orchestrated by her father, Mr. Ghani. After completing his medical studies in Europe, Aadam is repeatedly called to Naseem's house because the girl seems to have "quite [an] extraordinary number of minor illnesses" (Rushdie 2021c, 43). For reasons of decorum, Naseem remains hidden behind a perforated sheet when Aadam visits Mr. Ghani's house. This is part of the tradition of purdah, followed by both Hindu and Islamic customs, in which the female body is separated from that of the men by a curtain or veil in their homes or by wearing clothing that covers the face and body in public. As a result, Aadam can only visit Naseem's diseased or aching parts. In reality, Aadam's infatuation with Naseem seems to be more of a delusion, as it is the

result of the controlled administration of 'parts' of Naseem's body that stimulate Aadam's curiosity and arouse his desire to see all of her, so that he believes he is in love with her. It will be the beginning of an unsatisfactory relationship. Aadam would almost certainly not have been convinced of his love for Naseem if he had been able to visit her under normal circumstances, in full. As a result, Aadam is more enamoured with his own mental creation or imago of Naseem's body and with the subsequent search for confirmation of his fantasies. Against this backdrop, the perforated sheet serves as a threshold or boundary that shows while it hides and hides while it shows, but in such a way that what is shown is not entirely real and what is hidden is not merely imaginary.[41]

Naseem haunts Aadam as the spirit of a divided body, like Mother India. Indeed, the rectangular sheet with a hole in it is clearly a representation of the Indian national flag.[42] In this sense, the circle within it represents the inner void Saleem claims to possess along with the Indian nation. This emptiness serves simultaneously as a representational and creative space. However, despite his mother's explicit indication that he is being deceived, Aadam is not discouraged and continues to play along with the Ghani family until the two lovers become engaged. Aadam's infatuation is genuine and legitimate, but it is nevertheless the result of "the magic of the sheet" (Rushdie 2021c, 45), although technically it is not magic at all. Naseem and Aadam contributed to this 'magic' through their collaboration and sentimental disposition. When Aadam finally comes out to Naseem and they are officially engaged, Mr. Ghani refers to the whole situation as a 'tamasha', basically a performance for entertainment. The word comes from Urdu and means 'digression' or 'walk': "Enough of this tamasha! No more need for this sheet tomfoolery! Drop it down, you women, these are young lovers now!" (ivi, 50)

[41] "So gradually Doctor Aziz came to have a picture of Naseem in his mind, a badly-fitting collage of her severally-inspected parts. This phantasm of a partitioned woman began to haunt him, and not only in his dreams. Glued together by his imagination, she accompanied him on all his rounds, she moved into the front room of his mind, so that waking and sleeping he could feel in his fingertips the softness of her ticklish skin or the perfect tiny wrists or the beauty of the ankles; he could smell her scent of lavender and chambeli; he could hear her voice and her helpless laughter of a little girl; but she was headless, because he had never seen her face." (Rushdie 2021, 43)

[42] The hole can also be traced back to a statement by Rushdie in which he reveals that giving up the Islamic faith caused dissatisfaction in his family and left him with a "God-shaped hole" (Rushdie 1991b, 439). A hole that, as he later clarified in an article for the *Independent* (2000) written in response to another by Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, referred not to the divine quality of his ego but to art and literature. It should be noted that Saleem's grandfather also had an inner emptiness due to religion.

I would like to draw attention to three particular literary devices Rushdie employs to support the magic of make-believe: the anthropomorphising of inanimate objects, temporal coincidences, and the endowment of characters with grotesque qualities.

a) Anthropomorphising of inanimate objects

As Aadam examines Naseem through the perforated sheet, the anatomical parts that seem to be affected by supposed diseases become more and more erogenous: first the breasts, then the buttocks. He will always remember seeing a "compliant blush" (ivi, 45) when he touched them. The simplicity of this example conveys very effectively the playful nature of Rushdie's magical realism, which transforms what is likely a blush from Aadam's energetic touch into a humorous blush that humanises Naseem's back as if it were subject to shame or modesty. A dialogue Aadam later has with Ilsa Lubin shows that he truly believes he saw Naseem's backside blush. Again, humour is used to blur the line between the realistic and the magical.

The examples of anthropomorphising objects in this novel are endless. The valley where Aadam prays at the beginning of the story "curved up towards him" (ivi, 25) and "punched him on the nose" (ivi, 24), the mountains of Kashmir "crowded round and stared" (ivi, 52) at him leaving his home. All things that make Aadam feel "inexplicably – as though the old place resented his educated, stethoscoped return." (ivi, 23) When a car with military personnel hits the spittoon some urchins were playing with, "blood congeals like a red hand in the dust of the street and points accusingly at the retreating power of the Raj." (ivi, 71) Each of these elements contributes to the illusion that captivates characters and readers "in [what is] only a charade after all." (ivi, 25)

Among all, the nose obviously stands out. Not only Saleem's magical protuberance, which enables him to communicate telepathically with the other magical children of India, but also that of his grandfather. By a remarkable coincidence, Saleem's "colossal apparatus" (ivi, 27) connects him to his grandfather and to the myth of Ganesha. In Saleem's descriptions, we learn that his nose, like his grandfather's, is endowed with Ganesha's magical ability to detect danger. It is a coincidence that confirms Saleem's birth right in Sinai's house and his status in Indian mythology. In many ways, the nose's mysterious properties give the impression that they are the result of fate, which makes the significance of its characteristics all the more powerful. However, it is important to note that the alleged magical properties of the nose are never true magic, as they cannot be verified or traced to verifiable events. It is the tone

in which the narrator describes the nose that gives it its 'magical' properties, for it makes what would otherwise be considered ordinary coincidences seem extraordinary.

For example, Rushdie attributes prophetic qualities to the nose, the ability to foresee what will happen. This is always a discourse effect resulting from Rushdie's propensity for making unsubstantiated connections between seemingly unrelated things. As soon as Aadam learns that Naseem, whom he has not yet met, is ill and needs his medical assistance, his nose begins to itch. It is itching again just before he meets Naseem, as if to warn him of the deception of the perforated sheet which the blind Mr. Ghani had planned. On April 13, 1919, the day of the Amritsar massacre, Aadam's nose itches harder than ever. Amidst the crowd of people that are about to be killed by the soldiers, he sneezes providentially saving his life before the soldiers open fire:

> Aziz penetrates the heart of the crowd, as Brigadier R. E. Dyer arrives at the entrance to the alleyway, followed by fifty crack troops. He is the Martial Law Commander of Amritsar [...] As the fifty-one men march down the alleyway a tickle replaces the itch in my grandfather's nose. The fifty-one men enter the compound and take up positions [...]. As Brigadier Dyer issues a command the sneeze hits my grandfather full in the face. 'Yaaaakh- thoooo!' he sneezes and falls forward, losing 'his balance, following his nose and thereby saving his life. (ivi, 59)

As a result of the imbalance caused by his sneezing, Aadam drops his medical equipment on the ground. As he tries to pick it up, he dodges the bullets that the soldiers are firing at the demonstrators at that moment. The weight of the bodies pelting him causes the clasp of his bag to press hard on his chest, leaving a bruise "so severe and mysterious that it will not fade until after his death." (*ibid.*)

As this passage shows, Rushdie has a unique ability to blend the magical with the real. Saleem's grandfather was probably saved by a simple sneeze that caused him to bend over at just the right moment and drop the contents of his bag just as he was about to be shot. Nevertheless, the constant references to the magical properties of the nose in the story convince the reader that this could not have been simply an accident or a stroke of luck. We cannot prove it, but we cannot help but 'feel' that Aadam was saved by some magical property of his nose, implied by the way the narrative is constructed. A bruise formed after the incident, which will accompany him all his life and disappear only after his death, emphasises the fatal nature of the event. In Saleem's constant allusions, Rushdie's sense of humour is evident as he makes perfectly plausible what would otherwise be impossible and obscures more probable and rational explanations. The above

passage makes clear how the intersection of reality and fiction in the novel is only possible through the unique coincidence of the grotesque and magic, humour and horror. The act of writing fosters the reader's ability to shift seamlessly from one level of interpretation to another: from credulity to scepticism, from providential beliefs to rational interpretations, from the mundane to the supernatural.

The use of literary devices such as the nose gives the writing its variable polychromatic quality, making it iridescent or opalescent. The grotesque element of the nose serves to defend the genealogy – it is interpreted as the foundation of the family as well as its eventual support or protection from the horrors of colonialism and the dangers of suspicion that could undermine or destroy it. The trick is to create the illusion that the nose just happens to respond to important events in Saleem's history only by chance.

b) Temporal coincidences

Rushdie's humour is based on chance, understood in its double meaning of overlap and occasion. It emphasises the illusory determinacy of all the elements of the novel. Through the use of opalescent elements, sites of convergence or confluence are constructed where multiple properties can be simultaneously united or separated. By working at the boundaries of writing, Rushdie's humour allows for multiple perspectives to be considered and for the same object to be given different and even opposing properties so that one can create one's own narrative space, time, and place. Throughout the novel, Saleem makes many connections between his characters' lives and events in Indian history: "Such historical coincidences have littered, and perhaps befouled, my family's existence in the world." (ivi, 46) Naseem and Aadam first meet on the day that World War II ends; Saleem's son is born on the day Indira Gandhi declares the Emergency; at the same time Shiva bursts into Saleem's life, India conducts its first nuclear test, etc. The biggest coincidence, however, is that Saleem was born precisely at midnight on the day that India gained independence. The two are not even separated by a fraction of a second.

The event, Saleem says, has him handcuffed to history. However, even though "there's no getting away from the date" (ivi, 20) Saleem introduces it with the phrase "once upon a time." (*ibid.*) This phrase is used in fairy tales to emphasise that the persons, places and situations described are both imaginary and timeless. The use of a vague expression such as this and the search for precise details is a perfect example of oscillating between seemingly contradictory approaches. Rushdie alternates between the fantastical elements of the fairy tale, which take root primarily in the minds and memories of children,

and the chronicles of officially recognised or documented historical facts. According to Saleem's narrative, history is defined both by the linear passage of time and by the ceaseless devouring of all the stories from the past, present and future that cross each of us in reality and in fantasy. Rushdie places Saleem both within the linear unfolding of human history and as a product of the imagination, in an indeterminate time of origin lost in the intricacies of desire and fantasy. Saleem's birth occurs at an irretrievably precise moment in time, an accidental consequence and a fatal outcome of and for millions of Indians.

c) Grotesque characters

The way Rushdie blends historical events with imaginary Indian mythology in his characters and in the circumstances they encounter is often evident in their physical features. The physical characteristics they are born with or acquire during their lives do not seem to be accidental or ends in themselves, but are in a sense mirror images or simulacra of the religious myths or legends that have been persistently pursued on Indian soil and beyond.

In particular, I would like to draw attention to the grotesque figure of Tai, the ferryman, who foreshadows the importance of the nose in Aadam's life and in the lives of his descendants. Since Tai predicts many significant events, the reader is led to believe that he has the ability to see into the future. His predictions go well beyond mere wisdom. He seems to possess some kind of metanarrative knowledge or consciousness. Again, it is difficult for the reader to discern this:

> Tai [...] who revealed the power of the nose, and who is now bringing my grandfather the message which will catapult him into his future, is stroking his shikara through the early morning lake ...
> Nobody could remember when Tai had been young. He had been plying this same boat [...] forever. As far as anyone knew. [...] Tai himself cheerily admitted he had no idea of his age. Neither did his wife – he was, she said, already leathery when they married. [...]
> He was the living antithesis of Oskar-Ilse-Ingrid's belief in the inevitability of change ... a quirky, enduring familiar spirit of the valley. A watery Caliban, rather too fond of cheap Kashmiri brandy. (ivi, 28)

He is described as a hybrid of the mythological figure of Charon, a 'watery Caliban,' and a kind of genius loci who has practically 'always' lived in the area. Rushdie's humour here is distinguished by the fact that he asks the reader to take this statement literally and not as an exaggeration. Tai appears to be an extremely old man who has lived so long that he cannot even remember his age. With his endless babbling that makes others think he is crazy, he exerts a strong fascination on Aadam. His "magical talk" (ivi, 30) has literally

enchanted Aadam and aroused his curiosity. When Aadam asks Tai about his age, he replies that he met Jesus while he was staying in Kashmir:

> I saw that Isa, that Christ, when he came to Kashmir. Smile, smile, it is your history I am keeping in my head. Once it was set down in old lost books. Once I knew where there was a grave with pierced feet carved on the tombstone, which bled once a year. Even my memory is going now; but I know, although I can't read. (ivi, 31)

Tai claims that he knows everything and that the narratives he has in his head are the truth, unadulterated by textual evidence. Tai is offended when Aadam grins in his face for not believing him, claiming to be a reliable source: "It is your history I am keeping in my head." (ivi, 31) Aadam is aware that Tai is a drunkard who speaks under the influence of alcohol, but both he and the reader cannot help suspecting that he is to be taken seriously. Embedded in the inconsistent history of a character based on the equally unreliable memory of his author, the lone madman presents a new narrative frame that might prove him to be the only reliable narrator. Rushdie uses the auctorial mise en abyme he has created here to poke fun at Christianity by having Tai claim that Jesus died in Kashmir and therefore was never resurrected. He claims that Emperor Shāh Jahān is mistakenly associated with the figure of a gardener because he had the Shalimar Gardens created. He refers to Alexander the Great as a familiar figure and discusses his personal affairs with such ease as if they were recent events. Tai even mentions the love affair Alexander had with Bagoas, a beautiful Persian eunuch, a piece of historical anecdote that an illiterate man like him could not possibly know about. Rushdie criticises official historiography for being riddled with so many lies and inaccuracies that it fails to properly reflect historical events, and for being constantly manipulated, much as writers manipulate their characters in novels:

> Oh, you don't believe? [...] God knows what they teach you boys these days. Whereas I' … puffing up a little here … 'I knew his precise weight, to the tola! Ask me how many maunds, how many seers! When he was happy he got heavier and in Kashmir he was heaviest of all. I used to carry his litter … no, no, look, you don't believe again, that big cucumber in your face is waggling like the little one in your pajamas! So, come on, come on, ask me questions! Give examination! Ask how many times the leather thongs wound round the handles of the litter – the answer is thirty-one. Ask me what was the Emperor's dying word – I tell you it was "Kashmir". He had bad breath and a good heart. *Who do you think I am*? (ivi, 32, emphasis is mine)

Having witnessed the events first-hand, he goes so far as to challenge Saleem to verify the veracity of his claims. He pretends to know details such as the

exact weight of the Emperor and the last word he spoke on his deathbed. As he makes these points, he cannot resist drinking his brandy, which underscores the fact that he is a drunkard who cannot be taken seriously. And yet Tai is the one who advises Aadam to trust his nose, because "it's the place where the outside world meets the world inside you. If they don't get on, you feel it here." (ivi, 33) It is Tai who predicts Aadam's future alcoholism, or the one who mocks his European upbringing, which would lead Aadam into conflict with his wife and cause him to espouse ideas of autonomy and emancipation, eventually ending up in his tragic death. Tai has the unique ability to predict important events in Aadam's life, as if he could see into the future. This adds credibility to his claim that he knows everything that happened in the past and creates a sense of unease where suspicion outweighs evidence. Tai differs from RamRam, the seer, in that he seems to be a character endowed with extradiegetic or superordinate knowledge that places him both inside and outside the narrative. He does not give his age, because the exact date is not important. What ultimately makes him what he is is what he knows, his ability to distinguish the true from the false.

It is Rushdie's ambiguous humour that keeps readers on the border between reality and fiction, allowing them to interpret many details and events as clues, symbols, metaphors, and allusions of and to other things. Make-believe makes it possible for characters, objects, dates, and events to take on different shades of meaning and evoke different metaphysical qualities that create alternative paths within the plot or even conflicting narratives. Factual information is woven into a magical realist narrative that stimulates the reader's imagination and intuitive abilities to identify obvious connections or arbitrary plot developments. Kalderon (2005) argues that make-believe involves participation in the story and relies on a process he calls 'tentative acceptance' of narrative content. Following Harman (1986), Kalderon distinguishes between tentative and full acceptance of a statement:

> Tentative acceptance, while distinct from full acceptance is a matter of degree. The degree of tentative acceptance depends on the extent to which a person is prepared to rely on the acceptance of the sentence in theoretical and practical reasoning and the range of contexts in which a person does so rely. If, over time, and over a wide range of contexts, a person comes to rely sufficiently on the acceptance of the sentence in theoretical and practical reasoning, he may come to fully accept that sentence. Thus, the distinction between tentative and full acceptance is best understood as an approach to a limit. (Kalderon 2005, 2)

Tentative acceptance is a consequence of make-believe because it makes the reader participate in the 'props' of the story, the 'strings' to which Saleem refers

when Padma calls Dr. Baligga. Although Saleem repeatedly points out to the reader that his account may be wrong and that he may not remember the events accurately, he does not do so to discredit his narrative. Saleem wants the reader to understand that they are participating in a process of tentative acceptance of what he is saying, of pretending that certain things are true and false *at the same time*. It is an invitation to actively participate in the construction of the story, to place oneself at the boundaries of narration: neither inside nor outside of it as a neutral observer. For this process to take place, collaboration and emotional involvement are required.

As Saleem approaches his 31st birthday at the end of the novel, he feels that his life is coming to an end. With only a few days left until August 15, 1978, he not only sees the cracks in his skin more and more clearly, but also perceives the people in his life as ghosts or visions. This may be due to the hallucinatory delirium of a mentally ill individual or the dissolution process of a dying person. At this point, Saleem makes a series of meta-referential considerations by linking his occupation as a cook to that of a writer, equating storytelling with the "joy of cooking" (Rushdie 2021c, 157). As a result, the voices of Rushdie and Saleem become less and less distinguishable. Saleem's ability, according to Forsyth (1996), is the most powerful of all: it is the power to tell stories. In *Shame*, this power was expressed through Rani Harappa's weaving of eighteen allegorical shawls, through which "unspeakable things no one wanted to hear" (Rushdie 1995, 192) are told. Rushdie has elsewhere described it as the 'chutnification' of history (Rushdie 1982) and in *Midnight's Children* is conveyed through the metaphor of the 'pickling process' which has great figurative significance:

> My special blends: I've been saving them up. Symbolic value of the pickling process: all the six hundred million eggs which gave birth to the population of India could fit inside a single, standard-sized pickle-jar; six hundred million spermatozoa could be lifted on a single spoon. Every pickle-jar (you will forgive me if I become florid for a moment) contains, therefore, the most exalted of possibilities: the feasibility of the chutnification of history; the grand hope of the pickling of time! (Rushdie 2021c, 660)

Just as 600 million spermatozoa, and the potential lives they represent, can be handled and mixed with a spoon invisibly to the naked eye, any cook should be aware that a mixture of ingredients can produce an infinite variety of possible flavours. A writer, like a cook, must have "above all a nose capable of discerning the hidden languages of what-must-be-pickled, its humours and messages and emotions," (ivi, 661) making it possible to represent an infinite number of memories, dreams, thoughts, and ideas. Saleem continues his metaphor by illustrating that both cooking and writing can be subject to the "in-

evitable distortions" (ivi, 662) of the process, which can lead to unwanted or unwelcome changes and intensifications. What really matters, however, is that each conveys meanings that give the story "the authentic taste of truth." (*ibid.*)

Saleem is well aware of the "vague implausibilities" (ivi, 661) that might raise questions and make one suspect that he "invented the whole story." (*ibid.*) As already mentioned elsewhere in this dissertation, he points out his resentment toward his father's regrets, as well as his incestuous love for his sister, which he suggests might lead one to think that he invented the story of the exchange of the cradles in order to make it acceptable to himself first. If one accepts this hypothesis, one could argue, for example, that Saleem's final castration, the sperectomy that deprives him and his nation of any hope of redemption, can be seen as a piece of Oedipal fiction through which he reconstructs his family history. What is ultimately at stake, however, is the possibility of storytelling to set in motion a "process of revision [that] should be constant and endless." (*ibid.*)

If we examine Saleem's entire story closely, we find that the supposedly magical elements are the result of Rushdie's ironic use of props, a narrative that could reflect a temporary loss of memory or sanity, or a desperate attempt at redemption for a life that has failed, with no hope of recovery except through rewriting. There is nothing in the novel that does not lend itself well to logical explanation as opposed to the surreal account offered, or that does not give rise to speculation as to whether the details that undoubtedly make the novel magical are not in fact distorted to create the illusion. For every story there is a counter-narrative, and every point of view is accompanied by a competing perspective that might lead us to suspect that Saleem is not telling the truth. And yet he swears to Padma: 'I told you the truth' (ivi, 211) In Rushdie's humorous allusions, the question of what is true or false is not so much about separating fact from fiction, but about accepting the role that make-believe plays in contaminating reality. From the beginning of this story, we are like Aadam at prayer in a desolate valley in Kashmir, "trapped in a strange middle ground, trapped between belief and disbelief, and it is all only a charade after all." (ivi, 25). As an artist, Rushdie is primarily concerned with the reader's decision to accept or suspend either one or the other, for it is this choice that establishes the boundary between them and determines their relationship.

Despite the extensive knowledge we have today, it is impossible to gain a clear understanding of reality because of the wealth of information available. This is a paradox of the modern globalised information society: although we now have more means of disseminating knowledge, such as audiovisual recording instruments to document objective facts, an abundance of forgeries can be spread more easily than ever before, confusing people, sowing doubt and dis-

cord and making a common perception of reality virtually impossible. Never has it been so common for false information to be mistaken for truth. For Rushdie, the ability to tell stories is one of the most characteristic features of the human race. During a speech at Duke University on 12 April 2011, Rushdie made the statement that "man is a storytelling animal,"[43] borrowing a phrase that had been employed by Graham Swift in *Waterland* (1983) almost thirty years before. As a result, many myths and religious rituals were spread throughout history, which helped people to make hardships more bearable, but which also led to wars and divisions. One might assume that disinformation would be harder to spread at a time when it is easier to dispove. However, this has not been the case, and the proliferation of electronic media has made it increasingly difficult to distinguish between reality and illusion. Contradictory 'truths' proliferate uncontrollably, leading to chaos, confusion and endlessly multiplied viewpoints. Postmodernism begins to manifest itself in literature when authors accept the idea that reality is not univocal or universal and that there is no way to reach the truth. So, they begin to play with their material and allow the reader to assemble some of the narrative elements into their own stories. Since there can be no agreement on what is real and what is not, it is also impossible to distinguish between right and wrong from an ethical point of view.

Saleem must therefore take responsibility for shaping his own story (which he knows will never be exclusively his) so as not to be crushed by it, and assume the dual role of author and narrator:

> 'I can find out any damn thing!' I triumphed, 'There isn't a thing I cannot know!' Today, with the hindsight of the lost, spent years, I can say that the spirit of self-aggrandizement which seized me then was a reflex, born of an instinct for self-preservation. If I had not believed myself in control of the flooding multitudes, their massed identities would have annihilated mine... (Rushdie 2021c, 259)

He uses as a metaphor the leakage where his body crumbles under the pressure of the 600 million stories of as many souls that populate India. He can only fight back through storytelling, but more importantly through the creative power that comes with authorship. The act of writing one's own story is a means of not succumbing to the complexity and richness of the cultural and material realities we encounter through history, media and myth. Saleem (and through him Rushdie) uses writing to survive, much as Sherazade did. Padma is Saleem's ear that helps him believe in and make sense of his story so that

[43] Reported on *Brittlepaper.com*. Refer to the sitography for the exact address.

it can become a human and historical legacy for his son. For stories to exist, someone has to believe in them, just as subjects need to recognise themselves in the gaze of others, according to Jacques Lacan. Saleem is overwhelmed by the amount of stories that he encounters (or that enters his body, to use the metaphor employed in the novel), and as a result, he feels like he is breaking under the pressure of it all. He is unable to fully understand or make sense of this information. However, Saleem finds a way to resist this complexity as a storyteller, by using his own memories, history, and myths to create a personal blend of truth and lies. Had he not taken control of the stories to create his own narrative, he would have succumbed to history. How much of that narrative is true is less important than the fact that it is 'his' story, one that he believes in and shares with those he loves because, in this way, he is able to find meaning and purpose in the midst of the complexity of the world around him. In fact, this situation makes all other considerations irrelevant, and Saleem can accordingly conclude: "Believe don't believe, but it's true." (ivi, 661)

Chapter III

The Profane and the Sacred. A Palinodic Approach to *The Satanic Verses*

> This swaying, this swing in which confused material goes about taking shape, is for me the only certainty of its necessity [...].
>
> Julio Cortázar, *Hopscotch*

> We are somewhat more than ourselves in our sleeps, and the slumber of the body seems to be but the waking of the soul. [...] Supposing a man always happy in his dreams, and miserable in his waking thoughts, and that his life was equally divided between them, whether would he be more happy or miserable?
>
> Joseph Addison, *Essay on Dreams*

3.1 *Mirrored perceptions*

In the previous chapter, Rushdie's concerns about Saleem's role as narrator were addressed. By combining his memories with his imagination, he creates a narrative that allows him to revel in his own feelings and feed the illusion that he is in control of his own life, despite his castration by Indira Gandhi. Yet he also leaves open a number of possibilities for alternative accounts of the same story, all of which can be just as valid as his own. This is largely due to the humorous style in which he presents his story, resulting in the novel's characteristic opalescent style that challenges the reader to hypothesise and determine which option is most likely. There is no doubt that Saleem's parable reflects the Indian national consciousness, which is a grand narration (Bhabha 1990, 1994) that mixes fact with fiction to maintain its own balance and stability. For a narrative to be viable, historical accuracy is only partly relevant. Truth can be combined with fiction as long as the narrative is credible and stable. *Midnight's Children* explores cultural and social relations as hybrids between fiction and fact through the metaphors of food and taste. Flavours merge in the same way that people 'merge' through the exchange of feelings, memories and information. "Like many millions of people," Saleem points out, "I am a bastard child of history. Perhaps we all are, black and brown and white, leaking into one another, as a character of mine once said, like flavours when you cook." (Rushdie 2021c, 408) Contamination can only occur when different, even opposing, characteristics interact.

In a short video on the *BigThink* website and *YouTube* (2015),[1] Rushdie explains that he was a big fan of science fiction before becoming a writer. Growing up and in his twenties, he read countless science fiction novels that were the inspiration for *Grimus*. Rushdie believes that his first novel is more accurately classified as fantasy fiction rather than science fiction: "Because I think that that form, what might be better called speculative fiction, has always been a very good vehicle for the novel ideas. You know if you have ideas that you want to set in motion [...] fantasy fiction has always done that and always done it very, very well." (Rushdie 2015) As a writer, Rushdie viewed science fiction as the most effective literary form for experimenting with new ideas and imagining possible futures and worlds. Rushdie invented fantasy fiction as a genre that combined science fiction and fantastic elements. He described it as a genre of 'speculative fiction' that allows new ideas to be explored more easily. Throughout his career, Rushdie has been interested in the ways in which art and literature enable the creation, formulation, and exploration of new ideas. Neither Rushdie nor his writing is fundamentally concerned with realistic, didactic, or morally explicit literature. What is important to him is to be able to imagine what might yet be possible. In the words of Pradeep Trikha (2021): "The invented worlds of Rushdie's novels and short stories register largely failed attempts to move beyond the bounds of the present; to imagine other pasts and futures that might discharge the curse of similitude. For if there is fear in Rushdie's fiction it is the fear of repetitions of entrapment in self-perpetuating structure." (1) This investigation also calls into question all that might have been, both in the present and in the past. His writing develops within a consistent contradiction, a state of serene chaos in order to intercept and confront ontological and epistemological issues equally. Rushdie's ability to blend fact and fiction has made his novels a virtual space in which he explores the infinite possibilities and contradictions of storytelling, as well as the process of change that ultimately makes things and characters what they are. This may help explain a characteristic discrepancy between Rushdie's work and criticism of it. For example, although scholars tend to call him a postmodernist, he describes himself as a modernist author. The gap between Rushdie's experience of his work and the public's perception has never been greater than after *The Satanic Verses* was published.

A major difference between the plot of this novel and *Midnight's Children* is that it is told from the perspective of two different characters, Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha, both of Indian origin. At the beginning of the novel, the

[1] "True Stories Don't Tell the Whole Truth". Refer to the sitography for the exact address.

two are travelling by plane from Bombay to London. Saladin is returning from Bombay after visiting his father, and Gibreel is on his way to London in search of Alleluia Cone, a mountaineer with whom he had had a three-day affair earlier. But a suicide hijacker blows up the plane over the English Channel. In spite of plunging into the void, the two men miraculously land unharmed on the surface of London. In the aftermath of the fall, Gibreel turns into an angel and Saladin into a devil. However, the situation becomes increasingly implausible for Saladin, and he attributes their survival to pure luck. He thinks that, due to his holding tightly on to Gibreel waving his arms like bird wings, they were able to slow down and land unharmed on the beach. Gibreel, however, does not deny that the fall was a miracle, claiming that it was brought about by a combination of singing and flapping while falling. While Saladin displays a rational attitude, Gibreel is dominated by faith and tends to believe in the supernatural.

It is extremely common in literature to find mirror oppositions such as these. As an example, Booker (1990) recalls Vladimir Nabokov's Sebastian Knight and his doppelgänger V.,[2] or James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom[3] or Shem and Shaun[4] pairs. Rushdie himself cited Stevenson's Jekyll and Hyde dualism as an intertextual model for *The Satanic Verses* and

[2] Vladimir Nabokov's *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941) features the shadowy and enigmatic V., an author and critic who is obsessed with the work of Sebastian Knight, the novel's protagonist. As the story progresses, V. begins to blur the line between his own identity and that of the writer he idolises. This leads to a series of increasingly strange and disturbing events as V. becomes more enmeshed in Sebastian's life and begins to take on his personality and idiosyncrasies.

[3] Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom are the two main characters in James Joyce's novel *Ulysses* (1920). Stephen Dedalus is a young artist and intellectual struggling to find his place in the world. He is highly educated and has a deep love of literature, but is also prone to feelings of isolation and alienation. Leopold Bloom, on the other hand, is a middle-aged man who works as an advertiser. He's more down-to-earth and practical than Stephen, but he also has a deep inner life, struggling with his own identity and purpose. The lives of the two men intersect on June 16, 1904, when they finally meet after attending to their own matters and strike up a conversation. Stephen, an intellectually curious young man, is initially sceptical of Bloom's ideas, but as the conversation progresses he becomes more receptive to his perspective. As Stephen opens up about his own struggles and insecurities, Bloom offers him words of encouragement and support, marking the beginning of their deep and meaningful relationship.

[4] Shem and Shaun are characters in James Joyce's novel *Finnegans Wake* (1939), sons of the book's protagonist, HCE. They are named after two biblical characters, Shem and Shaun, known as the 'sons of Noah'. In the novel, Shem and Shaun represent opposing forces: the former is associated with artistic and intellectual endeavours, while Shaun is more practical. Throughout the book, the two brothers engage in a sort of battle for control of their father's inheritance.

other novels of his. A quote from Rushdie's *Shame* reads: "as Mr. Stevenson has shown in his Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, such saint-and-monster conjunctions are conceivable in the case of men; alas! such is our nature. But the whole essence of Woman denies such a possibility." (Rushdie 1995, 160) This ironic observation refers to Sufiya Zenobia Hyder's[5] transformation into a beast that rips off young men's heads after she hypnotises and seduces them. There is a constant theme of transformation in Rushdie's many novels, including *Midnight's Children*: Saleem is employed by the Pakistani army to hunt down enemies during the Indo-Pakistani war as a kind of human-dog, on account of his prodigious sense of smell. In *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie indirectly suggests that transformation, or the passing from one state to another, also plays a central role through the names he gives to his characters. As an example, Saladin Chamcha's bears a striking resemblance to Gregor Samsa[6] from Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1915). Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) observed that physical transformations can metaphorically express the changes we undergo during our lives: "Metamorphosis serves as the basis for a method of portraying the whole of an individual's life in its more important moments of crisis: for showing how an individual becomes other than what he was." (115) By demonstrating the radical changes that can be undergone by the self, and the ability to embrace qualities that are initially alien to it, the transformation process challenges the concept of self as fully defined and immutable. It is no coincidence that both Gibreel and Saladin exhibit a certain degree of inherent duplicity and yet can be treated as a unity, since their qualities and characteristics can only be understood from a complementary point of view. Throughout the

[5] In the novel, Sufiya Zenobia Hyder, the daughter of Raza Hyder, embodies the concept of shame. She was born a girl and not the son her father had hoped for, and her brain damage caused by a fever has left her mentally disabled and a source of shame for her parents and sister. The concept of shame, or 'sharam', in the novel encompasses a wide range of complex and mostly unpleasant feelings for which there are no exact English equivalents, combining pride, modesty, guilt and discomfort. Shame seems to manifest as an inner beast that consumes her as she grows older. Although Sufiya eventually marries Omar Khayyam Shakil, the shame does not subside and her transformation into a beast is its final manifestation.

[6] Gregor is a young man who works as a travelling salesman and is the primary provider for his family. One morning, he wakes up to discover that he has been transformed into a giant insect. The transformation is a metaphor for Gregor's feelings of isolation and confinement in his monotonous and unfulfilling life. As an insect, Gregor is unable to communicate or connect with his family and is completely reliant on their care. He becomes a burden and is eventually rejected by them. Gregor's transformation serves thus as a catalyst for the changes that occur within his family and their relationships with each other.

story, the relationship between the two characters develops in response to each other's changing feelings about cultural, religious and emotional belonging.

At the beginning of the novel, Saladin returns to England after visiting his father, Changez Chamchawala (another name that evokes the idea of change), in Bombay. He had returned to perform in the play *The Millionairess* by George Bernard Shaw. As a child, his father's excessive strictness and the numerous prohibitions he imposed on him were difficult for Saladin to accept. One day Saladin found a wallet full of British pounds, but his father scolded him for not earning it. He also recalls longing for his father's lamp, an "avatar of Aladdin's very own genie" (Rushdie 2011, 47), that he was not allowed to rub. Because of his father's attitude, Saladin holds a grudge against him. To break away from his father and Bombay, Saladin dreamed of moving to London from an early age. He wanted to become a true Englishman because that was precisely what his father did not wish for him. In fact, after Saladin announced that he wanted to become an actor in London, Changez informed him that he believed he was possessed by a demon.[7] From childhood, Saladin learned to change selves like one changes clothes. He found reassurance in the transience: it wasn't a problem if one Saladin was faulty, he could simply replace it with another. A fixed, unchanging identity did not appeal to him. Once in London, Saladin's resentment was compounded by the fact that his father forced him to use all the money he had found in the wallet to pay for his studies, which made him worry about his financial situation. In a sense, then, it was not his father who was paying for his studies, but the mysterious person, presumably of English origin, who had lost his or her wallet. Saladin has two love affairs. In England he marries Pamela Lovelace, with whom he has a strained relationship because he cannot have children.[8] Instead, in Bombay he has an affair with Zeeny Vakil, a controversial writer whom he has known since childhood. An "empty slate" (ivi, 72) is what Zeeny calls his face when he isn't acting or making voices. Out of jealousy, Saladin breaks up with Zeeny when she gives Saladin's father a tender kiss on the mouth.

[7] "Changez Chamchawala's reply came by express mail. 'Might as well be a confounded gigolo. It's my belief some devil has got into you and turned your wits. You who have been given so much: do you not feel you owe anything to anyone? To your country? To the memory of your dear mother? To your own mind? Will you spend your life jiggling and preening under bright lights, kissing blonde women under the gaze of strangers who have paid to watch your shame? You are no son of mine, but a ghoul, a hoosh, a demon up from hell. An actor! Answer me this: what am I to tell my friends?'" (Rushdie 2011, 58)

[8] She also has problems because her parents were killed when she was a child.

As to Gibreel, he struggles between wanting and being unable to believe in God. In Kanya Kumari,[9] Gibreel had been involved in the shooting of one of his many religious films in which he played a number of Hindu deities, when he was simultaneously struck down by actor Eustace Brown's fist and the sea water that brings together three oceans at once. Kanya Kumari, also known as Cape Comorin, is located at the extreme point of the Indian subcontinent and is therefore surrounded by three different seas: the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal. There is also a time of year when the sunset coincides with the appearance of the full moon on the horizon. Upon suffering the stroke, Gibreel was plunged into a death-in-life state due to an unexplained internal haemorrhage similar to the crumbling Saleem suffers in *Midnight's Children*. As he struggled with his illness, he pleaded with God for help, but to no avail. He concluded that there was no God to protect or listen to him. Only after this disappointment did a rapid and again inexplicable healing process begin. In the wake of his illness, Gibreel was left without the faith in God he had previously held. After recovering from internal bleeding, Gibreel loses faith in Islam, and no longer accepting God's benevolent intervention starts to revile Him with his behaviour.

If Saladin has a problem with his biological father, Gibreel has one with the supreme father of the Abrahamic religion. And just as Saladin's decisions are the result of a lack of trust in his father, Gibreel's depend on his lost faith in God. He begins to eat pork as a sign of revenge against Islam. At one of these meals, Alleluia Cone passes him by and scolds him that he should celebrate his recovery. Gibreel immediately falls in love with her, so much so that he decides to break off his previous relationship with the wealthy Rekha Merchant. As a result, he begins a romantic relationship with Alleluia, an affair that lasts only three days. She then leaves India and travels to London, but this is enough to make Gibreel join her there.

Rushdie portrays Saladin and Gibreel as divided between London and Bombay, love and sexual affirmation, faith and solitude, implying both a worldly and a social division. The two characters oscillate between East and West, Gibreel fleeing one love in order to pursue another, Saladin escaping his family, his past, and his traditions in order to embrace the western metropolis and its lifestyle. The novel describes their attempt to achieve unity amidst the tensions between these different poles. In the end, only Saladin

[9] The town of Kanya Kumari is located at the southernmost tip of the Indian peninsula in the state of Tamil Nadu. The area was named after the Hindu goddess of the same name, who is believed to have performed religious duties there.

survives by returning to his roots. Gibreel's failure to find a woman to love and to rediscover his faith in God starts the journey leading to his death. His anguish is expressed in dreams in which he (re)experiences the events of the Islamic revelation in the guise of the archangel Gabriel who advises the 'businessman' Mahound in the spread of a new monotheistic religion (which, of course, stands for the Prophet Muhammad's predication of Islam). The events take place in the sandy city of Jahilia (which means 'ignorance'[10] in Arabic and was used by the Arabs to refer to the pre-Islamic period). Jahilia is depicted as a city in a state of spiritual and moral decay, where the ruling authorities use religion and tradition to justify their repressive actions. The city is also home to a group of people known as Jahilites, who are described as ignorant and superstitious. It seems that Rushdie refers to the land in which these dreams are set as Jahilia, not to demonstrate the falsity of Islam, but to illustrate the state of dissolution that can be experienced by a soul that has lost God.

When Gibreel passes from reality to dream for the first time, he remembers his mother calling him Shaitan because he had been mischievous: he had put meat intended for Muslims in snacks for Hindu customers, which enraged them. First she rebukes him with demonic epithets such as Shaitan and mischievous imp, then she embraces him calling him her angel (Farishta means angel in Hindi, Persian and Farsi). The oscillation between his present reality and the dream world is triggered by this childhood memory. After that, he has sacred visions of the devil being cast to earth, of the three pagan deities Lat, Manat and Uzza, and of Mahound. This narrative device makes it possible for both contemporary London and the dream world to alternate and co-exist. The transitions are not abrupt and do not contrast with each other. They merge seamlessly, so that one leads to the other and then back again. Even though the story switches back and forth between reality and dream, they remain mutually constitutive, constantly interfering in each other. The dream contains a number of characters (Mahound, as anticipated, but also the foundling Ayesha[11]) who are directly influenced or inspired by Gibreel. There-

[10] The Arabic word 'jahiliyyah' derives from the word root 'jahil' which means 'ignorant' or 'uneducated'. In Islamic tradition, the period of jahiliyyah is considered a time of social and moral decline, when the people of Arabia lived in a state of ignorance and were not guided by the principles of Islam. It is believed that this period ended with the revelation of the Qur'an and the emergence of Islam as a religion.

[11] Ayesha of Titlipur is a young woman who belongs to the Jahilites. She is introduced into the novel as a minor character, but she is eventually accepted as a prophetess who delivers messages

fore, Gibreel's dreams cannot be separated from reality and reduced to mere fantasy. His conscious life is deeply interwoven with the dream of Mahound. Gibreel's reality and his dream can be seen as two polarisations of the same mind activity, each embodying a different set of capacities and needs.

When we are awake, conscious experience predominates and the senses are most active, while psychic life is subordinate to the reception and organisation of all information. In contrast, purely psychic activity predominates in dreams and sensory input and is subject to its rules. Gibreel's memory and consciousness constantly switch back and forth between them. We saw in *Midnight's Children* that Saleem spoke of a resentment coming from the future to condition the narrative from the beginning as it was initiated. It is the contamination between material and psychological data that creates the fluctuation, where a clear line between the two cannot be distinguished, but a movement that comes simultaneously from an impulse in one direction followed by a restoring force in the other.

A dream is the result of a struggle between the desire to believe and the fear of doubt, according to Rushdie. In this sense, the dreams in which Gibreel experiences the revelation of Islam are the most painful and have provoked criticism in the Arab world. In these dreams he expresses his doubts about God and the assumptions that prevent him from returning to faith, much as he wishes to do so. These dreams make him experience visions of disbelief and scepticism that undermine his firmest convictions. In Rushdie's words, "[Gibreel] tries in vain to escape them, fighting against sleep; but then the visions cross over the boundary between his waking and sleeping self, they infect his daytimes: that is, they drive him mad." (Rushdie 1991c, 413) Basically, Gibreel becomes insane as a result of his visions overtaking his waking reality. So, just as in *Midnight's Children*, we cannot assume that either narrative in *The Satanic Verses* is entirely accurate and free of bias or inaccuracy. Unlike *Midnight's Children*, however, this time Rushdie hints from the beginning that Gibreel may be insane or suffering from mental problems, for he starts to have visions that can be interpreted as hallucinations. For example, when he crashes on London soil, he sees a ghostly image of Rekha Merchant on a flying carpet. She had been his lover in India and in the meantime had committed suicide with her son by jumping out of their flat precisely because their ro-

in the name of the Archangel Gibreel, although she suffers from seizures and is initially seen eating butterflies. After predicting the cancer of Mirza Saeed Akhtar's wife, she tells the village that they must make a pilgrimage on foot to Mecca to cure her. After assuring the villagers that the Arabian Sea will part so they can reach Mecca, they drown as they follow her into the water.

mantic relationship had ended.[12] Saladin, however, is unable to see or hear her. As always with Rushdie, we must decide whether we believe in a supernatural element, namely that Rekha's spirit appeared to Gibreel to torment him after her death, or whether it is a pure case of insanity. Although the implausibility of the situation may cause the magical element to somewhat overshadow the possibility that Gibreel could be insane, Rushdie has nonetheless repeatedly suggested that the most revolutionary men are often obsessed with visionary ideas that make them seem mad.

Migrants also experience similar oscillations of belief and doubt when adjusting their old values to new cultures and traditions (Bhabha 1990, 1994). Cécile Leonard (2022) supports the idea of oscillation by calling it a 'free flow':

> Most of Rushdie's scholarship focuses on the transnational or cosmopolitan quality of his novels, pointing out the free flow advocated by the author between India and the West.
> [...]
> The ritual of the plane then allows a liberating distance with geography and gives birth to a metaphysical definition of the border. This membrane, as an imaginary organism that can stretch out and mutate, becomes a counterpart for terrestrial frontiers, rigid and constraining. In flowing in and out of imaginary borders, the postcolonial subject assumes his role as a translated subject – etymologically, of being 'borne across'. (408, 411)

Rushdie observes in "In Good Faith" (1991) that "if *The Satanic Verses* is anything, it is a migrant's-eye view of the world," (408) a view that expresses "the very experience of uprooting, disjuncture and metamorphosis" (*ibid.*) as well as "problems of hybridisation and ghettoization, of *reconciling the old and the new*." (*ibid.*, emphasis is mine) The experience of a different culture can influence our perception of truth, stability, and certainty. Different cultures may understand concepts differently; cross-cultural contact may make another world seem more real than our own.

[12] "'You don't see her?' Gibreel shouted. 'You don't see her goddamn Bokhara rug?'
No, no, Gibbo, her voice whispered in his ears, don't expect him to confirm. I am strictly for your eyes only, maybe you are going crazy, what do you think, you namaqool, you piece of pig excrement, my love. With death comes honesty, my beloved, so I can call you by your true names.
Cloudy Rekha murmured sour nothings, but Gibreel cried again to Chamcha: 'Spoono? You see her or you don't?'
Saladin Chamcha saw nothing, heard nothing, said nothing. Gibreel faced her alone." (Rushdie 2011, 18)

So, it seems fair to conclude that with Gibreel, Rushdie expresses two of his fluctuating sensibilities: the first stems from the force of attraction and repulsion that marks his relationship with the complementary figure of Saladin, which reflects Rushdie's psychologically unsettling experience as a migrant. The second oscillates within the equally dualistic relationship between Gibreel and Mahound/Muhammad as they alternate between dream and reality. In *Midnight's Children*, the foreshadowing of this dreamlike mise en abyme (where history and fantasy mirror each other) can perhaps already be discerned when Saleem compares his suspicion of being insane with Muhammad's apparent feelings:

> 'Muhammad,' I said, 'at first believed himself insane: do you think the notion never crossed my mind? But the Prophet had his Khadija, his Abu-Bakr, to reassure him of the genuineness of his Calling; nobody betrayed him into the hands of asylum-doctors.' By now, the green chutney was filling them with thoughts of years ago; I saw guilt appear on their faces, and shame. 'What is truth?' I waxed rhetorical, 'What is sanity? Did Jesus rise up from the grave? Do Hindus not accept – Padma – that the world is a kind of dream; that Brahma dreamed, is dreaming the universe; that we only see dimly through that dream-web, which is Maya. (Rushdie 2021c, 311)

The way Gibreel falls ill, besides representing a subtle allusion to the possibility that his mental condition may be permanently affected by the disease, is reminiscent of the incident in Muhammad's life when he was hit full in the face by a stone after his defeat at Mount Uhud.[13] The force of the impact was so great that his opponents believed the Prophet had already died from it.

Not coincidentally, this novel has been the subject of a famous religious controversy known as the Rushdie affair. The portrayal of Mahound as the equivalent of Muhammad, the apparent status of his wives as prostitutes, the association between Saladin Chamcha (a possible equivalent of Saladin, the celebrated ruler and warrior who fought against Christians during the Crusades) and the devil, as well as the use the name of the Prophet Muhammad's

[13] In the Battle of Uhud, which took place in 625 CE, the Muslims were initially successful against the Meccans, but eventually had to retreat when some of the Muslim soldiers broke formation to loot the enemy's camp. As they retreated, the Meccans counterattacked and inflicted heavy casualties on the Muslims. Muhammad himself was seriously wounded when a stone hit him in the face, knocking out his teeth and causing him to lose consciousness. Despite his injuries, he managed to rally his followers and eventually the Muslims were able to regroup and drive out the Meccans.

wife (Ayesha) with respect for someone who caused much destruction and killed many people, are all considered offensive to the Islamic faith by many Muslims. During the Crusades, it was common for Christians to use the name Mahound in a pejorative and insulting way, equating it with Satan. A further concern is that the narrator implies that the prophet uses this 'devilish' name to win over his opponents.[14]

The most controversial part of the novel deals with an incident from the life of Muhammad and the emergence of Islam, also known as the Gharaniq incident. According to two Arab historians and at least four of Muhammad's early biographies,[15] later almost universally rejected by commentators on the Qur'an, Muhammad accepted three local deities (al-Lat, al-Uzzah and Manat) as intermediate beings between man and God. In this way, he supposedly hoped to overcome the resistance of the inhabitants of Mecca and convince them of the truth of monotheism. This concession would have been a shrewd political move, for Mecca depended on the pilgrims who visited the city to worship these and many other deities. Having achieved his goal, the Prophet later reportedly rejected the verses about the three pagan goddesses, attributing them to demonic influence. This retraction, however, cannot completely erase earlier verses, which, though 'under erasure',[16] continue to exist and exert influence. Islamic scholars generally reject this hypothesis, as it invalidates the Prophet's divine inspiration and casts doubt on the authenticity and infallibility of his words.

[14] "His name: a dream-name, changed by the vision. Pronounced correctly, it means he-for-whom-thanks-should-be-given, but he won't answer to that here; nor, though he's well aware of what they call him, to his nickname in Jahilia down below – he-who-goes-up-and-down-old-Coney. Here he is neither Mahomet nor MoeHammered; has adopted, instead, the demon-tag the farangis hung around his neck. To turn insults into strengths, whigs, tories, Blacks all chose to wear with pride the names they were given in scorn; likewise, our mountain-climbing, prophet-motivated solitary is to be the medieval baby-frightener, the Devil's synonym: Mahound." (Rushdie 2011, 104)

[15] Written by al-Tabari, al-Waqidi, Ibn Ishaq and Ibn Saad.

[16] To invoke a well known expression by Jacques Derrida (1976). The phrase 'under erasure' (also known as *sous rature* in French) refers to the practice of writing a word or term with a crossed-out line. This practice is often used in philosophical or critical texts to indicate that the word or concept is being used in a problematic, provisional or conditional way without fully endorsing it. By drawing a line through the word, the author shows that they are aware of the limitations or challenges associated with the word or concept, but still use it for the purpose of argument or discussion.

In the novel, the visions of Gibreel also show Mahound being asked whether three pre-Islamic deities, Lat, Uzza, and Manat, could be incorporated into the religion he was preaching. In consultation with Gibreel, whose inspiration Mahound draws for creating his new cult, Mahound accepts to worship the deities, believing that this will facilitate acceptance of his belief system and convert the Jahilian people more quickly. After his religion is accepted by all, he denies these statements and claims that they were dictated to him by Satan. Although the inclusion of the three pagan deities has played a crucial role in Islam's narrative, Mahound, following Gibreel's advice, attempts to "unwrite [the] story" (Rushdie 2011, 134) by removing the "foul verses that reek of brimstone and sulphur" (*ibid.*) from the book. In order for Gibreel's story to continue, he must bring it back first.[17] The novel's narrative arc is therefore drawn by three strands of plot. The first two address Gibreel and Saladin's vicissitudes between London and India. The third concerns the dream that reverses the roles and in which the archangel Gibreel (in London) takes on demonic traits (as he is the one who proposes to Mahound that he accept the compromise with Grandee Abu Simbel about the three goddesses), while Mahound (in some ways the opposite of Saladin) becomes the herald of the true faith, just as Gibreel eventually becomes in London.

In "One Thousand Days in a Balloon" (1991), which he wrote after spending 1,000 days in hiding following ayatollah Ruḥollāh Khomeynī's fatwa[18] (or death sentence) in February 1989, Rushdie acknowledges that the novel focuses on the question of who should have authority over telling and retelling

[17] "Gibreel, hovering-watching from his highest camera angle, knows one small detail, just one tiny thing that's a bit of a problem here, namely that it was me both times, baba, me first and second also me. From my mouth, both the statement and the repudiation, verses and converses, universes and reverses, the whole thing, and we all know how my mouth got worked." (Rushdie 2011, 134)

[18] Ruḥollāh Khomeynī was an Iranian cleric and revolutionary who served as Supreme Leader of Iran from 1979 until his death in 1989. He issued the fatwa against Rushdie in 1989 in response to the publication of *The Satanic Verses*. Khomeynī declared that Rushdie had committed blasphemy against Islam and called for him to be punished with death. The fatwa was widely condemned by the international community and considered a serious violation of freedom of expression and human rights. Despite the fatwa's condemnation, it was supported by many Muslims around the world and was seen as a rallying point for those concerned about the perceived disrespect for Islam in the Western world. In the Islamic tradition, a fatwa is a legal opinion or ruling issued by an Islamic scholar or jurist in response to a question on a particular subject. Fatwas can cover a wide range of topics, including religious practices, legal matters and moral issues. They are not as binding as court rulings, but they are considered guidance for Muslims who wish to follow Islamic law and tradition.

stories, and that the so-called Rushdie affair was essentially sparked by this interest. Specifically, Rushdie is referring to the history of Islam:

> Maybe they'll agree, too, that the row over *The Satanic Verses* was at bottom an argument about who should have power over the grand narrative, the Story of Islam, and that that power must belong equally to everyone. That even if my novel were incompetent, its attempt to retell the Story would still be important. That if I've failed, others must succeed, because those who do not have power over the story that dominates their lives, power to retell it, rethink it, deconstruct it, joke about it, and change it as times change, truly are powerless, because they cannot think new thoughts. (Rushdie 1991d, 448)

Indeed, there have been a seemingly endless number of violent protests around the world in response to the novel, leading to the killing or attempted murder of several translators and editors in various countries. The public burning of the novel, as well as efforts to silence its author and those involved in its publication, are unacceptable violations of human rights from the viewpoint of western nations. As opposed to this, Rushdie's text is perceived by many representatives of the Muslim world as a direct attack on their faith as it discredits both the story and the values upon which it is based. In this way, Mäyrä (2005) argues that Rushdie has succeeded in provoking a discussion on freedom of expression and its implications for interethnic and cultural exchange.

At the time of writing, Rushdie has also been reported to have been stabbed in the neck during an event at the Chautauqua Institution in New York State on 12 August 2022, where he was due to deliver a speech. The assailant, Hadi Matar, charged onto the stage armed with a knife and lunged at him, trying to execute the death sentence which was never really lifted by a limited branch of the Islamic community. Matar has admitted that he has not read the whole book, but only a couple of pages. In spite of this, he was absolutely convinced that Rushdie attacked Islam. For him, it did not matter how or in what form. He relied on what he had been told about Rushdie and the book, namely that "He's someone who attacked Islam, he attacked their beliefs, the belief systems."[19] This confirms a statement Rushdie had made long before:

> It has been bewildering to watch the proliferation of such statements, and to watch them acquire the authority of truth by virtue of the power of repetition.

[19] Steven Vago and Ben Kesslen reported the news in the *New York Post* of August 17, 2022. Refer to the sitography for the exact address.

> It has been bewildering to learn that people, millions upon millions of people, have been willing to judge *The Satanic Verses* and its author, without reading it, without finding out what manner of man this fellow might be, on the basis of such allegations as these. It has been bewildering to learn that people do not care about art. Yet the only way I can explain matters, the only way I can try and replace the non-existent novel with the one I actually wrote, is to tell you a story. (Rushdie 1991c, 411)

As Booker (1990) notes, even Khomeynī himself may not have read *The Satanic Verses* and its author before sentencing him to death. This observation raises a very important point. According to Rushdie, what he saw as slander was accepted as truth by a section of the Muslim world, and both the book and its author were judged on the basis of hearsay alone, and in some cases even despised, without many people having read the book themselves. It made no difference whether certain assessments of the book were true or false, regardless of the actual basis and arguments for those evaluations. At the end of the day, what matters most is the feeling that people share with one another. This feeling, however, has led to the creation of a second novel, which Rushdie believes does not exist, but which has nevertheless become more real than the original. There is one book imagined by a certain branch of the Islamic community that dominates the world's attention, while the original is slowly being forgotten or fading into obscurity.

In spite of this, there are still those who believe that the text is highly misunderstood, especially in the field of art and academia. In *Testaments Betrayed. An Essay in Nine Parts* (1995),[20] for example, Milan Kundera notes how Rushdie's novel shows a certain tenderness towards Islam. Feroza Jussawalla (1996) even referred to *The Satanic Verses* as Rushdie's love letter to Islam, which unfortunately resulted in its author becoming "a victim of cross-cultural (mis) understanding" (54). How can such a disagreement about one and the same text come about? If the same novel causes thousands of people to take to the streets and feed angry mobs while calling for the death of the author, how can others see in it a benevolent attitude towards those same people?

[20] Gregor is a young man who works as a travelling salesman and is the primary provider for his family. One morning, he wakes up to discover that he has been transformed into a giant insect. The transformation is a metaphor for Gregor's feelings of isolation and confinement in his monotonous and unfulfilling life. As an insect, Gregor is unable to communicate or connect with his family and is completely reliant on their care. He becomes a burden and is eventually rejected by them. Gregor's transformation serves thus as a catalyst for the changes that occur within his family and their relationships with each other.

3.2 *Challenging textual authority: the emergence of the new*

According to Kundera, Rushdie is keen to use the 'not-serious' to discuss the dreadful, which is to deal with dramatic and important issues without taking them too seriously. In the novel, this is achieved right from the beginning by Gibreel and Saladin surviving the in-flight explosion of the aeroplane, with the first flailing his arms and hovering as if he were a butterfly, while the latter is squeezed into a grey suit with his arms "on his sides... a bowler hat on his head." (Rushdie 2011, 14) Like *Midnight's Children*, *The Satanic Verses* challenges the reader to accept impossible events, such as the fact that two people can survive the explosion of an aeroplane and fall to the ground seemingly unharmed. It also asks the reader to believe that the two are able to start singing as they fall and compete with one another to sing louder: "let's face it: it was impossible for them to have heard one another, much less conversed and also competed thus in song. Accelerating towards the planet, atmosphere roaring around them, how could they? But let's face this, too: they did." (ivi, 17) Unlike *Midnight's Children*, however, this time the narrator does not even ask to be believed. His revelations (and there can be no doubt that he is indeed a male) must be heard and accepted as true. In fact, the novel is teeming with prompts to the reader, such as 'listen'.

Taking into account Saladin's ability to simulate multiple voices and the fact that Gibreel's "mouth got worked" (Rushdie 2011, 134), it becomes clear that the problem of oscillation due to indeterminacy already exists as soon as we try to determine who the narrator actually is and where or when he speaks. This novel raises the fundamental and possibly unresolvable question of his identity. Booker acknowledges that the narrator of *The Satanic Verses* is probably less revisionist than Saleem in *Midnight's Children* and less destabilising than the narrator in *Shame* (with his constant hints that what he is telling is a fabrication), but no less devious. Right at the beginning, the narrator questions his own identity – "Who am I? Who else is there?" (ivi, 15) – and constantly challenges the reader to try and guess it.[21] Unlike Saleem, the reader cannot determine whether the narrator is angelic or satanic, on the side of good or evil, or whether his words have benevolent or malevolent intentions. The fact that this aspect has been mostly ignored is astonishing, for it alone would be sufficient to absolve the work of insulting Islam, as it also destabilises the voices that oppose the Prophet's proclamation. Although one is instinctively inclined to identify Gibreel as the narrator of the novel, some clues in

[21] "Who am I? Let's put it this way: who has the best tunes?" (Rushdie 2011, 21)

the novel suggest that he may in fact be Satan himself. There is an example where Gibreel and a possible demonic puppeteer create a ventriloquist effect: "To will is to disagree; not to submit; to dissent. I know; devil talk. Shaitan interrupting Gibreel. Me?" (ivi, 104), or as described in the story of the fall from the sky: "...great falls change people. You think they fell a long way? In the matter of tumbles, I yield pride of place to no personage, whether mortal or im-. From clouds to ashes, down the chimney you might say, from heaven-light to hellfire [...]." (ivi, 144) It is clear that the narrator here identifies with Satan recalling the moment when he fell from Paradise. From the beginning, the novel is based on an irresolvable ontological confusion that merges the narrator with the narratee, good with evil, truth with fiction, history with stories. Since a pivotal moment of the story is Mahound's declaration that he was inspired by Satan, even if only in a few verses, we cannot even be sure that this does not happen in other parts of the narrative. Whereas the main question in *Midnight's Children* was whether Saleem intentionally or unintentionally fashioned the narrative after his own memories and emotions, the main concern in *The Satanic Verses* is not only to determine how much of the narrative is authentic, but also how much of it has been contaminated by the possible substitution of narrators. By juxtaposing the Ganesha/Vyasa and Saleem/Padma binomials, *Midnight's Children* only tangentially touched on the issue, but in *The Satanic Verses* it keeps the narrative caught in the ebb and flow of an undying echo. In fact, the words Gibreel supposedly suggests to Mahound are written down by a scribe named Salman, which clearly points to the author in the flesh. He decides to slightly alter Mahound's words of revelation in an effort to test him, as he begins to doubt their validity. Upon discovering that Mahound cannot tell the difference, he is dismayed:

> Mahound did not notice the alterations. So there I was, actually writing the Book, or rewriting, anyway, polluting the word of God with my own profane language. But, good heavens, if my poor words could not be distinguished from the Revelation by God's own Messenger, then what did that mean? What did that say about the quality of the divine poetry?
>
> ...
>
> The truth is that what I expected when I made that first tiny change, all-wise instead of all-hearing what I wanted – was to read it back to the Prophet, and he'd say, What's the matter with you, Salman, are you going deaf? And I'd say, Oops, O God, bit of a slip, how could I, and correct myself. But it didn't happen; and now I was writing the Revelation and nobody was noticing, and I didn't have the courage to own up. I was scared silly, I can tell you. Also: I was sadder than I have ever been. So I had to go on doing it. Maybe he'd just missed out once, I thought, anybody can make a mistake. So the next time I

> changed a bigger thing. He said Christian, I wrote down Jew. He'd notice that, surely; how could he not? (ivi, 378-379)

Adding a third polarity to the Gibreel/Satan binomial,[22] Salman realises that he is able to substitute Mahound's words with his own. Fearing the punishment that would await him if he made a confession, and perhaps intoxicated by the power this situation gave him, Salman realised that he could no longer avoid changing the information he was being given. There is something enthralling about the creative power of the word. An essential element of Rushdie's work is the attack on the monological authority of the text and the language through which it is expressed. This harrowing understanding of how language may be abused to fabricate truths accounts for Rushdie's ironic lashings on religion in general (as well as on homogenising notions of nationality). They do not poke fun at those who identify with a religious affiliation or a sense of national unity, but are meant to express the dismay of those who, like him, have witnessed the arbitrariness of such power through the experience of cultural dislocation and have lost the ability to fully immerse themselves in one of these highly reassuring identity paradigms. Additionally, they serve as a warning to those who assume responsibility for maintaining the integrity of truth and virtue of the violence they, often unwittingly, perpetrate. It is Rushdie's contention in *Shame* that religious fundamentalism in Pakistan does not come from below, from the population, but from above. It is imposed by regimes through a rhetoric of faith based on "words of power, words which the people are reluctant to see discredited, disenfranchised, mocked." (Rushdie 1995, 252) As we all know, history has proved that he was right. According to Mäyrä (2005), *The Satanic Verses* can be interpreted as satanic not because it seeks to reveal an anti-truth, but because it explores the difficult process of identity construction in postmodern society in a deeply personal way: "The most important single feature in this area [...] is the systematic juxtaposition and blending of the religious and the profane, and the self-conscious commentary about this process." (Mäyrä 2005, 255).

Following Booker, Rushdie's style is clearly inspired by Samuel Beckett[23] to constantly confront the reader with the possibility that what is said may not be true. The choice between what is real and what is not, between what is true

[22] "Like shadows superimposed on shadows." (ivi, 393)

[23] Whose *Molloy* (1951), *Malone Dies* (1951) and *The Unnamable* (1953) were a major source of inspiration for Rushdie, as he himself acknowledged.

and what is false, prevents the reader from reaching, if not a final resolution, at least a solid or safe conclusion. In the words of Booker:

> Such either-or, yes-no choices are constantly subverted within Rushdie's overall assault on polar logic. This manipulative mode of narration is another Rushdie trademark – his work tends to feature unreliable, intrusive narrators who openly break the frame of the fiction to reveal the processes of composition, disturbing any attempts at a naturalistic recuperation of those fictions [...]. (1990, 987)

Booker summarises the essence of the reflection we are conducting here, however, when he writes that Rushdie challenges the authority of canonical texts given an absolute degree of truth, demonstrating a relationship between the immutability of their sacredness and their possibility for profane innovation. Furthermore, his writing: "problematizes so simple an opposition as that between the true and the false, the real and the not-real. The difficulty of this distinction is highlighted by the way in which Rushdie's self-consciously literary fiction engages in a direct and intense dialogue with the social and political issues of the real world." (ivi, 990) It is precisely Rushdie's intention to challenge authoritarianism and dogmatism of all kinds so as to deconstruct any simplistic binary opposition.

As mentioned before, while they pass through a series of clouds, one of the most exemplary among protean objects, Gibreel and Saladin are transformed into an angel and a devil respectively.[24] The moment of the fall from heaven is thus a time of transformation. As Cécile Leonard (2006) has noted, in several of Rushdie's novels there are characters who undergo a metamorphosis as they make their way west. Something similar happens in *The Moor Last Sigh* (1995) as well as in *The Ground beneath Her Feet* (1999). Rushdie himself admits in essays and interviews that he was inspired by *The Wizard of Oz* and *Alice in Wonderland*, where the act of crossing or, better, moving between two places leads to change and transformation. In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem undergoes a similar transformation as he passes the historical point of India's independence,

[24] "...while pushing their way out of the white came a succession of cloudforms, ceaselessly metamorphosing, gods into bulls, women into spiders, men into wolves. Hybrid cloud-creatures pressed in upon them, gigantic flowers with human breasts dangling from fleshy stalks, winged cats, centaurs, and Chamcha in his semi-consciousness was seized by the notion that he, too, had acquired the quality of cloudiness, becoming metamorphic, hybrid, as if he were growing into the person whose head nestled now between his legs and whose legs were wrapped around his long, patrician neck." (Rushdie 2011, 17)

gaining some powers and losing others along the way. Boundaries can take any form: temporal, geographical, cultural. As Rushdie states in *Step across this Line* (2002), life first emerged on land when a form of aquatic life crossed the threshold represented by the surface of the sea and made its way ashore.

According to Kundera (1995), Rushdie demonstrates the lesson of François Rabelais, namely that the author must make clear from the beginning what kind of connection he or she wants to establish with the reader. By merging the impossible with the surreal, it is Rushdie's purpose to force readers to consider the true nature of his humour, and there is a risk associated with every answer. Kundera notes that humour in literature did not emerge until the novel, and specifically with Cervantes. Earlier literature was largely devoid of it. Following Octavio Paz, he argues that humour is the true literary device of modernity, making everything it touches ambiguous. Moreover, Kundera admits that humour is the main cause of misunderstanding between him and his readers and that there is nothing more difficult than 'explaining' humour. According to Kundera, humour involves suspension of judgement, which is not a flaw but the essence of the novel:

> Suspending moral judgement is not the immorality of the novel; it is its morality. The morality that stands against the ineradicable human habit of judging instantly, ceaselessly, and everyone; of judging before, and in the absence of, understanding. From the viewpoint of the novel's wisdom, that fervid readiness to judge is the most detestable stupidity, the most pernicious evil. Not that the novelist utterly denies that moral judgment is legitimate, but that he refuses it a place in the novel. If you like, you can accuse Panurge of cowardice, accuse Emma Bovary, accuse Rastignac – that's your business; the novelist has nothing to do with it. (Kundera 1995, 7)

Kundera sees the creation of an "imaginary terrain in which moral judgement is suspended" (O'Mahoney 2011, 82), as the novel's greatest achievement, since a fictional character can develop autonomously from an ethical and moral perspective without necessarily expressing an absolute or universal value. By denying this autonomy, the novel as a literary genre loses its very essence. A key reason why *The Satanic Verses* is so effective in this regard is that it offers secularism the opportunity to challenge traditional religious sentiments and orthodoxies. All of them, not only those belonging to the Islamic faith. Once one understands what the novel is about, it is clear that Christianity is no less challenged than Islam.

According to Rushdie, the novel is a space where preconceived judgements can be set aside, creating characters who are not necessarily bound by absolute

values, unquestioned truths or strict ethical requirements: "*The Satanic Verses* celebrates 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." (Rushdie 1991c, 408) The main interest Rushdie shows in literature is the possibility of producing new ideas and new ways of thinking, a response to the Deleuzian ideal of thinking other-wise (1980, 1983, 1988),[25] in the double sense of thinking differently and from someone else's viewpoint. In "In Good Faith," Rushdie states that *The Satanic Verses* and the case brought against him had been used by racists and hypocrites to vilify Muslim and non-Muslim Asian people. In that essay, Rushdie argues for the novel's status as 'novel', specifically as something that "seems to insist [...] to see the world anew." (Rushdie 1991c, 407) He also acknowledges the anger that can accompany an attempt to introduce a new idea or perspective on the world: "I am well aware that this can be a hackle-raising, infuriating attempt." (*ibid*.) Indeed, it is this anger that has been intercepted by manipulators to create a novel that is something different from what Rushdie intended.

In "One Thousand Days in a Balloon" (1991), he compares the Islam he believes exists today with his ideal Islam, which he imagines as an open and tolerable Islam of the future. For a writer to allow the new to emerge, he or she must engage in a tension between individual and collective desire, between fantasy and reality. In doing so, the writer becomes a god-like figure confronting both existing conditions and the tensions created by worlds that are denied, hidden or merely potential. Again, Rushdie is in line with the thinking of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in believing that all stories originate in the tension between material and abstract realities. In their work *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), they speak explicitly of a book as a machinic assemblage or multiplicity whose "signifying totality" (4), or "plane of consistency" (*ibid.*) can only be traced in the connections it makes

[25] Thinking other-wise, or *penser autrement*, is a concept developed by French philosopher Gilles Deleuze that refers to the ability to think outside traditional categories and conventions and to embrace creativity and difference. Deleuze believed that this kind of thinking is essential to disrupt and dismantle dominant power structures and create new possibilities for social and political change. For Deleuze, thinking other-wise means rejecting the notion that there is only one, correct way of thinking and instead accepting a multiplicity of perspectives and approaches. This includes a willingness to question and criticise established ideas and to engage with the unconventional and unexpected. Deleuze believed that this way of thinking could help individuals and groups to free themselves from the constraints of dominant ideologies and create new, more inclusive and democratic ways of being.

abstractly (i.e. virtually) with other assemblages on different levels of existence (molecular, biological, linguistic, cultural, financial, etc.). Therefore, in their opinion, reading a book is not about searching for meaning or understanding it, but "what it functions with, in connection with what other things it does or does not transmit intensities, in which other multiplicities its own are inserted and metamorphosed, and with what bodies without organs it makes its own converge." (*ibid.*) Or more simply, they see a book (or any other 'object' or concept) as a multiplicity based on multidimensional relations for which the most important question is "which other machine the literary machine can be plugged into, must be plugged into in order to work." (*ibid.*) According to Rushdie, by making connections between the real and the virtual, authors are able to explore alternative worlds, scenarios and situations, and to rethink the relationship between what exists and what can be thought. The burden of artistic creation is unlike any other endeavour. We can only move forward as a species by voicing the unspeakable, creating virtual spaces where new questions emerge, and re-imagining what is already there.

The following passage from *The Satanic Verses* has attracted much attention in the postcolonial academic debate since the novel was published:

> How does newness come into the world? How is it born?
> Of what fusions, translations, conjoinings is it made?
> How does it survive, extreme and dangerous as it is? What compromises, what deals, what betrayals of its secret nature must it make to stave off the wrecking crew, the exterminating angel, the guillotine?
> Is birth always a fall?
> Do angels have wings? Can men fly? (Rushdie 2011, 19)

Ultimately, Rushdie would answer the question himself: "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." (Rushdie 1991c, 408) The renowned postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha would pay homage to this idea and develop it in "How newness enters the world", the title of a chapter in his seminal work *The Location of Culture* (2004).

We can discern here two key aspects of Rushdie's fascination with contamination as a literary device for thinking about the new: the first is the use of language as a means of exploring the tension between the thinkable and the unthinkable. The idea that language and art serve as a bridge between the visible world of human societies and the potential worlds that remain hidden or unrecognised aligns with Michel Foucault's views on these topics (1972,

1978, 2002, and 2008a and 2008b). In his works, Foucault discusses how language and art can reveal and bring to light these unseen or neglected aspects of reality. Language can be used to give approval and support to certain ideas, attitudes, and values, or to punish, harm, hide, or suppress others. The second aspect to consider is that language and literature can both bring people and cultures together and also create division between them. Salman Rushdie's writing style focuses on how literature can expose readers to new cultural and ideological perspectives. The presence of opposing elements and the blending of contrasting qualities can create openings for the emergence of something new. Because of this insight, Rushdie has become a prominent figure in contemporary literary, academic, and intellectual discussions.

Rushdie himself implies that novelty is never completely new, but rather is composed of combinations, translations, and connections. In his writing, he is interested in examining how it persists through agreements, compromises, and betrayals. In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie used the metaphor of leakage and the making of chutneys to illustrate this concept. However, it is more clearly demonstrated in *The Satanic Verses* through the way the dream seeps into reality and vice versa. However, as in his previous works, Rushdie makes this apparent already in the names he gives to things and characters in the novel. The plane from which Saladin and Chamcha fall is named Bostan, which is both a Farsi word for garden and the title of the great didactic poem by the 13th-century Persian poet Saadi Shirazi, the *Bustan*.[26] Details like these are not insignificant. In Rushdie's work every act of naming is densely packed with implications. A fall from an aeroplane with such a name illustrates the blending of elements from different religions. It contains a symbolic reference to the Christian tradition in that the plane is comparable to the Garden of Eden from which Adam and Eve were expelled, but also to Satan's fall from heaven, which according to Jesus in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 10-18) fell like lightning from the sky. At the same time, the term refers to a masterpiece of Islamic

[26] *Bustan* (Persian for 'orchard') is a collection of poems by the 13th century Persian poet Saadi Shirazi. It deals with a wide range of themes, including love, friendship, justice and wisdom. Among the most famous poems in the book is "Bani Adam" ("Children of Adam"), which advocates equality for all people. An important theme running through the poems is the garden. It is used as a metaphor for the natural world and the beauty it contains, a place of peace, tranquillity and contemplation which is often associated with the search for spiritual enlightenment and wisdom. In most poems, the garden is described as a place of refuge from the stresses and troubles of the outside world and find solace in nature. It is also commonly used as a symbol for the soul or the inner self. Throughout the poem, the poet urges the reader to tend the 'garden' of their own soul to discover the beauty and wisdom to be found within.

literature. Hovering over everything is the idea of the garden as a natural place of fecundation and contamination. The plane carrying the two is referred to as a seedpod that explodes with an originative 'big bang' in the sky, releasing the spores (its occupants) it contains across the London metropolitan area:

> ...mingling with the remnants of the plane, equally fragmented, equally absurd, there floated the debris of the soul, broken memories, sloughed-off selves, severed mother-tongues, violated privacies, untranslatable jokes, extinguished futures, lost loves, the forgotten meaning of hollow, booming words, land, belonging, home." (Rushdie 2011, 15)

In this passage, the plane is being compared to an egg. Just as an egg contains the mystery of life and eventually transforms into something new, the plane is described as a pod or seed that transforms when it comes into contact with a different cultural environment. This transformation is compared to the process of insemination or natural replication, as the plane disseminates its spores and produces something new. The transformation of Saladin into a devil and Gibreel into an angel in the novel is described as being similar to the transformation that migrants undergo when they 'fecundate' or enrich a new culture. In both cases, the transformation allows for the emergence of something new.

This highlights the problematic connection that exists between the language and the production of newness. One specific example of this is the arrest and abuse of Saladin by officers Stein, Novak, and Bruno. As a result of this experience, Saladin realises that his body is undergoing a transformation into a goat-like creature faster than he can process or understand. Saladin experiences a profound disconnect between his own realisation of the advancing transformation of his body into something monstrous and the seeming indifference of the officials, who are not the least bit surprised by his appearance. This situation is similar to what previously discussed for *Midnight's Children*, in which there is a difference between how Saleem perceives his own body and how the other characters perceive him, including the doctor who visits him for a check-up. Immediately afterwards, however, we are given an interpretative key. After losing consciousness, Saladin wakes up in a hospital bed and is visited by a manticore, who explains that many people, particularly migrants, are being transformed into monstrous creatures as a result of the way they are talked about by others. The manticore suggests that these grotesque characteristics are simply the result of the way people talk about them: "'But how do they do it?' Chamcha wanted to know. 'They describe us,' the other whispered solemnly. 'That's all. They have *the power of description*, and

we succumb to the pictures they construct.'" (Rushdie 2011, 179, emphasis is mine) Because of this, many creatures with both human and monster-like traits are formed. Saladin witnesses several of these hybrid creatures while he escapes the hospital, including people with features resembling animals and insects.[27] Language has the power to not only describe reality, but also to influence and change our understanding and perception of reality.

As a result, migrants must often create false identities or disguises to protect themselves from negative or false portrayals of themselves: "most migrants learn, and can become disguises. Our own false descriptions to counter the falsehoods invented about us, concealing for reasons of security our secret selves." (ivi, 60) Many scholars, such as Homi Bhabha (1990, 1994), Gayatri Spivak (1989), and Simon Gikandi (1996) have discussed how this process of creating new identities is common among immigrants from South Asia and the Caribbean who live in London and are trying to redefine their sense of self and what it means to be English. In postcolonial criticism, this way of creating new identities is called mimicry, a concept that refers to the imitation or copying of the dominant culture by a colonised or subaltern group, but with subtle differences. Mimicry is often seen as a form of resistance or subversion, as the colonised group appropriates and reshapes the dominant culture to assert its own identity and agency. However, mimicry can also be seen as a form of assimilation or internalised oppression, as the subaltern group may adopt the values and norms of the dominant culture and internalise its ideology. In this sense, mimicry can be seen as a way for the minority group to gain acceptance and social mobility within the prevailing society, but at the expense of their own cultural traditions and autonomy. Mimicry is often discussed in relation to power dynamics and the way systems of control are maintained and perpetuated.

As language provides a means by which truth can be invented, the process is based on the ability to hear and listen, or more precisely, on the willingness

[27] "The great escape took place some nights later, when Saladin's lungs had been all but emptied of slime by the ministrations of Miss Hyacinth Phillips. It turned out to be a well-organized affair on a pretty large scale, involving not only the inmates of the sanatorium but also the detenus, as the manticore called them, held behind wire fences in the Detention Centre nearby. [...] There were many shadowy figures running through the glowing night, and Chamcha glimpsed beings he could never have imagined, men and women who were also partially plants, or giant insects, or even, on occasion; built partly of brick or stone; there were men with rhinoceros horns instead of noses and women with necks as long as any giraffe. The monsters ran quickly, silently, to the edge of the Detention Centre compound, where the manticore and other sharp-toothed mutants were waiting by the large holes they had bitten into the fabric of the containing fence, and then they were out, free, going their separate ways, without hope, but also without shame." (Rushdie 2011, 182)

to believe and to be believed: "A man who invents himself needs someone to believe in him, to prove he's managed it. Playing God again, you could say. [...] Not only the need to be believed in, but to believe in another." (Rushdie 2011, 60) There must be a mutual willingness or at least openness between the speaker or narrator and the listener or receiver of information. The same process of creation flows 'backwards' into the dream as well, as Gibreel inspires Mahound the new religion, who admits to: "hav[ing] learned how to listen. This listening is not of the ordinary kind; it's also a kind of asking. Often, when Gibreel comes, it's as if he knows what's in my heart. It feels to me, most times, as if he comes from within my heart: from within my deepest places, from my soul." (Rushdie 2011, 116) Rushdie plays with the idea that even though some beliefs may be impossible to prove or seem absurd, the founders of major world religions were able to convince others to believe in their visions and ideas:

> Any new idea, Mahound, is asked two questions. The first is asked when it's weak: WHAT KIND OF AN IDEA ARE YOU? Are you the kind that compromises, does deals, accommodates itself to society, aims to find a niche, to survive; or are you the cussed, bloody-minded, ramrod-backed type of damnfool notion that would rather break than sway with the breeze? – The kind that will almost certainly, ninety-nine times out of a hundred, be smashed to bits; but, the hundredth time, will change the world. (Rushdie 2011, 346)

It is interesting to see how ideas and people are used interchangeably here. As a polytheist who makes money from the pilgrims who visit the temples and altars of Jahilia to worship the 360 deities recognised there, the Grandee of Jahilia Abu Simbel[28] reflects on his fear of Mahound and the preaching of his monotheistic religion. He describes himself as the type of man who bends and compromises to survive. For example, Abu Simbel decides not to accuse his wife Hind, a pagan priestess, of adultery because he needs the derogatory verses of the poet Baal, with whom his wife is having an affair, against Mahound and his followers because "the pen is mightier than the sword." (ivi, 113) Although Abu Simbel knows that his wife Hind is having an affair with several lovers, he does nothing because her family is in charge and guards

[28] Abu Simbel is probably also an ironic reference to the village by the same name in southern Egypt, near the border with Sudan. It is home to two ancient temples built in the 13th century BC by the pharaoh Ramses II. The larger of the two temples, called the Great Temple, is dedicated to the gods Amun, Ra-Horakhty and Ptah, as well as to the Pharaoh himself. The smaller temple is dedicated to the goddess Hathor and features reliefs depicting the pharaoh and his queen making offerings to the gods.

the temples. It is Hind who recognises herself as equal to Mahound and opposite to him. Equal in her refusal to bend, opposite in defending the pagan divinities of the past against the novelty of Mahound: "'Neither he [Baal] nor Abu Simbel is your equal. But I am. [...] I am your equal,' she repeats, 'and also your opposite. [...] If you are for Allah, I am for Al-Lat. And she doesn't believe your God when he recognizes her. Her opposition to him is implacable, irrevocable, engulfing. The war between us cannot end in truce.'" (Rushdie 2011, 132) The significance of this passage lies in its emphasis on the reciprocity of opposites, which depend on each other to be created, born and at the same time destroyed or eliminated.[29] Abu Simbel is thus presented as a different 'concept' from that embodied by his wife Hind. He is not the unyielding one who stubbornly resists, but the one who bends and adapts to the situation.[30] Neil ten Kortenaar (2008) praises Mahound in the novel for standing up against the discrimination, misogyny and injustice of a corrupt political class. To ten Kortenaar, Mahound represents a new and fresh approach to challenging the status quo. However, other scholars such as Homi Bhabha and Simon Gikandi see Mahound as representing the old, traditional ways. As for Mahound, he is shown to believe that history has reached a critical point where the old and the new must be separated, and that it is the responsibility of the new to challenge the old.

More generally, the novel emphasises the idea that what is considered 'real' or obvious can be questioned or rejected. This is shown also through the character Gibreel flying through the city unnoticed, and in the contradictions and inconsistencies in the teachings of religious leaders such as Mahound and the founders of Christianity and Islam. These leaders use the concept of God to justify actions that might otherwise be considered wrong: "God [was used] to justify the unjustifiable." (Rushdie 2011, 106) Abraham, for instance, is called a bastard (*ibid.*) for abandoning his slave Hagar and the child he conceived with her, Ishmael, in the desert.[31] In the Bible, God himself encourages the

[29] "'You are sand and I am water,' Mahound says. 'Water washes sand away' 'And the desert soaks up water,' Hind answers him." (Rushdie 2011, 132)

[30] "What kind of idea am I? I bend. I sway. I calculate the odds, trim my sails, manipulate, survive. That is why I won't accuse Hind of adultery. We are a good pair, ice and fire." (Rushdie 2011, 113)

[31] "While Mahound climbs Coney, Jahilia celebrates a different anniversary. In ancient time the patriarch Ibrahim came into this valley with Hagar and Ismail, their son. Here, in this waterless wilderness, he abandoned her. She asked him, can this be God's will? He replied, it is. And left, the bastard. From the beginning men used God to justify the unjustifiable. He moves in mysterious ways: men say. Small wonder, then, that women have turned to me. - But I'll keep

gesture, promising Abraham that out of Ishmael will come a great nation as he is Abraham's seed. In this passage, Rushdie ironically illustrates how Abraham in the Bible uses God to rid himself of a slave girl that had become unwieldy and who had provoked Sarah's (Abraham's wife) jealousy by bearing a child to him. She had offered her slave girl to Abraham as a means of conceiving a child when she was unable to do so. Although Muhammad, and thus the Islamic tradition, is one of the descendants of Ishmael, this is not an ironic dig at Islam. Rushdie's sarcasm is aimed at the Abrahamic tradition as a whole, which includes Judaism and Christianity. Having grown up in an Islamic family, Rushdie naturally has more difficulty accepting the religious teachings of this particular religion, with which he has a conflicted relationship.

3.3 *Metaxy and palinodic storytelling*

The Satanic Verses is a text characterised by ambiguity and duplicity on both a symbolic and structural level. As Gibreel and Saladin plummet, the narrator emphasises how the friction with the air and the speed of the fall almost wakes them from their "delirious daydream" (Rushdie 2011, 17). Reality and fiction are juxtaposed, real and false memories are distorted, historical reality is contaminated with folk tales or hearsay, dreams and consciousness are intimately linked, all contributing to the necessary interplay between truth and fiction that defines reality. There is a great deal more complexity to dualism in *The Satanic Verses* than in *Grimus* and *Midnight's Children*. The novel is characterised by two key dualities: the relationship between Gibreel and Saladin, and the contrast between their reality and Gibreel's dream, which represents the historical origins of Islam. The novel's back-and-forth movement between two polarities is an essential part of its structure and meaning.

Gibreel swings like a pendulum. At one moment he is a former believer who has lost his faith, and at another moment he is the originator of the very same religion he once embraced. In the narrative, the character of Gibreel moves back and forth, to and fro, effectively creating a rhythmic motion that prevents the reader from taking a static or fixed view of who he is or how he comes by the information and knowledge that underpins his faith and individuality. Since the dream characters claim to be inspired by the 'real' angel

to the point; Hagar wasn't a witch. She was trusting: *then surely He will not let me perish*. After Ibrahim left her, she fed the baby at her breast until her milk ran out. Then she climbed two hills, first Safa then Marwah, running from one to the other in her desperation, trying to sight a tent, a camel, a human being. She saw nothing." (ivi, 106, emphasis is in the original)

Gibreel, and given that many of the events occurring in reality cannot be rationally explained, one can speculate that Gibreel's dreams may not only be an imaginative means by which he expresses his doubts about religions (all of them) and especially about the preaching of Islam, but may in fact be Rushdie's take on the 'true' story (in a fictional sense, of course) behind the revelation, or that it contains at least some degree of truthfulness. In a specular way, the reality of Saladin and Gibreel would gradually become less and less real, suggesting that it could be actually crowded with demons, angels and other supernatural creatures. Gibreel himself is the one who questions the degree of reality of his dreams, and, by extension, the degree of reality of his daily experience: "every time I go to sleep the dream starts up from where it stopped. Same dream in the same place. As if somebody just paused the video while I went out of the room. Or, or. As if he's the guy who's awake and this is the bloody nightmare. His bloody dream: us. Here. All of it." (ivi, 94)

As Neil ten Kortenaar (2004) argues, in Rushdie's novel there is more magic in late 2nd millennium London than in 7th century Arabia. It is noticeable that Jahilia lacks the transformations and elements of myth and religion that are so abundant in the parts of the novel set in contemporary India or England. There, myth and religion are debunked and demystified, leaving Islam without magical or supernatural elements. Contemporary London, on the other hand, is steeped in magic, its time governed by a divine authority. This imaginary reality is imbued with the creative power of the word, as the constant biblical references seem to suggest. From this perspective, Gibreel and Saladin would represent the 'real' fictional world, a future world that Mahound dreams and from which he draws inspiration to preach his new religion in the past (or his own present). As in *Midnight's Children*, the traditional linearity linking past and future breaks down through a constitutive reciprocity between them, making it impossible to determine with certainty who is the real figure and who is the dreamer, which is the actual historical situation and which is the invented one:

> But when he has rested he enters a different sort of sleep, a sort of not-sleep, the condition that he calls his listening, and he feels a dragging pain in the gut, like something trying to be born, and now Gibreel, who has been hovering-above-looking-down, feels a confusion, who am I, in these moments it begins to seem that the archangel is actually inside the Prophet, I am the dragging in the gut, I am the angel being extruded from the sleeper's navel, I emerge, Gibreel Farishta, while my other self, Mahound, lies listening, entranced, I am bound to him, navel to navel, by a shining cord of light, not possible to say which of us is dreaming the other. *We flow in both directions* along the umbilical cord. (ivi, 121, emphasis is mine)

An important part of Saleem's narrative was that he admitted to retroactively selecting parts of Indian historical reality from his broken memory and fragments of his own imagination. In this way, he was able to construct a narrative that was plausible and congenial to him, in an effort to shield himself from the fears and resentments he had suffered (or nearly so) at various times in his life. This led to a flexible and recursive presentation of the story, which found a new application in the oscillation between truth and invention. Similarly, *The Satanic Verses* interweaves history and myth, religion and daily politics as dreamlike reflections of one another. It is impossible to determine Gibreel's account unambiguously in terms of 'origin' or 'end', as well as of its truth content. Apart from the impossibility of distinguishing between the dreamed (imagined) and the real (historical) Gibreel, narrative structure also makes it impossible to determine which diegetic thread, between dream and reality, is chronologically prior to the other.

This is achieved in a different way to the postmodern pastiche of *Midnight's Children*. Josh Toth (2017) suggests that the end of postmodernism is signalled by the overcoming of the humorous "groundlessness"[32] (ivi, 42) of "the signifier's game running its course." (ivi, 56) By this he means the tendency to focus on a sterile, endless play of meanings, where these are subject to a kind of predestination determined by the system of meaning in which they are situated. Toth points out that, while various post-structuralist and deconstructionist approaches drew on the Lacanian concept of 'inertia'[33] (Lacan 1991, 190) which ultimately subordinates reality to the abstract imagos of the symbolic order, Slavoj Žižek (2000) maintains that they are mutually dependent: both define and transform each other. Consequently, according to Toth, material reality is inherently 'plastic' for its "capacity to receive form and [...] to produce form. Accordingly, [...] the symbolic – as an inescapable narrative in which we all play our 'parts' – is no less restricted than the hand

[32] The concept of groundlessness challenges traditional notions of objectivity and neutrality in relation to knowledge and suggests that all understanding is ultimately subjective and culturally specific. It also challenges the notion that there are fixed, universal values or moral principles that can guide our actions, as these too are seen as socially constructed and culturally relative. This means that knowledge and understanding are always provisional and subject to change as they are shaped by the perspectives and experiences of those who hold them.

[33] In the work of Jacques Lacan, the concept of inertia refers to the subject's resistance to change or progress. It is related to the idea of the status quo and the way in which the subject is interested in maintaining its present position or mode of being. This inertia can manifest itself in various ways, such as a reluctance to try new things or to question one's beliefs and assumptions.

of a sculptor before a piece of clay." (ivi, 57) In this context, plasticity refers to a property of cultural images that are not only capable of giving form to reality, but also of being shaped by it. Toth uses the concept to overcome an internal contradiction or paradox which characterises contemporary critique of postmodernism. As much as it emphasises the dangers associated with the irresponsible forgetting of the past, it simultaneously also asserts that the past cannot be truly known. That's why Toth speaks of historioplastic metafiction (as opposed to Linda Hutcheon's (1985, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1989) historiographic metafiction)[34] to refer to a kind of metaliterary consciousness which "shifts our attention to the infinite yet bound pliability of the past." (ivi, 58) The pliability of the past refers to the idea that our understanding and interpretation of past events and historical figures are subject to change and are influenced by the present context in which we interpret them. This concept suggests that the past is not rigid or static, but rather shaped by the perspectives and biases of those who interpret it. The pliability of the past is evident in the way historical events are remembered, as different groups may have different views on what is important or significant about a particular event and how it should be remembered. It is also evident in the way historical figures are portrayed and understood, as our understanding of their actions and motivations may change over time as new information becomes available or our values and perspectives change. The concept has important implications for the way we think about history and its role in shaping our present and future. It suggests that our understanding of the past is always provisional and open to revision, and that our interpretation of historical events and figures will evolve over time.

Toth claims that this new consciousness manifested itself as an aesthetic renewal in the late 1980s and early 1990s (the very period in which *The Satanic Verses* was published). This represented a shift from a postmodern to a metamodern sensibility, to use the terminology employed by Timotheus

[34] Historiographic metafiction is a phrase coined by the Canadian literary critic Linda Hutcheon to describe a particular kind of fiction that engages with historical events, figures and themes, but also draws attention to its own status as a work of fiction and its relationship to history. In her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), Hutcheon defines historiographic metafiction as fiction that intentionally subverts historical representation conventions concerning events, people, and places. It often incorporates elements of metafiction such as self-reference and self-knowledge on the part of the narrator, as well as techniques such as intertextuality, pastiche and parody, to draw attention to the constructed nature of the story and the ways in which it engages with and reinterprets historical events and figures.

Vermeulen and Robin van der Akker (2010). However, although there is continued scholarly debate regarding the end of postmodernism (Bourriaud 2009, Eshelman 2008, Kirby 2009, Nealon 2012), there is even less agreement about what metamodern might mean. Since postmodernism is rooted in disillusionment with the possibility of understanding and playing a meaningful role in the world, the supposed end of postmodernism would signal the return of 'hope', the belief that humans are capable of making a positive contribution to society. The term metamodernism, in the words of Daniel O'Gorman and Robert Eaglestone (2019): "identifies at the heart of contemporary culture a persistent fluctuation between irony and sincerity, emphasising a dissolution in the boundary between the two." (23) It was theorised in 2010 by Vermeulen and van der Akker as a type of discourse "oscillating between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony" (1), a tension "between and beyond – the electropositive nitrates of the modern and the electronegative metals of the postmodern" (ivi, 4) that produces "a spacetime that is both-neither ordered and disordered. Metamodernism displaces the parameters of the present with those of a future presence that is futureless; and it displaces the boundaries of our place with those of a surreal place that is placeless." (ivi, 12)

In this volume, Rushdie is not intended to herald the end of postmodernism or the beginning of the metamodernist era. However, using the idea that *The Satanic Verses* relies on "an internal duplication, [...] constantly in a mode of statement and retraction" as noted by Booker (1990, 987), it can be argued that Rushdie seems to be an early interpreter of a new metamodern sensibility which shifts its focus dynamically on instances belonging to both modernism and postmodernism, and then declines such variations in a postcolonial, magic-realist way. In *The Satanic Verses,* Rushdie is able to incorporate different artistic and literary concerns and styles without being confined to any particular category. As a writer during the height of the postmodernist movement, Rushdie was also aware of how deconstructionist theories and the critique of power could challenge the idea of a universal subject in a clear time and place. More specifically, to Vermeulen (2010) a metamodern sensibility relies on a new aesthetic perspective: "new generations of artists increasingly abandon the aesthetic precepts of deconstruction, parataxis, and pastiche in favor of aesthethical notions of reconstruction, myth, and *metaxis*." (*ibid.*, emphasis is mine) Reconstruction, myth, and metaxis are aesthetic terms that relate to ways of feeling, rather than external elements or processes. This is an important distinction: by definition, aesthetic refers to beauty or appearance. In contrast, the term aesthetical refers to sensation, to what is felt through the use

of sense organs.[35] In this light, I intend to argue that Rushdie expresses the attempted transition from parataxis to metaxis (μεταξύ, also metaxy in English).

Meta- (μετά) is a prefix that can be used to describe a number of different things and carry a wide variety of meanings and connotations. It can mean 'instead of' or 'otherwise' when referring to qualitative changes in place, nature, or order as is the case with terms such as metamorphosis, in which one form is transformed into another and not merely acquired. Another very common translation is 'beyond' or 'after', such as in metaphysics. The term comes from the sequence of Aristotle's works that Andronicus of Rhodes[36] rearranged and labelled 'metaphysics' to emphasise the topics beyond physics that Aristotle addressed in his texts. As a matter of fact, Aristotle referred to this branch of knowledge as primal philosophy, i.e. everything that pertains to what is beyond senses and matter. This made it a term that encompassed anything that transcended physicality. It is because of this meaning that meta- is more commonly associated with self-reflective behaviour in specialistic and even in common usage to indicate 'about its own category', X about X. For example, in literary criticism, a metaliterary text reflects on the text itself or on the intertextual elements within it, metatheatre is a play containing another play; in psychology, metamemory refers to remembering something through another memory. The prefix can also replace positional terms such as 'with' and 'between'. Vermeulen and van den Akker (2010) employ the prefix to include all its meanings in it:

> When we use the term 'meta', we use it in similar yet not indiscriminate fashion. For the prefix 'meta-' allows us to situate metamodernism historically beyond; epistemologically with; and ontologically between the modern and the postmodern. It indicates a *dynamic or movement between as well as a movement beyond*. More generally, however, it points towards a changing cultural

[35] It was the German philosopher Alexander G. Baumgarten (1750) who coined the term aesthetics to describe sensory knowledge and beauty. Aesthetics comes from the Latin æstética, which comes from the Greek aistētikös meaning 'sensitive', 'able to feel', from aisthànomai 'I perceive', 'I feel with the senses', while aisthésis means 'sensation', 'feeling'.

[36] Andronicus of Rhodes was a Greek philosopher and scholar from the 1st century BC. He is credited with compiling Aristotle's works into the corpus we know today, which includes the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the *Politics* and the *Metaphysics*. Andronicus is best known for his arrangement of the latter, which he divided into three groups: the 'major' works, the 'auxiliary' or 'secondary' works, and the 'minor' works. This division was based on the content and quality of the texts, with the major works considered the most important and influential and the minor works less significant.

> sensibility – or cultural metamorphosis, if you will – within western societies. (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010, 2, emphasis is mine)

With such diverse meanings, even in contradiction with each other, meta- seems a prefix in constant flux or evolution, accommodating a variety of usages that make it a territory of discovery and ongoing definition. However, if we look at all of these meanings closely, we can see that they are all connected by the idea of movement. 'Meta-' does not refer to a static position, but rather to change and the process of moving from one point to another and back again. This movement, no matter how many different extremes it occurs within, is what ties them all together into a unified whole.

Liz Falconer (2011) notes that metaxy is a term used by Plato to describe the condition of human spirituality between the human and the divine. In his *Symposium*, metaxy is defined by the figure of the priestess Diotima, Socrates' tutor, as the 'middle way', understood as a dynamic exchange between the material world and the world of ideas through the facilitation of the demon Eros (before Christianity the word demon had no negative connotation). Moreover, Diotima uses the term[37] to show how oral tradition can be perceived in different ways by different people. To Plato, metaxy pertains to an ontological betweenness, a state not necessarily stagnant, but which can also be thought of as a continuous movement or transition. For example, it refers to how tangible things in the material world 'participate' in the perfection of the corresponding ideas in the ideal world, and how the abstract world of ideas, even though it is separate from the tangible world, still interacts with it.

This image is particularly helpful because the condition of in-betweenness has mostly been seen as static conjunction. On the contrary, metaxy is often associated with the idea of movement or change, as it suggests a state of transition between two or more things. Unlike connection, which has a more static connotation, metaxy implies a dynamic, interactive process of constantly going back and forth. Therefore, oscillation and participation are the best words to describe it. It is a condition of in-betweenness or mediation, a space of tension, exchange or conflict in which different forces come into contact and influence or shape each other. It can be used, for example, to describe the mutual relationship between the material and the immaterial, the individual

[37] In reference to Metis, the Titaness who in Greek mythology was the first wife of Zeus. She was the mother of the goddess Athena, who was born fully grown and armoured from Zeus' head. In some accounts, Metis was also the mother of Poros, the god of abundance also known as Porus, or 'wealth'.

and the collective, and the past and the present. There is no binary opposition between the involved elements, but variations that allow them to flow into and return to one another. One can only exist by 'partaking' of the other.

Indeed, Linds (2006) notes that metaxy has also been referred to describe the condition of simultaneously belonging to two different and autonomous worlds. Philosopher Augusto Boal (1995) further delves into the concept defining it as "the state of belonging completely simultaneously to two different autonomous worlds: the image of reality and the reality of the image. The participant shares and belongs to these two autonomous worlds: their reality and the image of their reality, which she herself has created." (43) Gilles Deleuze (1983, 1987, 1990) has argued that it is inherent in the human body to participate in more than one reality because of its ability to feel and act abstractly (i.e. virtually). It does not matter how much or how little the body is involved. Reading a book, listening to a song, attending a play, reading a newspaper article, watching a film or playing a video game are all examples of participation in different realities. Within this capacity, one can abstract, put oneself in the shoes of others, daydream, and be affected intellectually and emotionally by events that have not necessarily taken place in the physical world. It is possible for our intellect to develop and experience more than one reality at a time. For Rushdie, abstractions are 'real' in that they are part of the creation of reality. Therefore, it seems now appropriate to return to one of the first questions raised by Saleem and mentioned in this volume: can one dismiss a story as false simply because it is invented, if it has material consequences? Does it really matter how much one believes a story to be true, if one can still be deeply affected by it?

Rushdie uses metaphors and terms from the world of cinema much more extensively in *The Satanic Verses* than in *Midnight's Children* to illustrate how powerful the illusions created by the mind can be. According to Rushdie himself, Gibreel acts as both camera and viewer, as both player and spectator. He is both an invisible, ubiquitous eye constantly recording what is happening on the scene and any character inhabiting it. He chooses what to include in the unfolding drama, and yet he also observes or suffers it as a spectator. This reflects the dual role we play when we dream: active and passive at the same time. Our mind selects the elements of the memories that make up the plot of the dream in which we embody any character, but it experiences them as if it were only a spectator, without any control or influence over them. In an essay originally published in *The Spectator* in September 1712, "Essay on Dreams", Joseph Addison (1854) remarked that when the soul dreams, free from the body, it "produces her own company [...] She converses with

numberless beings of her own creation, and is transported into ten thousand scenes of her own raising. She is herself the theatre, the actor, and the beholder." (Addison 1854, 480) Jorge Luis Borges (2015) adds in his *Libro di sogni* (*Book of Dreams*) that it is also the author of the story it witnesses (Borges 2015, 5). Rushdie highlights a similar oscillation regarding the dream of *The Satanic Verses*:

> Gibreel: the dreamer, whose point of view is sometimes that of the camera and at other moments, spectator. When he's a camera the pec oh vee is always on the move, he hates static shots [...] But mostly he sits up on Mount Cone like a paying customer in the dress circle, and Jahilia is his silver screen. [...]
> But as the dream shifts, it's always changing form, he, Gibreel, is no longer a mere spectator but the central player, the star. With his old weakness for taking too many roles: yes, yes, he's not just playing the archangel but also him, the businessman, the Messenger, Mahound, coming up the mountain when he comes. *Nifty cutting is required to pull off this double role*, *the two of them can never be seen in the same shot*, each must speak to empty air, to the imagined incarnation of the other, and trust to technology to create the missing vision, with scissors and Scotch tape or, more exotically, with the help of a travelling mat. (Rushdie 2011, 119, emphasis is mine)

Oscillation refers to the repetitive fluctuation of a quantity between two extreme values or points. It is not limited to the moment when it reaches one of these extremes, but rather encompasses the entire range of motion. This movement creates a force that works to restore balance or create tension as it moves towards a point of equilibrium. As the object returns to this point, its own momentum carries it beyond it, creating a new opposing force in the other direction. The oscillation continues as it moves away from equilibrium due to the increasing intensity of this restoring force. A metaleptic reading of Rushdie's work reveals how the narrative is characterised by the simultaneous action of momentum and restoring force, which allows for the smooth transition between opposing qualities and states of consciousness. Rushdie's art is entirely founded on this tension. When discussing Rushdie's metamodern sensibility, the prefix 'meta-' does not imply static self-reflection, but rather a dynamic balance between opposing concepts such as the global and local, truth and illusion, doubt and conviction, knowledge and belief. These concepts are interconnected and rely on each other, but also maintain their separation. It is important to recognise how each concept influences and participates in the other.

Traditionally, literary criticism has focused on the idea that stories are based on historical reality. This is achieved by prioritising the author's per-

sonal and biological history over the narrative, and by only considering the way that literary works influence each other, rather than their impact on society, the economy, or individuals. For example, literary criticism based on the English literary canon might examine how Daniel Defoe's novels reflect the aspirations of the emerging English bourgeoisie because Defoe himself was familiar with their concerns, or how Mary Shelley's gothic romantic ideas were inspired by experiments with electricity on animals and her own dreams. Similarly, Robert Louis Stevenson's novel *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) was influenced by the burgeoning psychological theories of the time. In everyday thinking, a work of the present can be influenced by past works, but not by those that have not yet been created, so influences are thought to follow a chronological timeline.

In contrast, *The Satanic Verses* focuses on how different stories influence us and how we in turn affect them. Rushdie embodies a metamodern sensibility in that he constantly balances the ontological aspects of postmodernism with the epistemological concerns of modernism in his writing. This is reflected in the way that his literary devices often represent the tension between multiple names, characteristics, nationalities, or emotions: "To be born again [...] first you have to die. Ho ji! Ho ji! To land upon the bosomy earth, first one needs to fly. Tat-taa! Takathun! How to ever smile again, if first you won't cry? How to win the darling's love, mister, without a sigh?" (Rushdie 2011, 14) Birth and death, joy and sorrow, love and sighing are not simple binary oppositions, but rather oscillating movements in which the affirmation of one polarity presupposes the returning of the other. Throughout the novel, Rushdie gives numerous hints and clues based on the idea of reversal or inversion:

> Five and a half hours of time zones; turn your watch upside down in Bombay and you see the time in London. My father, Chamcha would think, years later, in the midst of his bitterness. I accuse him of inverting Time.
> [...]
> January, 1961. A year you could turn upside down and it would still, unlike your watch, tell the same time. (Rushdie 2011, 52)

Even the title of the novel is based on Mahound/Muhammad's withdrawal of the satanic verses, and the narrator frequently confirms and denies the accuracy of the narrative.[38]

[38] "It was and it was not so," "it was so, it was not so." (Rushdie 2011, 46 and 48 respectively)

Gibreel learns about the Prophet's life through the stories told by his mother, Naima Majmuddin, who dies in a bus accident when Gibreel is 13 years old. As an orphan living in poverty, Gibreel compares his life to that of the Prophet and looks to him for inspiration or tries to imitate him. Like the Prophet, Gibreel also rises from poverty by marrying his first wife, Khadja bint Khuwaylid.[39] Rushdie suggests that Gibreel becomes confused about the boundaries between his own life and the fantasies his mother told him as a child. He changes his name to honour her and begins his acting career as Gibreel Farishta, blending reality and fantasy. Gibreel's desire for maternal affection and his strained relationship with his father may explain his jealous attitudes towards women. Gibreel, a devout but sexually frustrated man, tries to escape his early period of poverty by seeking financial security through a marriage of convenience. It takes him four years to achieve success. During this time, he reads about classical myths, the origins of Islam, and the early preaching of the Prophet, as well as newspaper reports and other materials. In this phase of chaotic and quixotic absorption of myths and stories from the East and West,[40] he also learns about the 'incident' with the satanic verses in Muhammad's life. These stories, historical facts, myths, legends, and unbelievable news from various sources not only capture Gibreel's imagination but also relate to his own life experiences. As a result, it is practically impossible to distinguish between a fictional narrative and one based on historical events. Gibreel's fascination with stories and myths was driven by his inability to express his strong desire to love a woman. He gained fame and for-

[39] Khadja bint Khuwaylid (also spelled Khadijah bint Khuwaylid) was a businesswoman and the first wife of the Prophet Muhammad. She was a successful merchant and owned her own business, which enabled her to support the Prophet financially and emotionally during the early years of his prophethood. She was also the first person to convert to Islam and is remembered for her devotion to the Prophet, with whom she was married for 25 years and had several children together. After the Prophet's death, Khadja played a significant role in preserving his teachings and helping to spread Islam.

[40] "Off-screen, he lived alone in two empty rooms near the studios and tried to imagine what women looked like without clothes on. To get his mind off the subject of love and desire, he studied, becoming an omnivorous autodidact, devouring the metamorphic myths of Greece and Rome, the avatars of Jupiter, the boy who became a flower, the spider-woman, Circe, everything; and the theosophy of Annie Besant, and unified field theory, and the incident of the Satanic verses in the early career of the Prophet, and the politics of Muhammad's harem after his return to Mecca in triumph; and the surrealism of the newspapers, in which butterflies could fly into young girls' mouths, asking to be consumed, and children were born with no faces, and young boys dreamed in impossible detail of earlier incarnations, for instance in a golden fortress filled with precious stones. He filled himself up with God knows what [...]." (Rushdie 2011, 35)

tune by acting as deities like Buddha and Krishna in Bollywood films based on the Puranas,[41] as if he were reincarnating into a different deity each time. Before becoming famous, Gibreel had no emotional or sexual success, but then began engaging in libertinism, allowing him to love whoever he wanted. His illness did not prevent him from becoming a playboy and he often quarrelled and reconciled with the woman he was most in love with, Rekha. Initially depicted as a religious person, Gibreel starts to lose faith in God after falling ill.

However, this effort to assert his economic, personal, and sexual identity sets the stage for reversal. The accident leading to physical decline represents a turning point. His new Western identity, supposedly marked by atheism and unconditional love, becomes contaminated by religious dreams as he travels on the plane. He rediscovers his faith in London and becomes a disregarded prophet in one of the Western centres of Christianity. Gibreel manages to escape his obsession with women by preaching in London and gradually gains powers such as the ability to become luminous and fly. Unlike Mahound in his dreams, however, he is neither believed nor noticed, and his powers are treated as if they were not real.[42]

Similarly, in the second half of the novel Saladin realises that his lifelong desire for the new represented by Englishness has backfired on him. "The very world he had so determinedly courted" (Rushdie 2011, 268) rejects him, turns him into a monster, and forces him, not without difficulty, to stay with the Sufyan family, the owners of the Shaandaar Cafe. His greatest resentment relates to the fact that he, who feared that a return to India might corrupt his perfect English accent, has been so grotesquely and hideously sent back to "the bosom of his people, from whom he'd felt so distant for so long." (ibid.) Gibreel is eventually led on a journey back to Indian culture,

[41] The Puranas are a genre of Hindu religious texts that contain traditional stories about the creation of the universe, the history of the world, and the lives and deeds of gods, goddesses, and other supernatural beings. They are considered a part of the Hindu scriptures known as the Shastras. There are 18 major Puranas and many more minor Puranas, and they are believed to have been composed by Hindu sages over a period of several centuries.

[42] "It really was incredible. Here appeared a celestial being, all radiance, effulgence and goodness, larger than Big Ben, capable of straddling the Thames colossus-style, and these little ants remained immersed in drive-time radio and quarrels with fellow-motorists. 'I am Gibreel,' he shouted in a voice that shook every building on the riverbank: nobody noticed. Not one person came running out of those quaking edifices to escape the earthquake. Blind, deaf and asleep." (Rushdie 2011, 348)

reconciling with his father and rediscovering his love for Zeeny,[43] and in the process, abandoning the Western identity he had worked to establish throughout his life.

The novel examines how opposite qualities can coexist within the same character, and how the factors that lead to one state also create the conditions for a return to a previous state, even as the character appears to be moving in the opposite direction. In Gibreel's case, the loss of his initial faith is followed by a powerful renewal of faith. It is important to point out that Gibreel's real name is Ismail Najmuddin. Ismail is the name of Abraham's son, born of the slave Hagar, whom God had ordered Abraham to kill. In Arabic, Najmuddin means 'the star of faith' or 'the star of religion'. Interestingly, both his first and last names would suggest that he is a strict believer. By constantly fluctuating between rationality and madness, Gibreel's existence resembles a dream, but one that has the realism and lasting impact of reality. In *The Satanic Verses*, both historical and fictional characters interact through stories of sacred and profane recantations in a virtual geography that ranges from dream sequences to official history. Linds (1998) compares this process to a kind of transubstantiation, as described by Boal (1995), in that through this interaction texts and images come alive and take on new meaning. Linds believes that artistic creation should not just represent an event, whether realistically or symbolically, but should also deal with the interaction between the real and the virtual, and the "interplay between the imagined and the actual." (Linds 1998, 75) Specifically, according to Linds:

> Metaxis occurs in the artist's body and is embodied. Self and mind are woven through the entire human body and through the web of relationships in which that self takes shape. Then we play with the reality of the images before us. The protagonist must forget the real world which was the origin of the image and play with the image itself, in its artistic embodiment. The protagonists must practice in the second world (the aesthetic), in order to modify the first (the social). (Linds 1998, 74)

In *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie demonstrates that the border between two elements is not about separation, but about understanding change. Transi-

[43] "Undefeated (and, it appeared, unattached), Zeeny's re-entry into his life completed the process of renewal, of regeneration, that had been the most surprising and paradoxical product of his father's terminal illness. His old English life, its bizarreries, its evils, now seemed very remote, even irrelevant, like his truncated stage-name. 'About time,' Zeeny approved when he told her of his return to Salahuddin." (Rushdie 2011, 545)

tions allow us to see how Gibreel and Saladin, angel and devil, real Islam and Rushdie's imagined Islam, are both one and the other simultaneously, and all the variations in between. Just as in *Shame* a real and an imaginary Pakistan coexist, or, as Sufiya Zenobia is "two beings occupying the same air-space, competing for it, two entities of identical shape but of tragically opposed nature." (Rushdie 1995, 236) According to Booker, "if two 'tragically opposed' identities, two incompatible and contradictory alternative realities, can occupy the same space, then clearly the very notions of 'identity' and 'reality' are called into question." (1990, 990) Reading Rushdie metaleptically means understanding how History absorbs and transforms the infinite stories we tell and receive every day. Storytelling draws from history through processes of representation and reconstruction, creating autonomous worlds whose images circulate freely. It is the release or liberation of the stories that allows them to influence all others.[44]

In conclusion, metaxy may be traceable even when considering the process of translating the title of the novel from English to Arabic and then back to English. It has been observed by Daniel Pipes (1990) that:

> Rushdie's title in Arabic is known as *Al-Ayat ash-Shaytaniya*; in Persian, as *Ayat-e Shetani*; in Turkish, Şeytan *Ayatleri*. Shaytan is a cognate for 'satan' and poses no problems. But, unlike 'verses,' which refers generically to any poetry of scripture, ayat refers specifically to 'verses of the Qur'an.' Back-translated literally into English, these titles mean 'The Qur'an's Sa-tanic Verses.' With just a touch of extrapolation, this can be understood to mean that 'The Qur'anic Verses Were Written By Satan.' Simplifying, this in turn becomes 'The Qur'an Was Written By Satan,' or just 'The Sa-tanic Qur'an.' (116-117)

The novel's title seems to embody the transformative power that enables it to undergo a surprising but also tragically ironic transformation through cross-cultural contamination. This irony is hinted at in many aspects of the novel and is also reflected in the way Rushdie's own life has been transformed by the same ambiguity he used to create his art. He acknowledges this in *Quichotte*, the last novel discussed in this volume.

[44] It may be useful to remember Saleem's words here: "Because the feeling had come upon me that I was somehow creating a world; that the thoughts I jumped inside were mine, that the bodies I occupied acted at my command; that, as current affairs, arts, sports, the whole rich variety of a first-class radio station poured into me, I was somehow making them happen ... which is to say, I had entered into the illusion of the artist, and thought of the multitudinous realities of the land as the raw unshaped material of my gift." (Rushdie 2021c, 259)

Chapter IV

Oh, I am fiction's fool. Contaminations and 'Palindrome' Storytelling in *Quichotte*[1]

Happiness [...] is a perpetual possession
of being well deceived.
Jonathan Swift, *A Tale of a Tub*

4.1 *Contaminations between media and reality*

We have previously discussed some key aspects of Rushdie's novels, including the iridescence that superimposes different qualities on the same character, object or situation, and the metaleptic oscillations that disrupt traditional cause-and-effect relationships. Rushdie's writing is argued to transcend the simple combination or conflation of two or more cultural or thought systems, usually Eastern and Western, as is often discussed in postcolonial criticism. Rushdie's worlds violate the concept of *tertium non datur* to create "semiotic worlds suspended between existence and non-existence" (Doležel 1980, 23).

An indication of how two seemingly opposing milieus (i.e. reality and fiction) can intersect and still lead to a coherent outcome can be found in George Orwell's *1984* (1949), in which a useful key for our considerations can also be found. Memory plays a crucial role in shaping and controlling the present in the novel. The act of remembering and forgetting are closely linked and happen at the same time. When an event becomes part of the past, it is considered a fact because it is difficult to question its truth. However, in order to shape reality, these facts must align with a specific perspective or belief system. It is important to find a balance between forgetting facts that may be inconvenient or harmful, and remembering them at the appropriate time. This may involve manipulating facts or introducing fictional elements when historical facts do not support the desired present. For the construction of memory to occur, there must be a balance between fact and fiction, so that even those who manipulate history can appear credible to others by believing in their own manipulation. It is imperative to believe what you say in order to lie convincingly. A fundamental paradox of history is the ability to sincerely lie, a process that involves accepting two opposing concepts at once, regardless of their contradictions.

[1] This chapter is partly based on an essay I previously published in Italian. See De Riso (2021).

Known as doublethink[2] in Orwell's novel, this involves accepting one thing alongside another that denies it. It is essential to use these concepts selectively, as necessary, if they are to function properly. In order for fiction to work as a tool of deception, its manipulations must not be recognised or acknowledged by the collective memory. They must remain invisible. Truth is a belief that a story is true, or, equivalently, the belief that a story is true is what contributes to its validity. In Orwell's society, this process is so perfectly executed that there is no escape from it, it leads to a complete suspension of history. In essence, doublethink is the suspension of disbelief in its finest form.

For Rushdie, Orwell's doublethink is not something alien to humans. He recognises its role throughout human history, the tendency to mix reality with invention and to manipulate both depending on the situation. There is no doubt that doublethink plays an important part in the making of human history; in *1984* it is entirely coherent, allowing for the creation of a completely ahistorical reality that suppresses new, innovative, or unexpected ideas and events, preserving itself in a perpetual echo. In the real world, though, humanity, strives for this ominous enclosure but never fully achieves it. The importance of hybridisation, for Rushdie, lies in its disruption of this fatal pursuit. The emergence of the new short-circuits the process of achieving Orwellian circularity and ensures the survival and continuation of history by introducing the unexpected errors and the anomalies that prevent it from being terminated or consumed by coherent absurdity. That's why it is crucial to examine the cracks, leaks, inconsistencies and transgressions that are at the core of Rushdie's work. The paradox of the writer, to Rushdie, is striving for the perfect suspension of disbelief without ever achieving it. In his texts, he attempts to convey this oscillation between convenient remembering and forgetting, between historical fact and invention, between lying with conviction and sincere belief. Saleem in *Midnight's Children* believed that the prophets of major religions changed the world by combining the believable and unbelievable and by presenting the unbelievable in believable contexts. According to Rushdie, their lives were like dreams in the sense that in dreams, the brain modifies what we have actually experienced according to absurd or impossible rules in order to achieve its own mysterious goals. Dreams draw on our everyday behaviours, but they can also contain their own creations.

[2] Doublethink refers to the ability to hold two contradictory beliefs in one's mind at the same time and accept them both as true. By constantly changing their own statements and rewriting history, the Party, the authoritarian government in the novel, uses doublethink as a method of control and manipulation.

Hanna Meretoja (2017) has examined *One Thousand and One Nights* to discuss the ethics of storytelling and the importance of stories for human development. The evocative tales Scheherazade[3] tells King Shahryar delay her execution and ultimately save her life. For Meretoja, storytelling is the art of survival. As Paul Aster asserts, stories are the nourishment of the soul (Hutchisson 2013), and this is expressed by Rushdie's use of food as metaphor for his literary style. But believing in and telling stories, she warns, also holds dangers. In the Western imagination, Don Quixote and Emma Bovary[4] represent the danger of reading too much fiction. In recent years, the debate on the ethics of storytelling has been one of the most heated in literary studies. It focuses on the question of whether narrative is beneficial or harmful to human societies. The topic is extremely timely, especially now that the digital world has opened up a range of new narrative spaces. Social media platforms can be a breeding ground for the spread of false information and conspiracy theories that can have serious and even deadly consequences, as seen with the COVID-19 pandemic and the attempt to overthrow the government through the storming of the Capitol by supporters of Donald Trump.[5] Language not only describes reality in a fictional way, but also has

[3] Scheherazade is the main character in *One Thousand and One Nights*, also known as *The Arabian Nights*. In the story, Scheherazade is a young woman who becomes the wife of King Shahryar, who has a habit of marrying a new virgin every night and having her executed the next morning to prevent infidelity. After his first wife cheated on him, he became disillusioned with women and a cynic who no longer trusts anyone. Scheherazade, however, succeeds in winning the king over by captivating him with her tales. She tells him a series of stories over the course of 1,001 nights and delays her execution until her life is spared. The stories she tells are a collection of myths, legends and fairy tales from the Middle East, India and Africa and are known for their exotic and fantastical elements. One of the most famous tales that Scheherazade tells King Shahryar is the story of "Aladdin and the Magic Lamp", known for its theme of the power of desires, which also influences the relationship between Saladin and his father in *The Satanic Verses*.

[4] Emma Bovary, the main character in Gustave Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary* (1856), is often seen as emblematic of the dangers of reading too much fiction, as her unrealistic expectations and desires are shaped by the romantic novels she reads. Emma is disillusioned with her everyday life and marriage and begins to seek excitement and romance through extramarital affairs and frivolous spending, which eventually leads to her financial and social ruin. Her obsession with romantic novels and her desire to live their idealised stories lead her to make poor choices and pursue unattainable goals, ultimately causing her own downfall.

[5] When lawmakers met in Washington DC to certify Joseph Biden's election victory, then-President Donald Trump apparently called on right-wing extremists to storm Congress on 6 January 2021 to change the election result (as reported by Jude Sheerin for *BBC* in July 2022. Refer to the sitography for the exact address).

the power to shape and influence it. When we understand how language mediates between History and stories allowing them to work together, we realise that the mirror we hold up to nature can also be passed through. In Rushdie's work, art and life are intertwined in complex ways that defy straightforward chronological continuity or causality. Stories of the past and the future are connected in a dynamic network, knowledge is not simply passed down from generation to generation as a given. Reading *The Satanic Verses* metaleptically means to recognise these interactions, which in the novel are not unidirectional but palinodic.

Quichotte (2019), Rushdie's last work at the time of writing this volume, is particularly notable in this regard. The novel is loosely based on Miguel de Cervantes' *Quixote* (1605-1615). The underlying theme of *Quichotte* is reconciliation, both between the characters in the story and between different genres and literary styles. When viewed from a metaleptic perspective, the novel also explores the relationship between life and art. *Quichotte* is structured similarly to *The Satanic Verse*s, with two narrative threads that are interwoven irregularly throughout twenty chapters: the first follows the Quichotte who gives the work its title, the second the character of Sam DuChamp.

Quichotte, whose real name is Ismail Ismail,[6] is a pharmaceutical salesman born in India and living in the United States. Due to his travelling work, he has rarely been able to settle permanently in a fixed abode, but has mainly lodged at the "temporary addresses" (Rushdie 2019, 10) of the motels he stayed in during his travels. There is no doubt that Ismail was a lonely person who spent much of his time watching "mindless television" (*ibid.*) while surrounded by yellow light in his lodgings. Ismail's only form of entertainment consisted of TV series, soap operas, reality shows, news programmes and contests. His whole life was spent constantly glued to the television, which was an indispensable companion for him. Thrilled by the endless stream of stories displayed on the small screen, Ismail has spent more time in front of it than with real people. Due to his excessive consumption of television, he falls into a state of madness where the content on the box becomes his entire focus, overshadowing his real-life relationships and experiences. As a result, he begins to prioritise fictional TV characters and situations over the people he has encountered in reality. In his mind, these characters become his authentic friends, and the experiences he has had with them become a significant part of his memory

[6] In the novel, however, he is more often called in the Americanised form Ismail Smile or, alternatively, Smile Smile.

and emotional life. This condition is described in the novel as the "unreal real" (ivi, 11), a powerful contamination of reality with the imaginary, leading to an inability to distinguish between embodied reality and the abstract reality perceived through television:

> He fell victim to that increasingly prevalent psychological disorder in which the boundary between truth and lies became smudged and indistinct, so that at times he found himself incapable of distinguishing one from the other, reality from 'reality', and began to think of himself as a natural citizen (and potential inhabitant) of that imaginary world beyond the screen to which he was so devoted [...]. (*ibid*.)

The above quotation illustrates, among other things, how one and the same word, 'reality', contains and unites two opposites: reality and fiction, truth and make-believe. As well as the fact that it is fiction that is disguised as reality, or intended to appear as such.

Despite their thirty-year age difference, Ismail falls in love with Salma R., a former actress and current television presenter who is campaigning for the rights of minorities. Salma had moved to the United States to achieve the goal of becoming "the Beloved" (ivi, 46) of millions of Americans. Although Ismail's love for Salma is described by the narrator as "an infatuation which he characterised, quite inaccurately, as love" (ivi, 11), it is so strong that he sets out to declare it to her. Meanwhile, Ismail writes her romantic letters under the pseudonym Quichotte, which comes from an opera by Jules Massenet[7] that he loved as a child. Just as the musical work is loosely based on Cervantes' masterpiece, Ismail also seems to be "a little loosely based [him]self." (ivi, 13) The amusing connection the author makes with Massenet and Cervantes creates the resonance between different characters, situations and media from which Ismail's transformation into Quichotte emerges, and defines the novel as a whole.

In the case of Quixote, his amorous project fitted into the treatises on love that appeared in sixteenth-century Italian literature. He was influenced by the mixture of elements from Jewish mysticism, Christian theology, and Neoplatonic philosophy found in Marsilio Ficino's *De Amore* (1494) or Leo Ebreo's *Dialoghi d'amore* (1535). The latter had such an influence on Cervantes' writing

[7] Jules Massenet's *Quichotte* is an opera in five acts composed to a French libretto by Henri Cain, based on *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes. It was first performed at the Opéra de Monte-Carlo on 25 January 1910.

that he was quoted directly in the introduction to *Don Quixote*. Likewise, in a society heavily influenced by the fictional world of television, it does not seem improbable for the protagonist to decide to journey and confess his love to a stranger. Just as Cervantes' Quixote's perception of reality was shaped by chivalric literature, Rushdie's Quichotte interprets reality through the lens of modern TV conventions, where it is common for two strangers with little in common to date and marry, similar to a reality show. Quichotte's is a time of parodic contamination between analogue and digital media, where anything can happen:

> It was the Age of Anything-Can-Happen, he reminded himself. He had heard many people say that on TV and on the outré video clips floating in cyberspace, which added a further, new-technology depth to his addiction. There were no rules any more. And in the Age of Anything-Can-Happen, well, anything could happen. (ivi, 14)

For Quichotte, the TV screen acts like a porous membrane that allows the interaction between what is on one side of the screen and what is on the other. As long as something has been shown on TV, it is perfectly plausible in Quichotte's world. And if Quixote could ask any peasant to accompany him on his journey, it takes a simple wish for Quichotte to get a companion to join him on his journey: Sancho, the black-and-white son he dreams he will have with Salma. Having arrived from a future that exists only in his father's imagination, the boy tries to help his would-be father attain his goal of being with Salma, setting the stage for his own existence as well:

> 'Sancho,' Quichotte cried, full of a happiness he didn't know how to express. 'My silly little Sancho, my big tall Sancho, my son, my sidekick, my squire! Hutch to my Starsky, Spock to my Kirk, Scully to my Mulder, BJ to my Hawkeye, Robin to my Batman! Peele to my Key, Stimpy to my Ren, Niles to my Frasier, Arya to my Hound! Peggy to my Don, Jesse to my Walter, Tubbs to my Crockett, I love you!' (ivi, 24)

The humour in the first part of both Quixote's and Quichotte's adventures is largely based on their belief in the codes of chivalry and television, respectively. During their journey, they both believe that their actions are guided by a higher power or supernatural force that intervenes in their lives and helps to guide them in their endeavours. This belief in a higher will or occult guidance is a central part of their worldview. On the other hand, the work of Providence was fundamental to the sentimental fulfilment narrated in the 'romances' that inspired Don Quixote (Dentith 2000). However, the comedic character of the situations experienced by the two protagonists on their separate love journeys

differs significantly. In Cervantes, the humorous misunderstandings Alonso Quijano got into were often of a terminological nature: the lowly nobleman, who reinvented himself as a knight, looked around him through the lens of the chivalric stories he had read, using terms and meanings from those fictional worlds to make sense of the material world. This led to comical results as he misapplied those terms and misunderstood the people and things he encountered. He deceived himself due to his reliance on decontextualized language from a forgotten world.

In Rushdie's case much of the comic effect is derived from Quichotte's impressive ability to understand and navigate, at least it appears, the conventions of television. Quichotte uses these conventions to correctly interpret the otherwise random signs that fate sends him as he pursues his dream of finding love. However, other characters mock Quichotte's unwavering belief in the fateful nature of love, seeing it as foolish or unreasonable. Quichotte's serious and sometimes self-righteous demeanour contrasts with the irreverent disbelief of his son, Sancho, who mocks his father's belief in a higher will, despite the absurdity of his own 'birth'. The tension between Quichotte's solemnity and Sancho's irreverence creates comedic scenes in which Quichotte's claims of predestination are met with humorous disbelief. The wise sayings that Quixote was imparted by his squire are balanced here by Sancho's biting comments, which Quichotte always handles with ease. The echoing references to the content of the television environment from which and in which they propagate further add to the comic effect. In the following passage, for example, Sancho responds to Quichotte's highfalutin musings about attaining his love with a sarcastic joke that smacks of an advertisement. Quichotte then responds with a memorable line from Hannibal Lecter in Jonathan Demme's film *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), regarding the latter's practice of cannibalism:

> 'Do we also have to give up our desire for, and attachment to, the woman we love?' 'The Beloved is exempt,' Quichotte explained mildly, 'because the Beloved is the goal. These other burdens, however, must be shed.' 'Even an occasional glass of Grey Goose and tonic?' 'Even *fava beans and a nice Chianti*.' (Rushdie 2019, 147, emphasis is mine)

Hannibal Lecter (portrayed by Anthony Hopkins in the film) utters this line to intimidate Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster) as part of a dialogue in which each character tries to assert control over the other. If for Rushdie "Cervantes went to war with the junk culture of his own time," (ivi, 263) then his Sancho and Quichotte are constantly in tension with TV series, cinema films, TV commercials, songs, reality shows, and even Rushdie's own writing. In

this case, the use of satire, pastiche, and burlesque is not just for the purpose of creating humour, but also to convey a message by discussing something else. The comic elements in the novel freely move between different semantic fields, resulting in the formation of new meanings as unexpected connections are made. Reading something triggers spontaneous inspirations in the reader that seem to have nothing to do with it. Due to the porous and flexible definitions and categories present in the novel, readers may have surprising insights that seem unrelated to the text. Rushdie uses satire to take aim at a variety of social, political, and economic issues with a smug and masterfully allusive irreverence that is far more shrewd than the irony present in *The Satanic Verses*.

It can be argued that *Quichotte* represents the final stage of Rushdian's metaliterary reflection on how fictional characters and situations can interact with reality. A key theme of the novel is how the author's imagination shapes his everyday life and flows back from there into his writing. This reminds one, of course, of the kind of 'historiographic metafiction' that Canadian scholar Linda Hutcheon (1989) theorised most forcefully in the year Rushdie was sentenced to death, only to be reborn as Joseph Anton, and which is now echoed in his latest novel in 'pliable' form.[8]

4.2 *Converging narratives*

The literary device Rushdie employs to achieve his goal is Sam DuChamp,[9] a spy novelist. In fact, Quichotte is the main character of the novel Sam is writing and which we read as he is writing it. In its author's intention, the novel tries to bridge the gap between high and low culture (Rushdie 2019, 36) by combining different literary styles and genres. Like Quichotte, Sam is unable to distinguish between real and imagined events. According to the author, he developed an incurable "mental disorder" (*ibid.*) due to too much contact with the artistic and intellectual environment he spent time in as a child:

> And because of such intensive and prolonged childhood overexposure to creative genius of all types, Brother too, like his incipiently crazy Quichotte, fell victim to a rare form of mental disorder – his first, paranoia being the second – in the grip of which the boundary between art and life became blurred and permeable, so that at times he was incapable of distinguishing where one ended and the other began, and, even worse, was possessed of *the fool's conviction that the imaginings of creative people could spill over beyond the boundaries of the works themselve*s,

[8] See also Anderson 1998; Bennett 1985; Jameson 2003; Jencks 1991; Olson 2001.

[9] In the novel, he is frequently referred to by the name Brother.

> that they possessed the power to enter and transform and even improve the real world. (ivi, 36, emphasis is mine)

Sam is gradually able to recognise himself in Quichotte's events and to admit that through his own character he can speak indirectly about his own life. Above all, through writing he expresses his desire to reunite with his son, Marcel, and his sister, whose name is not mentioned in the novel, since he has lost both of them due to misunderstandings. The search for Salma thus reflects Quichotte's attempt to reconcile with his sister, from whom he has been separated for forty years. His relationship with Marcel is clearly reflected in that with Sancho.

> He had been thinking about her, about everyone he had lost but mainly about her, weighing the benefits of putting down the burden of their quarrel and making peace before it was too late against the risk of triggering one of her nuclear rages, and unsure if he possessed the courage to make some sort of approach. If he was honest with himself he knew it was up to him to make the first move, because she had a deeper grievance than he did. (ivi, 38-39)

This is undoubtedly the author's most important insight, but it is not the only one. As mentioned earlier, the stories of Quichotte and his author alternate in a similar way to the alternation between reality and dream in *The Satanic Verses*. In this novel, the metanarrative flow is unique because it reverses the plot developments of the two main characters. Unlike Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha, whose stories alternated with the former's dream, here the narratives of Sam and Quichotte intertwine, each developing in opposite directions, one leading 'into' the other's. Indeed, unbeknownst to their author, Quichotte's fictitious search for love foreshadows the future 'real' events of Sam's family and contributes to his own death. By contrast, the tensions in Sam's real life, which had brought about Quichotte's creation in the first place, ultimately lead to his character's fatal 'birth'.

The idea of narrative reversal is first hinted at with a significant reference to cinema, in which the lives of Sam and Quichotte are described as a rewinding of an old film by the great Indian comedian Raj Kapoor,[10] himself an imitation of Charlie Chaplin's Tramp. The funny movements of a great comedian reminiscent of those of another, even more famous comedian, represent the contamination between India and the United States, Hollywood and Bollywood, East and West. The rapid backward movement adds to the cartoonish

[10] Raj Kapoor is also referred to as the Charlie Chaplin of Indian cinema. He acted in over 150 films, many of which he also produced and directed. He was a pioneer of the Indian film industry and is credited with helping to bring Indian cinema to an international audience.

effect. The same seems to be true for Quixote and Quichotte. In the sequel to Quixote, the errant knight and Sancho interacted with characters who already knew them from having read the first part of the novel. For the protagonist to recover from madness and come to terms with himself, meta-referentiality was crucial.

Similarly, halfway through *Quichotte*'s narrative, a government spy manages to connect Sam with his son after reading what the former has written about his new book. He then learns that Marcel is the head of Legion, an organisation of hacktivists whose efforts are coordinated by him via YouTube videos in which he shows himself wearing the Don Quixote mask from the 2002 Broadway revival *Man of La Mancha*. Sam's consternation at how closely his own life mirrored those portrayed in his novels, and conversely, how closely his characters resembled reality, is underscored by his use of the phrase 'reverse rendition' from the title of his seventh novel. A possible critical reading can be derived from this clue:

> I'm no critic, sir, but I estimate that you're telling the reader that the surreal, and even the absurd, now potentially offer the most accurate descriptors of real life. It's an interesting message, though parts of it require considerable suspension of disbelief to grasp.
> [...]
> 'Oh my God,' Brother said, 'it's the plot of my seventh book.' '*Reverse Rendition*,' Lance Makioka said, actually clapping his hands in delight. 'I hoped you'd recognise the similarity. We're all big fans.' [...] The world Brother had made up had become real. (ivi, 205, 210-211)

The relationship between Sam and Quichotte is characterised by momentum rather than causal connections based on chronological linearity. As the narrative unfolds, Sam realises that his relationship with Quichotte is not simply a one-way projection from the author to his fictional creation, but rather an interactive dynamic in which both characters are actively involved. This relationship involves an interplay between truth and fiction, past and future: "He was learning, for example, that just as a real son could become unreal, so also an imaginary child could become an actual one, while, *moving in the opposite direction*, a whole, real country could turn into a 'reality'-like unreality." (ivi, 201-202, emphasis is mine)

Upon learning that his sister has suffered abuse at the hands of their father, just as Sam had imagined for the character of Salma in *Quichotte*, the writer's worldview is shattered and his certainties are called into question. This event echoes the real-life experiences of the author, Salman Rushdie,

whose ex-wife, Padma Parvati Lakshmi, revealed that she was sexually abused by her stepfather when she was only seven years old. The revelation forces Sam to confront the fact that his own life has been an illusion and that his previously held feelings of aversion towards his sister were based on misguided motives:

> It was bewildering at such an advanced age to understand that the narrative of your family which you had carried within you – within which, in a way, you had lived – was false, or, at the very least, that you had been ignorant of its most essential truth, which had been kept from you. Not to be told the whole truth [...] was to be told a lie. That lie had been his truth. Maybe this was the human condition, to live inside fictions created by untruths or the withholding of actual truths. (Rushdie 2019, 273)

Aristotle (2019) referred to this type of revelation as agnition, which transforms the truth that a character has always held. Sam's world dissolves before his eyes as Quichotte's fiction comes to life through him. He realises that his life was already governed by the rules of writing before becoming a writer himself. When he began *Quichotte*, he was already straddling the line between reality and fiction, linking his life to the world of art in an inseparable way:

> Maybe human life was truly fictional in this sense, that those who lived it didn't understand it wasn't real. And then he had been writing about an imaginary girl in an imaginary family and he had given her something close to Sister's fate, without knowing how close to the truth he had come. Had he, as a child, intuited something and then, afraid of what he had guessed, buried the intuition so deep that he retained no memory of it?
> [...]
> He sat at Sister's bedside, deafened by *the echo between the fiction which he had made and the fiction in which he had been made to live.* (Rushdie 2019, 27, emphasis is mine)

Quichotte's absurd dream of love is shattered when Sam and his sister reconnect. Salma, who is a minority rights activist and has the same profession as Padma, was sexually abused by her maternal grandfather. This trauma explains her addiction to drugs produced by Quichotte's family and leads to their tragicomic meeting. The revelation of Salma's abuse marks the turn towards a tragic denouement in the story. Their first encounter is more comical than romantic, as it is a secret meeting between an opium addict and a drug dealer that puts Salma's life in danger due to an overdose. Salma is repelled by Quichotte's resemblance to her abusive grandfather, whose memory she has

tried to avoid all her life. The reversal of circumstances confirms the tragic trajectory for the protagonists. During the second half of the novel, Sam experiences some of the strange situations that he had previously only imagined for Quichotte and Sancho, which now come to life with full dramatic force. Sam realises that Quichotte was the way that art and life found to reveal the truth about his family relationships to him. Additionally, the story contains hints that foreshadow the author's downfall and demise:

> When his heart trouble began – he thought at once of Quichotte's youthful arrhythmia – he understood that his book had known about it all along, even before he had any symptoms. Everything he had written about the malfunction of time began to make sense. He had sketched out scenes in which time accelerated or decelerated, in which it became staccato, a series of pounding moments, or in which it seemed to skip a beat. As the laws of nature lost their authority, time would lose its rhythm. He already had that worked out. And *now in his own body his fiction was coming to life*. [...]
> *Had this whole performance* [...] *really been a way of talking about the imminent end of the Author*?" (Rushdie 2019, 323, 325, emphasis is mine)

Sam's death, which marks the end of his imagination, coincides with an apocalyptic event in Quichotte's world. In an attempt to save himself and Salma, Quichotte passes through a portal to another world. Upon entering, they become so small in the author's room that they cannot even breathe the air. Both Quichotte and Salma suffocate in front of a distressed Sam, who is experiencing a heart attack.

4.3 *Mistaken beliefs*

Quichotte and his author are ultimately linked by their tragic fate, which is the result of the intersecting narratives within the novel. Many characteristics or events described in *Quichotte* and in other novels by Sam come from his past or develop into his future. Quichotte is convinced of the divine nature of his love and never doubts that he knows how to achieve it, just as Sam believed he was justified in slapping his sister when she left home for a man sixty years her senior (as depicted in Quichotte through the age difference between Ismail and Salma). Quichotte's seemingly innocent madness reflects Sam's deep sense of guilt. Despite denying any connection to his character, Sam's conscience plays a crucial role in Quichotte's story. It acts as a 'dae-

mon'[11] or guiding force, influencing Quichotte's decisions and contributing to his dramatic development:

> But the old fool? He resisted the idea that Quichotte was just his Author with a pasteboard helmet on his head and his great-grandfather's rusted sword in his hand. Quichotte was somebody he had made up with a nod (okay, more than a nod) to the great Spaniard who had made him up first. Granted: his creation and he were approximately the same age, they had near-identical old roots, uprooted roots, not only in the same city but in the same neighbourhood of that city, and their parents' lives paralleled each other, so much so that he, Brother, on some days had difficulty remembering which history was his own and which Quichotte's. Their families often blurred together in his mind. And yet he insisted: no, he is not I, he is a thing I have made in order to tell the tale I want to tell. Brother – to be clear about this – watched relatively little TV. (Rushdie 2019, 201)

It is the author's ancient error that influences the protagonist negatively and leads him to make a tragic mistake. Aristotle's concept of 'hamartia'[12] in his *Poetics* refers to the mistake that the hero makes and its role in the development of his character (Bremer 1969). The term is difficult to interpret, as it encompasses both guilt and error, which scholars have not always understood in terms of causation. Harsh (1945) and Greene (1950) suggest that Aristotle believed that actions with tragic outcomes were the responsibility of the perpetrator, at least in part. Some scholars, such as Butcher (1895), have argued that it is "one great flaw in an otherwise noble personality," (298) while others, like D. W. Lucas (1968), have described it as a 'flaw' in the soul of the tragic intellect. Regardless of the specific interpretation, hamartia is generally understood to refer to a moral failure or flaw in the personality or character of the hero. Van Braam (1912) has a different interpretation of Aristotle's concept of hamartia, believing that it refers to an intellectual error, a mistake made out of necessity or opportunity rather than a personality flaw. According to this interpretation, the error is characterised by blameless suffering resulting from wrong decisions made without moral responsibility.

Despite their ignorance of the reality around them and the intertextual connections that bind them together, Sam's and Quichotte's tragic fate is ultimate-

[11] At least as defined by Bremer (1969) and Dawe (1967), referring, in turn, to a doctoral dissertation by J. Stallmach. See also Stump and Crossett (1983) and Golden (1978, 1992) and on this subject.

[12] From the verb ἁμαρτάνω, hamartánō, to miss the target.

ly the result of their mistaken belief that they have a deeper understanding of events than they actually do. This arrogance is also present in other characters, such as Sam's sister, who stubbornly refuses to reconcile with him, or in her assumption that she will be able to recover from the fatal illness that eventually kills her. At its core, the novel is about the reconciliation of a family and the ability to emotionally reconnect, which becomes possible only after a series of narratives that have kept the characters apart are revealed as such. The tragic element of the human condition is the inability to understand and accept loss, especially when it is inescapable and suffering prevails. In this way, Quichotte's story reflects Sam's tragic loss of his family, which was caused by bad choices made by the author. The tragedy of the novel arises from the irreparable consequences of a stubbornly maintained error, the inability to find a balance between belief and doubt. When it becomes clear that lost time cannot be regained, the only option is to ask for forgiveness and accept one's fate. The true hero is the one who defends or wins back his beloved affection. Madness, on the other hand, is the act of sacrificing love for the false sense of security that pride, arrogance, and vanity provide:

> ...did she not understand – O abominable creature! – that human life was short and that every day of love stolen from her was a crime against life itself? [...] They had never been that close, Sister lamented, but if he had shown her even the slightest desire for rapprochement, she would have returned it multiplied a thousandfold. Instead, there remained his unjust accusation of financial crime, there remained the slap in the face, there remained the years of proud and unrepentant absence, and they were all unforgivable. (Rushdie 2019, 262-263)

Quichotte's encounter with humans transformed into mammoths predicts this condition. It is the image of an angry, ignorant and selfish humanity whose inability to empathise with others is represented by their supposedly animal appearance.

Rushdie's humour masks Swiftian disdain for human contradictions. It is impossible to have a happy ending or find solace in an inevitably tragic existence. Redemption, amorous or sexual affirmation are not allowed. It is even impossible to find a proper ending. Rushdie does not describe the author's death directly, but only hints at it. At the end, it almost seems as if the novel has come to an abrupt halt instead of concluding. Sam and Quichotte are brought together from opposite sides of the story to a shattering realisation that leads Sam to give up on life and Quichotte to find death in an attempt to come into the world. The direction or 'sense' of the narrative can only be understood by considering the alternating movements of the individual stories, with the unfolding of one enabling the continuation of the other.

In *Quichotte*, Rushdie honours the way that his life has inspired his art and vice versa: he foresaw many of the events, situations, and figures that he would encounter later in life in his novels. His belief that characters and situations created through artistic imagination can somehow become real and influence actual historical events, rather than just serving as fleeting reflections of human experience, has been a central aspect of his use of magical realism in all of his works since *Midnight's Children*. In this novel, Saleem Sinai's personal affairs and the history of the Indian people both contribute to the progression of their respective stories. Another example of this is how Mahound's preaching about Islam was inspired by Gibreel's acceptance and rejection of love and faith in *The Satanic Verses*, which would turn Rushdie himself into Joseph Anton (a nickname which, in turn, combined Joseph Conrad and Anton Chekhov). In fact, the Rushdie affair may be the most emblematic example of this idea. According to Rushdie, receiving a fatwa was like being hit by a curse or spell that made his life resemble that of many of his characters. He lived under the pseudonym Joseph Anton for years to avoid a tragic end. Scotland Yard provided protection for Rushdie after the fatwa was issued. David Sheff (2000) described Rushdie's first encounter with the protective forces in *Playboy* magazine, as if it were a scene from a spy film. In the years since, Rushdie has seen himself reflected in several of his characters.

The story of *Shalimar the Clown* (2005) seems particularly intriguing when looked at from this point of view. The story is set between Kashmir and the United States, where "our lives, our stories, flowed into one another's; were no longer our own, individual, discrete." (Rushdie 2005, 45) It is about the revenge that Shalimar the Clown (whose real name is Noman Sher Noman) seeks against Max Ophuls, the former US ambassador to India and later head of counter-terrorism in the US, for taking away his wife Boonyi, whom he loved in his youth. Shalimar has already killed his wife at the beginning of the novel and it is implied that he will also try to kill India/Kashmira, a documentary filmmaker born from the relationship between Max and Boonyi, who, unlike Gibreel, wanted to "inhabit facts, not dreams." (ivi, 19)

After taking Boonyi to her father, Shalimar, before also murdering Max, utters an ominous message to India that is foreboding: "For every O'Dwyer [...] there is a Shaheed Udham Singh, and for every Trotsky a Mercader awaits." (Rushdie 2005, 38) Shalimar here refers to Michael Francis O'Dwyer, who served as a civil servant in the Indian Civil Service and later as Lieutenant Governor of the Punjab in British India. O'Dwyer distinguished himself by approving the Amritsar massacre perpetrated by Reginald Dyer, reported in chapter two, and subsequently administering the martial law that

was immediately triggered. In revenge, O'Dwyer was shot dead by Udham Singh, an Indian revolutionary and martyr who belonged to the Ghadar Party, a movement against British rule in India, and the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA). Singh was present on the day the Amritsar massacre took place because he was there serving water in the crowd. During the trial that followed the killing of O'Dwyer, Singh responded to a question about his motives for the act: "I did it because I had a grudge against him. Machine guns on the streets of India mow down thousands of poor women and children wherever your so-called flag of democracy and Christianity flies." (Singh 2013, 189-218) Similarly, the Mercader to whom Shalimar refers is the Spanish secret agent Jaime Ramón Mercader del Río, who murdered Lev Trotsky with a pickaxe. Shalimar thus indirectly tells India that he is about to become her father's murderer, without the girl naturally being able to suspect him: "the assassin had confessed his crime to her before he committed it?" (Rushdie 2005, 38) In a similar way to what happened to Gandhi, each of the two murdered characters has his own nemesis waiting for him in the future, because doing great things produces your own reflection or nemesis, who will try to eliminate you. Art knew, therefore, that behind every Rushdie, too, lurked a Hadi Matar.[13] Similarly, Rushdie seems almost to be warning himself against writing *The Satanic Verses* through another of his characters, the pundit Pyarelal: "When you pray for what you most want in the world, [...] its opposite comes along with it." (Rushdie 2005, 95)

The more brutal and intolerant side of Islam rose up against Rushdie after he wrote a novel expressing his desire for a different and more tolerant Islam. It seems almost startling that Rushdie was able to predict what would happen to him through literature before, during and after the publication of *Quichotte*, despite the recent attack he suffered on himself. Like Shalimar, Hadi Matar waited patiently for the right moment to take action in real life. Rushdie's novels predicted his future self without him realising it. They described situations, loves, and people that Rushdie would encounter far into the future, as if they were waiting to be described, imagined, and realised. In his art, Rushdie discovers that he has explored not only his past and his own memories, but also what he conveniently wanted to forget or remember. It is probably through writing that he has learned how his Muslim upbringing laid the foundation for his disbelief, creating the figure of Joseph Anton and threatening his own life at the same time. The stories he feeds on are split up and reassembled in his art

[13] The man who tried to kill him. See page 105.

so that they can no longer be separated from his life. This reflects the internal contradiction of history based on selective remembering and forgetting, where any attempt to discern fact from fiction, what we have experienced from what we want to remember, cause from effect, objective fact from interpretation, is futile. A wiser approach is to acknowledge the creative and not merely representational power of language, to appreciate and fear its potential for simultaneous liberation and subjugation. To see it as an abstract environment in which life and art are constantly in tension, attracting and repelling each other, separating and reuniting in unpredictable ways. It is this interaction that makes history possible.

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List of key words and concepts

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About the author

Giuseppe De Riso is a researcher in English Literature at the University of Naples "L'Orientale", where he also completed his Ph.D. in *Cultural and Postcolonial Studies of the Anglophone Worl*d. He was also editorial assistant and webmaster for *Anglistica AION*, an interdisciplinary journal of the Department of Literary, Linguistic, and Comparative Studies of the University of Naples "L'Orientale". He published two books: *Affect and the Performative Dimension of Fear in the Indian English Novel: Tumults of the Imagination* (Cambridge Scholars, 2018), and *Affective Maps and Bio-mediated Bodies in Tridimensional Videogames of the Anglophone World* (Tangram Edizioni Scientifiche, 2013). He also published different articles on Anglo-Indian literature and digital media, such as "Time out of Time: Transworld Identity and the Collapse of Ontological Boundaries in *The Accidental* by Ali Smith" (2022), "The Algebra of Anger. Social Oppression and Queer Intersectionality in *Funny Boy* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*" (2021), "Writing with the Ghost: Specters of Narration in *Anil's Ghost* by Michael Ondaatje" (2020), "Ethical Responsibility in *Midnight's Children*. Clinical Storytelling as a Form of Biological and Cultural Survival" (2019), "Palimpsests of Power in Neel Mukherjee's *The Lives of Others*", "Memory and Negotiations of Identity in *Train to Pakistan*", "Of Smoke and Mirrors: Tribal Women in Postcolonial India" (2018) and "Gaming Gender: Virtual Embodiment as a Synaesthetic Experience" (2015). He is currently researching on English Post- and Metamodernism, the processes of transmedia convergence and contamination in literature, as well as ethnic-religious and gender issues in the Anglo-Indian novel.

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Dipartimento di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Comparati
Dottorato in Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Comparati

In this book, the literary world of Salman Rushdie is carefully scrutinised using a 'metaleptical' critical approach. Weaving together truth and fiction, reality and fantasy in his novels, the Anglo-Indian author's work exudes a 'metamodern' sensibility as it seamlessly weaves the fabric of real-world experience with the intricate patterns of language and art. Beginning with the contradictions and errors in the narrative of Rushdie's first masterpiece *Midnight's Children*, through the blending of the sacred and the secular in *The Satanic Verses*, to the palindromic movement of the mutual convergence of life and writing in *Quichotte*, the volume takes the reader on a journey of discovery of the creative power of language and how it shapes and is shaped by history. Salman Rushdie's work offers, in fact, the opportunity to engage in a nuanced examination of the balance between historical reality and artistic expression, individual aspirations and collective needs, continuity and decay, truth and make-believe.

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