„ORBIS LINGUARUM“, VOLUME 21, ISSUE 1
DOI: https://doi.org/10.37708/ezs.swu.v21.i1.15

THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT, OR FOR THE IMPOSSIBLE ESCAPE (THE COLLECTION *EAST, WEST* AND THE NOVEL *FURY* BY SALMAN RUSHDIE)

Magdalena PANAYOTOVA

South-West University "Neofit Rilski", Bulgaria
E-mail: panayotova@swu.bg

ABSTRACT: The notion of a new comparativism in literary studies shared by critics like Theo D'haen, Pascale Casanova, Michel Lobry, Walter Mignolo, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and many others is associated with questioning the dominant Eurocentrism, suggesting that regarding the ideas, messages, and projections taking over literature today, the Euro-American system is changing and in future could even become peripheral to the new one (D'haen, 2012). Even if this does not happen, one should not ignore that the world of literature looks different when viewed from less dominant points of view.

We share the idea that the cultures that stay isolated wither away; on the other hand, the cultures that remain confined within themselves deform, and only those cultures that maintain the balance of borrowing and lending tend to be healthy and thriving, hence the insistence on the interaction between the different cultures based on equality and mutual respect, because the imitation of the Western model is dangerous when it is internationalized in the intellectual concept of the world in the culture and literature of the nations that are not part of the Euro center. The inherent vitality of the crossroads literature sounds strange against the background of late-twentieth-century literature.

KEYWORDS: Salman Rushdie, comparativism, post-colonial English literature, the cultural identity

Introduction

In the globalization of the contemporary world the authors at the cultural crossroads between the Eastern and European traditions are by no means few. One of them is Salman Rushdie – a Nobel Prize laureate and author of 13 books, who became well-known with his second book *Midnight's Children* (1981), which brought him the Booker Prize in the very year of its publishing. Rushdie made the headlines with his fourth book, *The Satanic Verses* (1988), for which the Islamic world denounced him, a bounty was placed on his head, and his life changed forever.

Salman Rushdie has been different ever since he appeared: he is an author at crossroads, part of the celebrated post-colonial English literature, but above all, a hybrid author, whose assemblage combines contradictory East-West models, a man who points out that something is wrong with our world.

This premonition of not accepting the world is most clearly seen in the first story from his collection *East, West* (1994) – "Good Advice is Rarer than Rubies."

The collection of short stories is divided into three parts: "East," "West," and "East-West." Each of the parts also has three stories. The first three are dedicated to India and Pakistan and form the "East" section. The second part contains narratives pointing to symbolic names and models from Western European culture. The third part depicts various representatives of the East in the Western world.

The composition of the collection sets the idea of a union of the two worlds, of searching for the supports that give rise to the dialogue between them. However, the stories reveal rather the contradictions and problems that arise with the models set in this way, as well as the rejection of a dual perception of the world.

In the first story, Miss Rehana, who comes to the British Consulate to get a visa, along with many aspirants like her, abandons this goal. Furthermore, at first glance, this refusal is strange and unclear. However, in the course of the narrative, we learn that the only way she can get this visa is unfair. Instead, she prefers to remain a governess. However, the narrative does not stop there; it also reveals the additional reasons for Miss Rehana's refusal. In England, she would go to her husband, to whom she was married very young (Miss Rehana was nine years old, and he was about thirty), she did not know him, and he was a stranger to her. Thus, her refusal is a reaction, on the one hand, to the non-acceptance of the foreign world. On the other hand, it is a reaction against the Indian tradition of arranged marriages, a reaction against an ancient world that needs to change.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.37708/ezs.swu.v21i1.15

In the story "The Free Radio," the longing for a world that carries the unknown "echo" of distant latitudes deceives the main character, out of established and ossified traditions, out of ordinary existence, promising him fame and glory. For the narrator in the story – an old and respected man – this is an incredible passion that borders on madness. From the narrator's point of view, Ramani Rickshaw is deceived by everyone: by the widow, by his crazy hopes, but he himself admits that he keeps and reads with pleasure the letters of the hero who went after his dreams. The ending does not claim that this character is living well, but the important thing is that he continues to dream and live in a world that brings him joy and has the strength to cope with difficulties.

In "Yorick," a story from the second part, "West," the problem of cultural identity as a problem of the boundaries between two civilization systems that aspire to each other is manifested through the unusual reworking of the plot of the iconic Shakespearean tragedy, as well as at the level of the many allusions and quotes.

We must note that Rushdie, in all his works, is an intertextual author who combines references to different cultures in an amalgam, melting them for his ideological-artistic world in bizarre variants. Altering Shakespeare's work (as, incidentally, Shakespeare also did with the source material), Rushdie makes the murderer of Hamlet's father, the jealous Yorick, to whom the young prince Hamlet, in revenge for his father's punishment, instills the idea of treason. The story plays on the theme of the father's prayer, which became for the story – according to the narrator's ironic remark – a *Garden of Gethsemane*. Here, in addition to the comparison with Christ's fate, the reversal of the plot also hides the irony that it is not the son who approaches death but the father.

In this reworking of the timeless theme, we find references to both *King Lear* and *Othello* and Eastern classics such as the *Shahnameh* poem. In this sense, the problem of cultural identity reveals the heterogeneity, the marginality of such a landmark work of European culture, and the parallels with Eastern sources in Rushdie's story bring the plot into the channel of no less rich (compared to the West) cultural tradition.

As in "The Free Radio," here, only the one who leaves the confines of the little world and travels the Earth from the East to the West – Yorick's son – survives not only physically but also spiritually.

The dialog city, the ambiguity of culture, and the impossibility of choice, are also the themes of the last story in the collection ("The Courter"), which has autobiographical features. The character, who is already in England, expects to get a British passport to escape the power of his family and authoritarian father. Obtaining a passport is meant as a removal of borders for the person who comes from a more conservative environment.

However, the new world is not ***home*** yet. In this story, the impossibility of an unequivocal choice is brought to the fore – East or West – although this choice is necessary because the hero feels the tightening of the noose: "*But I, too, have ropes around my neck, I have them to this day, pulling me this way and that, East and West, the nooses tightening, commanding, choose, choose.*" (Rushdi, 1994, p. 211)

For Rushdie, having lived part of his life in the East and the other part in the West, the clash of cultures, the shifting of perspectives, and the mixing and playing of national narratives and legends, is a storytelling strategy. This strategy reveals the heterogeneity of a man with an elusive identity. At the epicenter of this world is the hero in crisis, the man who chooses a different space to solve his problems, only to find that escape is impossible.

In a 2018 interview with BNT (The Bulgarian National Television), Rushdie said he was interested in "how events on one side of the planet can have an impact on the other side of it, and if we are going to be able to live in a shared world, whether we like it or not."

The novel *Fury*, which appeared on the eve of September 11, 2001, is based on this butterfly effect, which sounds like an ominous prophecy, relevant even today. The autobiographical details are apparent – the character is an Indian man from Bombay who studied at Cambridge, a writer. Furthermore, the description of the ***femme fatale*** in the novel refers to the real Padma, to whom the book is dedicated.

In New York, amid the culmination and might of a country of emigrants, university literary lecturer Malik Solanka flees from his family in London to tame his personal demons, only to find himself in the

DOI: https://doi.org/10.37708/ezs.swu.v21i.15

midst of an explosion of communal fury that rises in the heart of a contented, mechanized, and dehumanized environment. Thus he becomes part of an element in which he tries to discover his true identity. The simple plot develops rapidly, interweaving images, ideas, actual historical figures (Margaret Thatcher, Bush, Gore, Hillary Clinton, Galileo, Milosevic, etc.) and fictional people, as well as characters from literary stories and legends (Daedalus, Othello, Kronos, Hamlet, Conrad's characters, Alain Robb Griyer, Keats, Swift, Stanislav Lemm, etc.), as for the reader, they are left breathless, following the vicissitudes of the college professor's life.

In his home in Cambridge, Solanka makes a strange micro-world where he creates the doll Maloumka (Brainless). Curious and changing, asking questions, she becomes a star and sells out in huge numbers worldwide. The doll escapes from the hands of her creator and takes on a life of her own. The beginning of a crime plot, interrupted without being developed or thoroughly refuted, is part of the manipulative parody style of the narrator. The hero, unable to come to terms with the "increasingly false reality," in which the intelligent person feels like a puppet whose strings are being pulled, plunges into the world of dolls, replacing complex human relationships with more clear and, at first glance, simpler ones.

The parallel between dolls and humans, the motif of duality, runs throughout the whole book. However, the relationship is reversed: it is not the doll that replaces the person, it is the people who begin to resemble the earlier creation – the Maloumka doll. The doll has its clones – from the professor's son to the murdered young women like Eleanor Masters or Mila Milosevic. The story of the doll is a story that a person carries within themselves:

If a doll had no back-story, its market value was low. And as with dolls so with human beings. This was what we brought with us on our journey across oceans, beyond frontiers, through life: our little storehouse of anecdote and what-happened- next, our private once-upon-a-time. We were our stories, and when we died, if we were very lucky, our immortality would be in another such tale (Rushdie, 2006, p. 49).

What becomes of our personal stories when we realize that despite the switching of East and West and moving from one country to another, the environment does not change, nothing is erased, and one must deal with one's demons and find one's place in a cynical and valueless world? In the age and season of fractured utopias, Malik Solanka realizes that this "best of all possible worlds" is the only one and delight and despair in it are relative terms.

Interweaving Voltaire's *Candide* and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, the narrator reveals an impersonal and clichéd world that infuriates him. Hence the idea of safe solitude, which, however, does not stand the test of time and plot. Just as his professor friend, nicknamed Chuk-Chuk, is not immune to falling in love in search of the truly precious and beautiful, so Solanka realizes that love for Neela can change him and clings to this hope wholeheartedly. Of course, they both fail.

The motif of the double and the puppet are interwoven throughout the novel. Solanka runs away from his family because he can no longer possess what rightfully belongs to him. He has been compared to Othello, but his image is also doubled in the image of the concrete murderer, who "*in this case, perhaps, destroying what he could not possess, because that very non-possession insulted his honor*." (Ibid., p. 67)

At the same time, his wife Eleanor is compared to Desdemona, but also to a doll, "what android women are mechanized, computerized… fully fledged incarnations of human beings." (Ibid.)

Thus, the doll becomes an original, a part of its creator, and the woman becomes a dehumanized image, the image of nobody's doll. Transforming into an essentially gender issues, Rushdie problematizes and brings to the fore the consequences of feminization in a consumer society, the unusual desire of young women, who reject the patriarchal society's standard to "look like dolls." Rushdie does not have the ambition to give precise answers as to why this happens if we do not count the quoted answer "*literature isn't an equal opportunity employer.*" (Rushdie, 2006, p. 97)

Nevertheless, *Fury* also turns into a problem several other messages of the modern world. The author's presence is evident in the novel. The narrator, with autobiographical characteristics, conveys his

DOI: https://doi.org/10.37708/ezs.swu.v21i.15

thoughts on literature, politics, the social messages of the era, the technological world, which depersonalizes and clichés human relations; his hatred for stupidity and mediocrity is obvious.

The motif of the puppet with the creator appears in the novel in at least three ways: Malik and his puppets, which he destroys, refer to Kronos, who eats his children, and Professor Kronos, who in the novel is part of the game for the puppet kings, is a puppeteer. This theme leads associatively to the fantasy classic of Larry Niven and his civilization of puppeteers (Ringworld, 1970).

The homunculus turns its back on its maker and sets off to forge its own destiny, while Kronos, the abandoned creator, takes leave not only of his creation but of his senses, too. (Rushdie, 2006, p. 139)

The theme of the creator and the creature that crosses him out repeatedly appears in other writings by Rushdie. What does humanity expect from its creator? Destruction or a new life in a virtual reality, which is equal to death? The narrative focuses on the victory of the virtual over the real, understood as the victory of vanity and the loss of the human: "*Everything in him fought against the mechanization of the human. Wasn't this exactly what his imagined world was being created to confront?*" (Rushdie, 2006, p. 156)

The narrator realizes that nothing belongs to him, and using things for a while does not make them his. They slip into the vast black hole that is the world, and where it is pointless to have any expectations whatsoever.

As in most of Rushdie's books, here, too, the topic of interpenetrations, contradictions, and misunderstandings between the East and the West is the main focus.

Reflecting the person's experience on the border between two distant worlds, trying to keep them within himself, Rushdie creates a character observing and evaluating the world here from the perspective of the other, the different one. The protagonist's journey is an opportunity for reflection on reality through the prism of fictional events so that the line between truth and fiction does not blur. This motif is most clearly identifiable in two stories: the one in which Solanka tells Neela about his childhood and the story Neela tells Solanka about the Indo-Lilliputians and the Elbees.

The first story is painfully hidden in the character's mind; he shares it not just with a woman he loves but with a woman from his eastern world. It is a story about a piece of the past that can spit out more than one hell, about patriarchal traditions, about violence, about the missing father who left his home just as Solanka himself left years later. In this story, not only are some of the traditions and customs of the patriarchal Eastern world seen as needing change, but the very crisis in the character's sense of identity is at stake here. As Solanka is the name of his stepfather, the abuser, the one whom Malik runs from, and the name of his real father, his real name, is missing, as is the sense of a found identity. Escape to one end of the world in the past may have set in motion the escape years later to another space. The departure of the Father is seen as the departure from the world in its Hindu variant of renunciation of the earthly. Furthermore, maybe the world is messed up and damaged because God – the Father – is missing.

The second story Neela tells becomes the basis of the last part of the novel, which ultimately opens the doors of metaphor and fantasy. Throughout the work, the cultural references, symbols, legends, and names from literature and culture are innumerable; they weave furiously into the whirlwind time of the novel, conveying the feeling of the furiously rushing civilization at the beginning of the third millennium. Natural and inspired, Neela tells about her Indo-Lilliputians and their revolutionary struggle with the Elbees (perhaps a projection of the Elves?), and if it were not for the reference to the literary world of Swift and *Gulliver's Travels*, the reader could also believe in the reality of this struggle. Nevertheless, precisely the reflection of reality through the prism of fiction prevents the fine line from being crossed.

In the story told of the Elbees and the Indo-Lilliputians, it is striking that, however fervently Neela shares her views on the revolution, her bias is always on the opposing side. Here is what she says:

And the world speaks our language now, not theirs. It is the age of numbers, isn't it? So we are numbers and the Elbees are words. We are mathematics and they are poetry. We are winning and they are

DOI: https://doi.org/10.37708/ezs.swu.v21i.15

losing: and so of course they're afraid of us, it's like the struggle inside human nature itself, between what's mechanical and utilitarian in us and the part that loves and dreams. We all fear that the cold, machinelike thing in human nature will destroy our magic and song. So the battle between the Indo-Lillys and the Elbees is also the battle of the human spirit and, damnit, with my heart I'm probably on the other side. But my people are my people and justice is justice and after you've worked your butts off for four generations and you're still treated like second-class citizens, you've got a right to be angry. If it comes to it I'll go back. I'll fight alongside them if I have to, shoulder to shoulder. I'm not kidding, I really will. (Rushdie, 2006, p. 136).

Here, the writer seems to express most explicitly some of his fears about the world and the feeling that combining origins and biases in the maddened world of abundance and scorched hopes are challenging.

Rejecting India as "*in the overemphasized manner of the diaspora: the filmi music, the candles and incense, the Krishna-and-milkmaids calendar, the dhurries on the floor, the Company School painting, the hookah coiled atop a bookcase like a stuffed green snake*," (ibid., p. 176) he also rejects the American model, in which the human identity is recreated in terms of mechanics, and "*happiness was better food, wiser furniture orientation, deeper breathing technique. Happiness was selfishness*," (ibid., p. 156) the kneeling before the world of money at the expense of the language of the heart, that seems lost in this mad world.

Following her heart, Solanka follows Neela to Blefuscu to experience yet another disappointment and the death of his beloved, to see Babur, who, hidden under a mask, bears his own guilty face. However, the reader remembers that the tragedy occurs in a sham environment, and thus the story becomes a sly grotesque. The puppeteer cuts the threads himself so that the reader can move on beyond the play into his own universe of reflections. The openness of the structure, which is characterized by the dynamism of the meaning-making process, leads to the internal heterogeneity of the text and opens a horizon to its non-linear reading. Most of the book's suggestions are between its lines, and they are sad reflections on the world that remains, laughing at the man who leaves without knowing who he is and his purpose.

Conclusion

In Rushdie's short stories and novels, the idea of the modern man who has a burning sense of the displaced world appears repeatedly. The writer himself, a "displaced person," through the images of his characters, is looking for a way to unite the East and the West, playing out the possibilities for their coexistence.

Mixing mythology and fantasy, realistic stories, and historical fiction, Rushdie reveals the tragicomedy of the modern world, which, however globalized, carries the misunderstandings of the worlds that build it, and its fragile unity rests on the wings of a butterfly.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

D'haen, Theo (2012) Mapping World Literature. – In: *D'haen., T., Damrosch, D.* and *Kadir, D.*, (eds.) The Routledge Companion to World Literature. London: Routledge, pp. 413-22.

Rushdie, S. (1994) East, West. Pantheon Books, 214 p.

Rushdie, S. (2006) Fury. Random House Trade Paperback Edition.

Rushdie, S. (2012) East, West / Salman Rushdie. – Vintage Digital, New ed. Edition, Amazon Digital Services, 2012.

Sali, Aishe (2018) Interview with Salman Rushdie for Bulgarian National TV <https://news.bnt.bg/bg/a/salman-rushdi-pred-bnt-khorata-prezhivyavat-kriza-na-lichnostta> (13.01.2023).