



THE HEART'S PASSAGE IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *EAST, WEST*

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Abstract

Salman Rushdie's *East, West* is a collection of short stories that embodies the transformative journey of diasporic writers navigating between Eastern and Western cultures. Rushdie's work weaves together shards of both worlds to create a rich tapestry that transcends boundaries and redefines the sense of self. The structure of the book, divided into 'East', 'West' and 'East, West', symbolically mirrors the anatomy of the heart, with each section representing the two distinct chambers, while the comma, reminiscent of Hokusai's most famous woodblock print, *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, serves as a metaphorical interventricular septum, separating yet connecting the two cultural hemispheres, allowing for a fluid narrative that explores the rhythms of identity and belonging. Through this narrative, Rushdie invites the reader on a journey to explore the geography of the heart, navigating between the symbolic East and West. This journey is not about clear-cut divisions but about the fluid dynamics of cultural exchange and personal identity. By embracing the hybridity of Eastern and Western influences, Rushdie's work challenges traditional notions of cultural identity and offers a nuanced exploration of self-displacement. Ultimately, *East, West* is a testament to literature's power to redefine and connect disparate cultural landscapes.

Keywords: *Eastern; Western; cultural fluidity; hybrid identity; in-betweenness*

INTRODUCTION

In *Imaginary Homelands*, his literary manifesto, Salman Rushdie suggested that '[...] Indian writers in England have access to a second tradition, quite apart from their own racial history. It is the culture and political history of the phenomenon of migration, displacement, life in a minority group. [...] the past to which we belong is an English past, the history of immigrant Britain. Swift, Conrad, Marx are as much our literary forebears as Tagore or Ram Mohan Roy' (Rushdie 1992, 20) – in a dialogical expression of the self that acknowledges having grown its roots in the cradle of the East, but pollinating its flowers in the Western landscape of intellectual greatness. He opens up the anatomy of his ancestry, which is equally Eastern and Western, drawing boundless inspiration from the lives, cultures, works of literature and civilisations of both. Rushdie sketches a transformative journey that diasporic writers who straddle two worlds have undertaken at one point or another; his prose has constantly woven fragments of East and West in a rich tapestry that speaks of hybrid authorial identities - a testament to the power of literature to transcend boundaries and continuously redefine the sense of belonging. It is as if, or at least this is the way we propose to approach Salman Rushdie's famous collection of short stories, *East, West*, the authorial voice had recorded the rhythms of its strand with a literarily adapted EKG device, capturing even the faintest of beats, while at the same time minutely mapping the anatomy of the heart, which in itself translates into a symbiotic East-West relationship. *East, West* is nothing else but the structural anatomy of the heart, whose *East* dwells in its right ventricle, the one that pumps deoxygenated blood to the lungs for oxygenation; it is, in this epic manoeuvre of renewal, a symbolic association with fresh beginnings, sunrises, tireless quests. The left ventricle completes its westward-drawn geography while propelling oxygen-rich blood to the systemic circulation, mirroring the *West*, often associated with culmination, sunset, and an abundant flood of energies. Working at a lower pressure, the right ventricle reflects adaptability and gentleness, similar to the symbolic qualities of the East, while the left ventricle, working at a higher pressure, stands for strength, perseverance and endurance, parallel to the millennia-old role of the West in sustaining civilisation.

The perfect union of the two makes the heart pulse in rhythmic unison, just as the East and the West complement each other in cultural, philosophical

or geographical contexts. The proposed structure of the book, which divides the nine short stories it contains into three sections, 'East' (*dawning*), 'West' (*dusking*), and 'East, West' (*in-betweenness, the journey itself*) is complemented by the third element that makes up the anatomy of the heart, namely the interventricular septum, which physically separates the two chambers and yet connects them, ensuring synchronised functioning.

In Rushdie's choice of title, the interventricular septum is represented by the comma, the punctuation mark that draws a demarcation line that silences the rhythms and yet never fails to resume the journey in fluid dynamics. Nevertheless, the comma is not a clear division but a pause along the way, a moment to redefine the new horizons that blossom with each step that articulates the journey. There is an undeniable fluidity and sense of undulating perspectives in the 'anatomy' of the comma, almost as if Hokusai's 'Great Wave' had condensed into the miniature form of this punctuation mark, overflowing with all its might onto the narrative texture. The reader anticipates an invitation to travel through the unique geography of the heart, a promise to connect with the intimate pulses of beginnings, explore the two hemispheres of one's world/heart, and decipher the semantics of belonging and becoming. The author imposes no limits, just as the heart, although clearly defined by its anatomical structure into distinct parts and structures, is nothing other than a biological machine working in synergy. Destined to travel, the man with the quill wanders through (imaginary) realms of memory and the world in search of the story of his own self.

One can read Rushdie's aforementioned volume in the key of this symbolic balance between East and West - distinct yet interrelated forces that maintain harmony in a larger system. What better map to guide the journey of someone who sees himself and all diasporic writers who record their heartbeats in English as 'translated men' (Rushdie 1992, 17) than the one enclosed in the covers of this volume?

'EAST'

The first section of the collection of nine stories visits the land of roots, the place where the Sun begins its journey and where the author bathed in the light of the world for the first time. Conscious of his double (literary) identity, Salman

Rushdie unravels the thread of a spiritual geography to the place where memory and myth intertwine, shaping a landscape that exists between exile and belonging. "The Orient [...] is [...] the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other" (Said 1978, 1). *Otherness* seems to be the key with which the author describes the East, no longer the world of exotic fairy tales, enchanting stories and intoxicating scents, not so much in opposition to the West, but in opposition to how it sees and perceives it. This is the *Other* that Rushdie has chosen to write about and to travel through, in a kind of reverse initiatory journey that lifts the veils from the face of the Orient and presents it barefaced, just like the heroine of the first story, *Good Advice Is Rarer Than Rubies*, Miss Rehana. The elegance of pure-blooded Arab stallions is replaced by the still-glaring headlights of buses that have brought the young woman "to the gates of the British Consulate" (Rushdie 1994, 10).

Elements of the Western civilisation permeate the (narrative) fabric of the East, blending with indigenous traditions in a mirrored expression of what the Orient stood for, as Edward Said argued in his scholarly book, *Orientalism*: "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (Said 1978, 3). The introductory lines of the first short story in the series open a window towards a world that is no longer pristine but under the influence of an imported material culture, where buses transport people from their remote households to the *gates* of some promised (Western) happiness. This rite of passage, dramatic in all the fragmented humanity it reveals, contrasts the bus's 'multicoloured arabesques', evoking vibrant oriental chromatics, with the vehicle's 'still shining' lights and the illusion it embraces, with all the dust it leaves behind. In a world resplendent with lights and colours, the transitory, still-glaring lights that come with the bus's headlights may subtly suggest the artificial and bizarre presence of a foreign element that is seen to disturb the delicate harmony of the scene, casting fleeting shadows of intrusion. The reader unveils a world that is no longer what Edward Said described as „a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (1978, 1). Alongside Miss Rehana we enter a world that, although speaks in the language of proverbs – "Good advice is rarer than rubies," "I tell you I am a poor potato", "When Fate sends a gift, one receives good fortune" (Rushdie 1994, 11) surprises with the

'modernity' of women who are allowed to travel unchaperoned and with their faces uncovered and who do not necessarily accept the idea of arranged marriages. The reader is not surprised to discover that her refusal to accept the 'benevolent' offer of a false passport, which could have taken her across the lands and seas to "Bradford, England", is a sign of modern self-determination on the part of a woman refusing to submit to an arranged marriage to an almost total stranger, her senior, who lives beyond the 'comma', somewhere in the West. The cloud of dust that first disclosed the delicate figure of the young woman "on the last Tuesday of the month" (Rushdie 1994, 10), as if it were an unwoven magic carpet, symbolically restores the ways of the world by carrying her back home—not as a bride-to-be, but as a single, free lady, mistress of her own destiny. "Her last smile, which he watched from the compound until the bus concealed it in a dust-cloud, was the happiest thing he had ever seen in his long, hot, hard, unloving life" (Rushdie 1994, 15).

While some dream of transplanting their roots in the soils of some western island and starting a better life, Ramani, a young rickshaw driver and the protagonist of the second story, *The Free Radio*, dreams of being rewarded with a free radio. Set during India's State of Emergency period (1975-1977), the short story, filtered and narrated through the eyes and voice of an unnamed elderly narrator, echoes Rushdie's bitter criticism of the political propaganda and exploitation of poor, gullible individuals. This time, the protagonist, blessed not only with "God's own looks" but also with a substantial inheritance from his father, "a brand-new first-class cycle rickshaw with plastic covered seats and all" (Rushdie 1994, 17), though "a little soft in the head" (Rushdie 1994, 20) fell under the spell of a Machiavellian woman ten years older than him, a mother of five, otherwise known as the "thief's widow". Infatuated with love and with the idea of receiving a free transistor radio, an incentive offered by the government to men undergoing sterilisation procedures as part of its controversial population control campaign, Ramani does not hesitate to submit himself to the vasectomy procedure, believing he will receive the promised gift, while being equally happy to oblige his future bride.

[...] Ramani suddenly began to talk about his new fantasy, telling everyone he could find that very shortly he was to receive a highly special and personalised

gift from the Central Government in Delhi itself, and this gift was to be a brand-new first-class battery-operated transistor radio. (Rushdie 1994, 20).

Rushdie skillfully interweaves elements of satire and tragedy, drawing attention to the perils associated with the unquestioning acceptance of authority. The free radio, which Ramani never actually receives, serves as a metaphor for the false promises made to the vulnerable, naïve, destitute and powerless members of society. The radio becomes a symbolic amplifier of stories of deceit, serving as a metaphorical Trojan gift that underscores the deep gap between reality and fantasy – “[...] now all is hundred per cent OK. Also it is in national interest,” he pointed out. “And soon the free radio will arrive” (Rushdie 1994, 20). Through the narrator’s perspective, the reader senses both affection and pity for Ramani, who eventually moves to Bombay in pursuit of his dreams of becoming a Bollywood star. Offering an open ending, the story is Rushdie’s critique of all ‘gifts’ that mask power imbalances. Ultimately, the author invites us all to reflect on whether or not such cultural exchanges enrich or erode the East’s unique and self-determined voice.

In the third and final short story of the initial section, *The Prophet's Hair*, Salman Rushdie employs the genre of magical realism to create an atmosphere reminiscent of the *Arabian Nights*, utilising this as the backdrop for a narrative in which ordinary individuals become the protagonists of a series of hallucinatory events that unveil the darkest facets of human nature. Set in Srinagar, Kashmir, the narrative revolves around Hashim, an Indian Shylock, an equally unscrupulous and deeply dishonest usurer, the quintessence of corrupt faith and arrogance. In his greed, Hashim resembles the infinitely more famous Venetian moneylender, and just like Shakespeare’s character, he too is a social outcast, morally isolated not only from his family because of his despotic personality but also from society because of the nature of his profession. Considered an abusive and unfair practice, lending money with interest is a major moral issue in Islamic teachings, as outlined in the Qur’an: “O you who have believed, do not consume usury, doubled and multiplied, but fear Allah that you may be successful” (Qur’an 3:130).

Against the majestic backdrop of the Himalayas, on the northern shores of Dal Lake, lies the Hazratbal Mosque, one of India’s most revered Muslim shrines that houses a relic believed to be a hair strand of Prophet Muhammad.

The chaos in the story unleashes when Hashim finds the celebrated relic and, instead of returning it to the holy place, decides to keep it all to himself. A most strange thing happens when Hashim and the rest of his family discover the transformative power of the relic, as he grows bluntly honest, exposing his past crimes and the abuses he had committed over the years.

[...] Hashim began to gush, to spume long streams of awful truths. In horrified silence, his children heard their father turn upon his wife, and reveal to her that for many years their marriage had been the worst of his afflictions. ‘An end to politeness!’ he thundered. ‘An end to hypocrisy!’ (Rushdie 1994, 30).

His transformation into a religiously fanatical and intolerant figure will eventually lead to tragic consequences for his family, who turn the world upside down and try to free themselves from the tyranny of the unwanted gift. The failed attempts of both Atta and Huma, Hashim’s children, to restore the former ways of their world and to get rid of the relic have solely brought about catastrophic consequences, which end in death or sheer madness. The state of ‘shock and dismay’ became the new normality of a family whose lifestyle had been previously deeply imbued with occidental elements; the abrupt decision to return to the Islamic religious practices triggered the siblings’ will to have the relic stolen from their father by some of the most dreadful thieves any devout Muslim would go to great lengths to avoid. “He ordered each member of his family to read passages from [the Qur’an] for at least two hours per day. Visits to the cinema were forbidden. And if Atta invited male friends to the house, Huma was to retire to her room” (Rushdie 1994, 31). The burning of all the books except the Qur’an and the strict prohibition of all Western social practices are Rushdie’s bitter satire of a dangerously artificial and reductionist philosophy that distorts faith into an instrument of absolute control. He has chosen to ridicule monochrome perspectives as unsuccessful and irremediable perceptions while insisting on the commodification of spirituality and the fragility of human relationships.

Symbolically located in the right ventricle of the heart, the East remains associated with new beginnings and sunrises that come to echo and eventually restore order; just as the relic ultimately returns to the holy shrine, the heart will

unceasingly resume its journey, much like the Sun, dawning a new heartbeat, like a new promise.

'WEST'

In an almost anatomy-related sense of synchronicity, in the left ventricle of the heart, the West continues the passage and builds its own experiences on the immense inheritance the East had toiled through millennia. The narrative of the map is written using the same legend of magical realism, and one of the final keys of the first section extends to the second short story of the second series, *At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers*. In a proposed multi-layered exploration of materialism, the story focuses on the culture of commodification, one of the fissures of Western culture. The title itself rests on two sturdy pillars intimately linked to materialism since auctions and precious stones are core elements of any materialist construct. Auctions are, by definition, the mere expression of commodification, which can often lead to moral decay; in the name of the vanity of the desire to be able to conjugate the verbs *to have* or *to possess* in the first person singular, people lose their moral bearings and, even more sadly, themselves. The red colour of the ruby slippers contrasts dramatically with the greys of a fractured humanity, flooding the narrative fabric with the same tension with which Picasso's *Guernica* unfolds its story. Commodified, reduced to a mere printed copy on a common outfit, the famous painting encapsulates the very loss of humanity it now adorns in fleeting trends. "One beauty parades *Guernica* on her back, while several others wear glittering scenes from the Disasters of War sequence by Francisco Goya" (Rushdie 1994, 54).

The author critically examines cultural hybridity and humanity's obsession with possessions as a substitute for meaningful connection and a healthy sense of belonging. The reader is invited to attend a most unusual auction, whose bidders are equally eccentric characters, movie stars, from "exiles, displaced persons of all sorts", to "political refugees [...] conspirators, deposed monarchs, defeated factions, poets, bandit chieftains" (Rushdie 1994, 54) and even outcasts who all compete for the iconic ruby slippers worn by Dorothy in the 1939 movie *The Wizard of Oz*. Beyond the fictional setup, the sense of futile illusion that Rushdie manages to create with his choice of auctioned object is overwhelming, as is the reason that motivates the auctioneers:

We revere the ruby slippers because we believe they can make us invulnerable to witches (and there are so many sorcerers pursuing us nowadays); because of their powers of reverse metamorphosis, their affirmation of a lost state of normalcy in which we have almost ceased to believe and to which the slippers promise us we can return; and because they shine like the footwear of the gods (Rushdie 1994, 54-55).

The words are carefully chosen to deepen the sense of shallow and moral displacement as people believe such objects can restore meaning to their lives. Probably the greatest of all, highlighting thus the irony of it being utterly misplaced, is the sense of belonging, a sense of 'home' that comes with the image of the magic slippers, the ones that took Dorothy home, along the yellow brick road, via Emerald City into the world of cinema fantasy.

'Home' has become such a scattered, damaged, various concept in our present travails. There is so much to yearn for. There are so few rainbows any more. How hard can we expect even a pair of magic shoes to work? They promised to take us *home* [...]' (Rushdie 1994, 55).

Born under the colours of cultural hybridity, Salman Rushdie overturns the traditional concept of home as a stable place that can be easily discovered as a physical point on a map; what he proposes is the story of all "translated men" who define "home" as a subjective construct shaped by memory and emotion. Through hybrid selves, "translated men" have to live with the impossibility of articulating a backward movement to an origin that no longer exists within the geography of their *homeland*, while their journey designs a forward movement to a new *hostland* that must reconcile the somewhat contradictory notions of displacement and identity. "Thanks to the infinite bounty of the Auctioneers, any of us, cat, dog, man, woman, child, can be a blue-blood; can be – as we long to be; and as, oowering in our shelters, we fear we are not – *somebody*" (Rushdie 1994, 60).

The short story *Christopher Columbus and Queen Isabella of Spain Consume Their Relationship* opens in *media res*, with almost stage-like references, namely that Columbus, whose outcast status is immediately exposed, was at the mercy of the queen with an eternity stretching between them, an unspoken gulf of power, ambition and uncertainty. "Columbus, a foreigner,

follows Queen Isabella for an eternity without entirely giving up hope” (Rushdie 1994, 62). The narrative weaves an intriguing interplay of East-West perspectives, which are both complementary and contradictory at the same time. In his relationship to the kingdom of Spain, the Genoese navigator is a man of the East who dreams of sailing to the exotic and mysterious shores of the Far East in search of its fortunes and promises of wealth; unfortunately, he lacks the financial and political support to undertake such an ambitious journey, and he remains dependent on the whims of the Western royal couple to carry out such an audacious undertaking.

He wants to tie the Queen's favour to his helmet, like a knight in a romance. (He owns no helmet.) He has hopes of cash, and of three tall ships, Niña Pinta Santa Maria; of, in fourteen hundred and ninety-two, sailing across the ocean blue (Rushdie 1994, 62).

The Queen plays with Columbus. At luncheon she promises him everything he wants; then cuts him dead later the same afternoon, looking through him as if he were a veil. [...] Toying with Columbus pleases the Queen. And pleasing the Queen, he reminds himself, may help him to achieve his purpose. [...] 'Pleasing the Queen is good.' (Rushdie 1994, 63).

The author creates a satirical and provocative reinterpretation of historical figures that ultimately tarnishes the aura of legend created by a romantic view of history that has perpetuated the portraits of the pious, powerful monarch and the idealistic explorer driven only by an insatiable desire to spread knowledge and expand existing horizons with new territories and realms. Queen and vassal alike speak the language of greed, ambition and selfishness, articulating a common story of calculated glory and wealth. The narrative describes the nature of their transactional relationship, a tapestry of dense mercantile partnership, political manoeuvring, and royal patronage. Columbus's vision of new trade routes intertwines with Queen Isabella's aspirations for expanding Spain's influence and spreading Christianity, and there is little room for altruistic ideals and genuine religious piety. Columbus knows that “pleasing the Queen is good” because he is well aware that their symbolic ‘union’ is not that of great minds but of pragmatic alliances, where mutual benefit outweighs genuine understanding or common ideals – Columbus wants to be the one who first set foot on pristine

territories, whereas Queen Isabella's Spain was in search of economic gain and territorial dominance. The man who travelled West to explore the East would soon take after his gain-driven financiers. How ironic that in the end, he could only travel westwards, as in an allegorical journey into the very heart of the world of commodified values, under the colours of the Spanish Empire, upon which the sun never sets. "He stands up, like a requited lover, like a groom on his wedding day. He opens his mouth, and what almost spills out is the bitter refusal: no. 'Yes,' he tells the heralds. Yes. I'll come" (Rushdie 1994, 68). Blending humour and biting causticness, Rushdie not only demolishes some of history's myths, but he also exposes the hypocrisy behind all colonial endeavours. As an Indian-born writer, he is unsparing in his condemnation of the great colonial powers' supposedly noble, civilising pretensions. Rushdie's writing in the 'West' section of the volume reflects his experience as an 'uprooted' person, an immigrant in Britain, confronted with new cultural and social norms that he must embrace. By placing elements of historical fiction and contemporary dilemmas on the same canvas, the author invites readers to reflect on the fluid boundaries between Eastern and Western cultures, taking them on a highly significant exploration of how cultural identities are (re)shaped in the context of globalisation and hybridisation. The West, like the left ventricle, with its robust construction, complements the heart's pulsating rhythm with an expansive and outward-looking nature often associated with its cultural heritage.

'EAST-WEST'

In the third and final section of the volume, the reader is invited to become a traveller caught in between the two chambers of the heart, drifting along the mediating bridge of the interventricular septum, the part that separates and yet connects, reflecting the experience of multiple identities. Stories such as *The Harmony of the Spheres*, *Chekov and Zulu* and *The Courter* explore the ways in which cultural influences from different parts of the world create a rich tapestry of cultural exchange and personal identity born at the threshold of civilisations and cultural heritage. The title of the first short story offers a highly symbolic key in which this final part of the volume should be interpreted, for itself is nothing but a mediating construct not only between the two points of reference but also between the promised harmony of the Universe and the turmoiled nature of

human relationships. The beautiful balance of the Universe is severely diluted in the world of the people, where disruptions lead to mutilated identities; *The Harmony of the Spheres* is all about friendship, mental disorders and the fragile nature of the human condition, and harmony becomes the pivotal word, the subject of one's intimate desire and longing, as it was "Eliot's favourite word, this – harmony" (Rushdie 1994, 79). The story acquaints us with thirty-two-year-old Eliot Crane, a writer who struggles with mental illness, author of *The Harmony of the Spheres*, and Khan, an Indian undergraduate who befriended him during Khan's final year at Cambridge University.

We were the most unlikely of friends. I liked hot weather, he preferred it grey and damp. I had a Zapata moustache and shoulder-length hair, he wore tweeds and corduroy. I was involved in fringe theatre, race relations and anti-war protests. He weekended on the country-house circuit, killing animals and birds (Rushdie 1994, 76).

Told through Khan's eyes, the story touches on some of the most important themes of human existence: friendship, loss and the fragility of human identity. It underlines the complex and dramatic relationship between human relationships and the sense of self, and Eliot Crane's eventual suicide is Rushdie's invitation to his readers to reflect on the idea that when relationships are broken, our identities can become disjointed.

But in Eliot's enormous, generously shared mental storehouse of the varieties of 'forbidden knowledge' I thought I'd found another way of making a bridge between here-and-there, between my two othernesses, my double unbelonging. In that world of magic and power there seemed to exist the kind of fusion of world-views, European Amerindian Oriental Levantine, in which I desperately wanted to believe (Rushdie 1994, 79).

Lying in between, the 'East, West' section of the volume was written with the excruciating pain that comes from a "double unbelonging", an incessant longing for a sense of belonging and the melancholy of knowing that falling between worlds is almost like a *fatwa* for all those whose roots have been quenched by different waters. After his friend's death, Khan goes through his manuscripts, only to find fragmented paragraphs of non-fictional but (auto)biographical

narrative and imagined dreams of glory. What he also discovers is the blurred line between fiction and reality that Eliot Crane has imagined for himself, both in his fiction and in his (real) life. The reference to a fusion of “European-American-Oriental-Levantine” worldviews reinforces the narrator’s desire for a harmonious integration of different perspectives, reflecting a broader theme of cultural blending present in all of Rushdie’s stories.

Rushdie’s central theme of *in-betweenness* is most heart-warmingly explored in the final short story of the volume, *The Courter*. We are in London, the great metropolis whose heart is divided by the River Thames, as if it were the interventricular septum between the West End and the East End, which serves as the backdrop for the story of a young Indian boy, probably modelled on Rushdie himself, his family and his ayah nanny, “Certainly-Mary”.

For years now I’ve been meaning to write down the story of Certainly-Mary, our ayah, the woman who did as much as my mother to raise my sisters and me, and her great adventure with her ‘courier’ in London, where we all lived for a time in the early Sixties in a block called Waverley House (Rushdie 1994, 97).

The harmony of the spheres in this story is hindered by language barriers that distort and ultimately lead to humorous (mis)communications. The plot orbits around Certainly-Mary and the building’s Eastern European porter, whom the boy’s mother, an immigrant struggling with English, mistakenly calls “Mixed-Up” instead of Mecir, his real name. “‘We’ll just call you Mixed-Up,’ I told him [...], to simplify life. ‘Mishter Mikshed-Up Mishirsh.’” (Rushdie 1994, 98). Hybridization is so much more than a language issue; it is a lived experience, a fundamental condition of modern existence, and a reflection of power dynamics and migration patterns.

It wasn’t just Certainly-Mary and my parents who had trouble with the English language. My schoolfellows tittered when in my Bombay way I said ‘brought-up’ for upbringing (as in ‘where was your brought-up?’) and ‘thrice’ for three times and ‘quarter-plate’ for side-plate and ‘macaroni’ for pasta in general (Rushdie 1994, 101).

Mary is not the only one who unwillingly brings identity confusion by misunderstanding and mispronunciation, as Mary herself has problems with the

language, and since “English was hard for Certainly-Mary, and this was a part of what drew damaged old Mixed-Up towards her. The letter *p* was a particular problem, often turning into an *f* or a *c*” (Rushdie 1994, 96). This time it is not Mecir’s name that is distorted, but the name of his profession, which transforms him from an ordinary *porter* into a proud *courter*. “So: thanks to her unexpected, somehow stomach-churning magic, he was no longer porter, but courter. [...] People called him many things, he did not mind. But this name, this courter, this he would try to be” (Rushdie 1994, 97). Courter is everything he is not, as he is shy, awkward, and hesitant; he discreetly woos Mary, using chess games as a symbolic language that the two *promessi sposi* master better than the linguistic code of their *hostland*. Rushdie thus chooses to prove that beyond any barrier of language, nationality and societal nature, there is a genuine connection that builds bridges and supports human relationships. Mixed-up is much more than a mispronounced name, it could very well act as a collective epithet that encompasses the history of all immigrants, protagonists of stories of cultural misunderstanding, identity confusion, referring to an almost organic, yet assumed dimension of the self to which hostlands unleash armies of determined antibodies. That is what happened when Mixed-Up fell victim to an irrational attack due to xenophobia or simple cruelty, which left him emotionally scarred and physically injured. Soon after, he stops playing chess with Mary and eventually quits his job as a porter. His departure envelops the story in the delicate thin air of sadness and unfulfilled expectations. Eventually, Mary made her way back to Bombay in a symbolic gesture that took the narrative perspective to its starting point as she travelled east. While retracing her steps to her *homeland*, one sees how Salman Rushdie has painted the agony of all souls who try to adapt to a different cultural milieu, only to be confronted with even a harsher sense of displacement and an incessant search for identity. In spite of all and of everything, the narrator continues his struggle with the antibodies of the *hostland* and waits for his British passport. If first refused by the beautiful Miss Rehana, now the passport grants freedom and a sense of relief, though it does not silence the dilemma that speaks the language of all immigrants:

[...] the passport did, in many ways, set me free. It allowed me to come and go, to make choices that were not the ones my father would have wished. 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*. [...] Do you hear? I refuse to choose (Rushdie 1994, 114).

CONCLUSIONS

The introspective narrative voice that guides readers through Salman Rushdie's rich storytelling explores some overarching themes fiction can probe, talking about the fragile sense of identity and belonging, all against the backdrop of fused outlooks that underscore the interconnectedness of global cultures. Blending magical realism, historical narratives and tales of self-discovery with wit and a touch of irony, the Indian-origin author uses the artistic technique of *trompe l'oeil* to create stories that are not only explorations of different cultural encounters but also celebrations of the diversity and richness that result from these unique experiences, inviting readers to look beyond the surface and question the nature of reality and identity. In the pulsating movement of the heart, the first twitch will always begin in the eastern, right-hand ventricle, the seed of life that begins, only to return, spiralling forever back to its origin.

So it was England that was breaking her heart, breaking it by not being India. London was killing her, by not being Bombay. And Mixed-Up? I wondered. Was the courter killing her, too, because he was no longer himself? Or was it that her heart, roped by two different loves, was being pulled both East and West, whinnying and rearing, like those movie horses being yanked this way by Clark Gable and that way by Montgomery Clift, and she knew that to live she would have to choose? 'I must go,' said Certainly-Mary. 'Yes, certainly. *Bas*. Enough.' (Rushdie 1994, 113).

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