LITERATUR
in Wissenschaft und Unterricht
ISSN 0024-4643

Homepage: http://LWU.uni-kiel.de

Herausgeber/Editorial Board: Rudolf Böhm, Konrad Groß, Dietrich Jäger, Horst Kruse.
Redaktion/Managing Editor: Walter T. Rix, Tel.: (0431) 880-2671 – e-mail: Rix@anglistik.uni-kiel.de
Redaktionsassistenz/Assistant to the Managing Editor: André Schwarck
Englisches Seminar der Universität Kiel, Olshausenstr. 40, D-24098 Kiel, Fax (0431) 880-1512
Verlag/Publisher: Verlag Königshausen & Neumann GmbH, Postfach 6007, D-97010 Würzburg; Leistenstraße 7, D-97082 Würzburg, Tel.: (0931) 7840700, Telefax (0931) 83620, Bundesrepublik Deutschland/Germany, e-mail: info@koenigshausen-neumann.de – Internet: www.koenigshausen-neumann.de

Bankverbindung: Deutsche Bank, Würzburg – Kto. Nr. 0 10 97 10 (BLZ 790 700 24)

Postscheck Nürnberg – Kto.-Nr. 1349 14-852 (BLZ 760 100 85)

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The Cultural Mutiny of "Translated Man" and the Ground Beneath Our Feet: Salman Rushdie and the New Literatures in English

"From Sailors' Mutiny to Cultural Mutiny," the motto of this year's Autumn Summer School on the New Literatures in English[1], was inspired by a historical incident which is generally regarded as one of the key events in Germany's long and intermittent move towards democracy. In this sense, the 1918 sailors' mutiny taking place in the main naval ports of Wilhelmshaven and Kiel and elsewhere is certainly one piece in a larger historical puzzle which, in its outcome, amounts to an outright cultural revolution, i.e. Germany's late arrival at fully-fledged modernity. The term mutiny, however, applies on a smaller scale. It implies identifiable agency from *within* a hierarchical power structure, and it is in this respect that the implication of our motto, i.e. the Cultural Mutiny of the New Literatures in English, becomes an interesting puzzle in its own right. While the casual eurocentric glance might perceive the impact of the New Literatures in English in terms of foreignness and exoticism, a more informed look reveals a highly charged combination of cultural inclusion and exlusion brought about by the historical phenomenon of imperialism and its current ambiguous aftermath, in which the increasing globalization of world culture manages to counterbalance and contain heterogeneous tendencies of postcolonial emancipation and regionalization.

In this essay, I will try to untangle this strange mixture of "insideness" and "outsideness." A suitable starting point is the observation that the idea of cultural mutiny occupies a strange position in today's discourse, as one of the few "truths" accepted by many people today is the belief that a consciousness cannot transcend the cultural conditions that have formed it. If this is so, and if the phenomenon of globalization implies an increasingly homogenized (and Westernized) cultural horizon, how can a cultural mutiny actually come about? In more general terms this question can be rephrased as "How does newness come into the world?", and this is the question put forward in the opening pages of Salman Rushdie's question-ridden novel *The Satanic Verses* (SV 8).[2] It is typical for Rushdie's mode of narration that the authorial narrator goes on to reformulate his question in a way which already contains the germ of an answer: "How is it born?", he asks and adds: "Of what fusions, translations, conjoinings is it made?" (*ibid.*) I shall follow this clue and turn to the works of Salman Rushdie in order to illuminate the notion of cultural mutiny and its implications for the New Literatures in English. Part 1, entitled "Fusions, Translations, Conjoinings", will pro-

[1] This essay was originally conceived as the opening lecture for the 5th Autumn Summer School on the New Literatures in English (17th to 23rd September 2000, Christian-Albrechts-Universität Kiel).

[2] Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*. London: Viking, 1988. All references following the abbreviation SV are to this edition. The book's religious theme is focused on the questions "What kind of idea are you?" and "What happens when you win?", while its stance is captured by the following question, which is, for once, answered: "What is the opposite of faith? Not disbelief. Too final, certain, closed. Itself a kind of belief. Doubt" (SV 92).

vide an outline of Rushdie's project of cultural mutiny as enacted in his novels up to *The Moor's Last Sigh*. The second part will then turn to Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, because after all that has happened to him and his project in the wake of the publication of *The Satanic Verses* this seems to be the book in which he reasserts his position by focusing on the grounds on which it is based. Accordingly, the second part will be called "The Ground Beneath Our Feet".

1. Fusions, Translations, Conjoinings

There can be little doubt that Salman Rushdie is the most prominent (or, as some would have it, notorious) proponent of the New Literatures in English. Currently he enjoys the dubious reputation of being "the most controversial prototype" of what has come to be called "the postcolonial subject,"[3] and this is largely due to the so-called Rushdie-affair. His work, however, sparked a certain amount of controversy even before the publication of *The Satanic Verses* in 1988.[4] His first novel, *Grimus*, published in 1975, was already criticized for "'tr[ying] on' cultures like used clothing"[5] and thus stands as the earliest example of Rushdie's interest in "fusions, translations, conjoinings." While happily transgressing the boundaries between East and West, myth and literature, and "high" and "low" genres of fiction, however, the novel remained safely within the realm of literary culture and left questions of history and politics largely untouched. In this respect, Rushdie came into his own with his next novel, *Midnight's Children*, published in 1981, and it was this trenchant fictional treatment of 20th century Indian history that established Rushdie as an eminent figure of world literature. However, in spite of the general acclaim by, rarest of occasions, readers and critics alike – the book's exceptional rank was acknowledged in 1993 by awarding it the 25th anniversary "Booker of Bookers" prize –, there were early dissenting voices worried by, on the one hand, the novel's provocative move of blurring the boundary between fictional and historical reality[6], and, on the other hand, Rushdie's use of the historically compromised English language for staging his mixture of Eastern and Western worldviews.[7] In a more general version, the latter problem is at the heart of many controversies on postcolonial literature. Vijay Mishra's and Bob Hodge's answer to the question "What is Post(-)colonialism?", for example, identifies "the category of the post-colonial itself and whether one can ever totally remove the stains of complicity with the empire that come with the 'profession' of post-colonial writer" as central concerns of the debate.[8]

It is quite typical for Rushdie and his project of meddling with the real world as inaugurated by *Midnight's Children* that he tackles this problem head-on in his next novel, *Shame*, published in 1983 and dealing with the history of Pakistan. Here, he even forgoes the distancing and thus protective device of first-person narration by a fictional character. Instead, he introduces a new mode of authorial narration in a fairly literal sense, marked by both self-consciousness and self-confidence. This narrative voice is quite specific about its problematic cultural location, especially in the face of objections from a seemingly external voice echoing the critical edge in the reception of *Midnight's Children*:

> *Outsider! Trespasser! You have no right to this subject!* [...] *Poacher! Pirate! We reject your authority. We know you with your foreign language wrapped around you like a flag: speaking about us in your forked tongue, what can you tell but lies?* (S 28, original emphasis)[9]

The narrator's justification of his position is of central importance to any understanding of Rushdie's poetics, so it deserves to be quoted at length:

> I reply with more questions: is history to be considered the property of the participants solely? In what courts are such claims staked, what boundary commissions map out the territories? Can only the dead speak? I tell myself this will be a novel of leavetaking, my last words on the East from which, many years ago, I began to come loose. I do not always believe myself when I say this. It is part of the world to which, whether I like it or not, I am still joined, if only by elastic bands. [...] The country in this story is not Pakistan, or not quite. [...] My story, my fictional country exist, like myself, at a slight angle to reality. I have found this off-centring to be necessary; but its value is, of course, open to debate. [...] I [...] am a translated man. I have been *borne across*. It is generally believed that something is always lost in translation; I cling to the notion [...] that something can also be gained. (S 28/29, original emphasis)

Here, in spite of all its dangers, the "in-betweenness" of "translated man" turns out be a key to newness and cultural mutiny. As Rushdie's novels amply demonstrate, this stance results in a new poetics that combines poetic licence with an emphatic orientation towards historical reality, and both writing and reading are enriched by playing off different cultural frames against each other.

This, however, is also where the problems begin, and *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie's most complete realization of this poetics, his tale of "translated" people in general and two "translated" men in particular, ran into deep trouble. The combination of Rushdie's embrace of authorship as a transcendent principle in a secular world – the authorial narrator of *The Satanic Verses* actually intrudes into the narrated world as God sporting the features of the novel's empirical author (cf. SV 318/409) –, Rushdie's status as a "translated man", and his chosen subject matter, i.e. the nature of religious belief as exemplified by the emergence and history of Islam, all this proved too much for our global network of seemingly

[3] E. San Juan, Jr., *Beyond Postcolonial Theory* (London: Macmillan, 1999), p. 25.

[4] For a more detailed version of the following brief survey of Rushdie's œuvre cf. Christoph Reinfandt, "'What's the Use of Stories that Aren't Even True?' Salman Rushdie as a Test Case for Literature and Literary Studies Today". *Literatur in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, 31,1 (1998), 75–92. The article also provides extensive bibliographical reference.

[5] Timothy Brennan, *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 71.

[6] Cf., for example, Uma Parameswaran, "Handcuffed to History: Salman Rushdie's Art" *Ariel*, 14,4 (1983), 34–45, esp. 45 note 9.

[7] One of the earliest attacks can be found in Feroza Jussawalla, "Beyond Indianness: The Stylistic Concerns of *Midnight's Children*", *Journal of Indian Writing in English*, 12,2 (1984), 26–47.

[8] Vijay Mishra, Bob Hodge, "What is Post(-)colonialism?" *Textual Practice*, 5,3 (1991), pp. 399–414, p. 400. For a recent view of Rushdie's position cf. Stephen Baker, *The Fiction of Postmodernity*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP 2000), pp. 163–197.

[9] S = Salman Rushdie, *Shame* [1983], London: Picador pb., 1984.

boundless communication and led to an unprecedented clash of politics and literature on a global scale.

After some false starts Rushdie managed to reassert his position in tenable terms in a brilliant essay written in 1990 and entitled "Is Nothing Sacred?" (IH 415–429)[10]. Here he fends off the charge of "secular fundamentalism" by drawing attention to the provisional character of all art, which, as an "an interim report from the consciousness of the artist [...] can never be 'finished' or 'perfect'" and thus does not deserve "being declared sacrosanct." The only privilege he claims for literature is "the privilege of being the arena of discourse, the place where the struggle of languages can be acted out" (IH 427). A similarly brilliant allegorical staging of this belief can be found in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, also published in 1990, but here Rushdie's former emphatic orientation towards reality has been bracketed in a fairytale world. With regard to *The Moors Last Sigh*, on the other hand, his first attempt at a return to his typical mode, which finally came out in 1995, many reviewers and also critics were slightly uneasy in their praise, because the novel appeared to them "like an inferior, because less engaged and less heartfelt, version of *Midnight's Children*"[11]. The comparison with *Midnight's Children* is certainly suggested both by the novels' Indian setting and by the fact that *The Moor's Last Sigh* employs a similar mode of first-person narration. The undiminuished linguistic exuberance of *The Moor's Last Sigh*, however, seems strangely out of place in a narrative whose plot rather suggests the genres of elegy or cautionary tale but which lacks the emancipatory optimism of Rushdie's earlier books. In the light of this development it seemed for a while as if Rushdie's project of cultural mutiny had ended with an outright victory of culture leading to resignation on the part of the mutineer. His next novel, however, suggested that amidst all divisions he had regained some ground beneath his feet, enabling him to strive for further fusions, translations, and conjoinings.

2. The Ground Beneath Our Feet

In spite or perhaps because of the fact that the term "culture" is a top aspirant for the evasive concept award, it seems to become ever more important in academic and non-academic discourse today. High and low cultures merge or battle, subcultures proliferate, and the humanities, the social sciences and even "hard" sciences succumb to a "cultural turn" which puts everything in cultural and thus relative perspective.[12] In spite of all internal differentiation, however, there seems to be no way out of the overall prison-house of culture in its most general sense as formulated in the tentative agreement that culture can be understood as "collectively structured meaning" which constitutes the social world and orientates human behaviour.[13] Furthermore, and in a more sinister sense, untranscendable culture finds its empirical realization in the historical phenomenon of globalization. Our world is what our increasingly homogenized culture tells us it is. Metaphorically speaking, culture is the ground beneath our feet. Or is it?

Ever alert to the cultural climate of the present, Salman Rushdie satirizes this state of affairs mercilessly in his millenium novel *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, published in 1999. Still using the re-established device of first-person narrative, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* is, in spite of the typically Rushdiean encyclopaedic approach, more focused than its predecessor, and the basis for this renewed thrust seems to lie in a healthy dose of regained optimism. "What's a 'culture'?", asks the narrator, the photographer Umeed Merchant, commonly called Rai, directly addressing the reader:

> Look it up. 'A group of micro-organisms grown in a nutrient substance under controlled conditions.' A squirm of germs on a glass slide is all, a laboratory experiment calling itself a society. Most of us wrigglers make do with life on that slide; we even agree to feel proud of that 'culture.' Like slaves voting for slavery or brains for lobotomy, we kneel down before the god of all moronic microorganisms and pray to be homogenized or killed or engineered; we promise to obey. (GBF 95)[14]

The novel, however, is seemingly not about these mediocre beings but about the life and times of the famous rock and pop stars Vina Apsara and Ormus Cama, two characters who exemplify the possiblility of breaking out of your cultural frame or even of breaking on through to the other side, wherever that may be. They manage to use the conventions of globalized popular culture as a means of authentic expression and cultural diagnosis, and they reach unprecedented heights of stardom on these grounds. At first glance it seems that a vision of truly authentic popular culture provides the fictional ground beneath their feet. "[I]n the whole half-century-long history of rock music", Rai observes,

> there is a small number of bands [...] who steal into your heart and become part of how you see the world, how you tell and understand the truth, even when you're old and deaf and foolish [...] VTO was one of those bands. And Ormus had the vision, but Vina had the voice, and it was the voice that did it, it is always the voice (GBF 157).

But is that really all there is to the book, is it just a boisterous celebration of "good" popular culture? Let us return to Rai's musings on culture. In the very next sentence, he points to Vina and Ormus as exceptions to the rules of his germs-on-a-slide theory of culture, but here his metaphor goes both colloquially and consciously astray. He says: "But if Vina and Ormus were bacteria too, they were a pair of bugs who wouldn't take life lying down". Instead, they go in for what Rai calls "auto-couture", i.e. "the creation of two bespoke identities, tailored for the wearers by themselves" (GBF 95). However, the intrusion of the slightly out-of-focus metaphor of the bugs undermines this heroism of self-

[10] IH = Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands. Essays and Criticism 1981–1991* [1991]. London: Granta/Penguin, 2nd ed. 1992.

[11] Cf. Catherine Cundy, *Salman Rushdie*. Contemporary World Writers (Manchester/New York: Manchester UP 1996), pp. 110–117, p. 115. For a more positive assessment of the novel cf. D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke, *Salman Rushdie*. Macmillan Modern Novelists (Basingstoke/London: Macmillan 1998), pp. 133–147.

[12] See, for example, David R. Hiley, James F. Bohman, Richard Shusterman (eds.), *The Interpretive Turn: Philosophy, Science, Culture*. Ithaca/London: Cornell UP, 1991.

[13] The quote is from a German overview of concepts of culture in various disciplines which sums up the most widely accepted understanding of culture in the quoted English formula. Cf. Siegfried J. Schmidt, *Kognitive Autonomie und soziale Orientierung: Konstruktivistische Bemerkungen zum Zusammenhang von Kognition, Kommunikation, Medien und Kultur.* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1994), pp. 203–216, 203.

[14] GBF = Salman Rushdie, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*. New York: Henry Holt, 1999.

fashioning by relating it to the overall structure of the novel. In fact, the uneasy relationship between conformity with culture as epitomized by Rai, taking it as it comes and capturing bits and pieces of it in photographs, and rebellion against it as epitomized by popular culture heroes Vina and Ormus is at the heart of the narrative situation in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet.* It is staged in the metaphor of bugs which pester the narrator literally and metaphorically throughout the book (cf. GBF 15 and *passim*): literal bugs of all kinds keep on transcending the "frontier of his skin", while the metaphorical bugs Vina and Ormus make him tell the story through the fascination of their self-fashioning personalities (and, one should add, through his secret love for Vina). The link between the literal and the metaphorical is provided by one of Ormus Cama's famous compositions, entitled "At the Frontier of the Skin" (cf. GBF 55 and *passim*), as well as by the novel as a whole. The skin of Rai's as well as many other people's cultural self-satisfaction is pierced by the sheer existential brilliance of Vina and Ormus, whose cultural mutiny, however, while positively affecting many people's lives, fails to bring about lasting personal happiness for themselves. For some strange reason, their passionate, life-long love, though undoubtedly true and at the heart of their creativity, never leads to lasting personal fulfilment.

So what is wrong with the ostensible heroes of the novel? The overall structure of the book suggests that in spite of their programmatic frame-breaking and in spite of the narrator's awed enthusiasm about it, Ormus and Vina are the victims of the dangers of that late-twentieth-century cultural stance of "taking a stand while lacking a centre"[15]. Their self-fashioning, while resulting in admirable cultural productivity, is entirely outward-directed and self-contained, leaving a gap at its centre which cannot even be filled by their love. Instead, culture rushes into this vacuum, it is, as Rai observes, "an amorphousness in search of shapes" (GBF 382). Vina takes on as many styles and stances as there are situations which seem to call for radical non-conformity (cf. GBF 458), and at the same time Rai observes how she gets "caught up in the gnaw and churning of the western world's spiritual hunger," becoming "a tough shell over insides full of mush" (GBF 337). Finally, she is literally swallowed by the ground beneath her feet in a huge earthquake in Mexico, and this seems to be a metaphor for the cultural tumult of the contemporary Western world. Ormus Cama, on the other hand, and in spite of all his seemingly frame-breaking creativity, appears to Rai as "incarcerated [...], enclosed within [his] own bod[y] by the circumstances of [his life]" (GBF 138). Accordingly, he suffers from a kind of double vision, leaving him increasingly unsure of the world and his position in it (cf. GBF 40 and 325ff.). Ultimately, he succumbs to madness and prefers, again in Rai's words, "another version of the world over his own" (GBF 516). Ironically, however, historical references make it clear that Ormus's "otherworld", of which Rai also catches a glimpse later on, is the reader's world while the "real" world of the novel is a parallel universe in which, for example, John F. Kennedy was not murdered and Richard Nixon never gained the presidency. As with the founding works of Rushdie's œuvre, namely the sequence from *Midnight's Children* to *The Satanic Verses*, this strategy prompts the reader to question the boundary between

[15] The formula has been applied to Rushdie himself. Cf. Kathryn Hume, "Taking a Stand While Lacking a Centre: Rushdie's Postmodern Politics". *Philological Quarterly,* 74,2 (1995), pp. 209–230.

fiction and history, a prompting which was not as centrally staged in *Haroun* and *The Moor's Last Sigh.*

Rai's attempt at an explanation for all this and for his own life's very special relationship with Vina's and Ormus's fates focuses in typically Rushdiean fashion on every minute detail of their family background. There is a danger here: with regard to *The Moor's Last Sigh*, for example, one reviewer complained that "for the first 100 pages you can't see [the protagonist's] childhood for the family trees"[16], and in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* there are three protagonists whose childhoods need sorting out. Thanks to its energetic thrust, however, the novel fares better than its predecessor, but the reader's patience is sometimes stretched. What emerges from these intertwined family histories is the theme of cultural disorientation and dislocation leading to parental suicides, patricide, murders, financial and moral disasters. It is impossible to summarize these stories here – there are some ten or fifteen fully-fledged plots for "normal" novels within *The Ground Beneath Her Feet.* However, a mere list of the cultural ingredients of this explosive brew may serve to illustrate the novel's claim to cultural universality: Vina Apsara is half-Greek and half-Indian but born in the U.S.A.. She spends her early years in the United States before family circumstances necessitate her move to India where she arrives at the age of 12. Ormus Cama's father, Sir Darius Xerxes Cama, is an anglophile Parsi Indian with an amateur scholar's interest in mythology, Greek and otherwise. Unfortunately, his career in Indian law is based on fake English documents. Rai's erstwhile loving and thoroughly secular parents, two architects involved in shaping Bombay's contemporary face, are torn apart when the development of the city inspires contrasting visions in them: nostalgic and idealistic in Rai's father Vivvy who nevertheless ruins everything through his penchant for gambling, and materialistic and progressive in Rai's mother Ameer who is perfectly willing to sacrifice the family home and a huge area of old Bombay for the profiteering "Cuffe Parade development plan".

What it all amounts to is that neither of the main characters really has secure emotional and cultural ground beneath his or her feet, they are two "translated" men and one "translated" woman. Accordingly, "[d]isorientation: loss of the East" (GBF 5) is one of the constant themes of Rai's narrative. In chapter 6, entitled "Disorientations," he enlarges upon this topic in universal terms with religious overtones:

> Disorientation is loss of the East. Ask any navigator: the east is what you sail by. Lose the east and you lose your bearings, your certainties, your knowledge of what is and what may be, perhaps even your life. Where was that star you followed to that manger? That's right. The east orients. That's the official version. The language says so, and you should never argue with the language. (GBF 176)

The sentence immediately preceding this passage, however, points to the potential ambiguity of language in one of the many puns of a book in which "punning is the engine"[17]. A film magnate with a severe stammer comments on the outcome of the police investigation into the burning down of the Merchant family home on Cuffe Parade: "Foo fool fully Exxon Exxon exonerated" (*ibid.*). So there is both

[16] Tom Shone, "Mother Knows Best." *The Spectator*, September 9 (1995), p. 38.

[17] Cf. James Wood, "An Exile's Sigh for Home." *Guardian Weekly,* April 18 (1999), p. 28.

truth and deceit in language. It is in the way that you use it and there is room for doubt. Accordingly, Rai goes on to speculate:

> What if the whole deal – orientation, knowing where you are, and so on – what if it's all a scam? What if all of it [...] is just the biggest, most truly global, and centuries-oldest piece of brainwashing? Suppose that it's only when you dare to let go that your real life begins? [...] But just imagine you did it. You stepped off the edge of the earth [...] and there it was: the magic valley [...] It feels better than "belonging" [...] (GBF 176f.)

In the light of these ideas he calls Vina, Ormus and himself "three kings of Disorient," only to observe devastatingly that he is "the only one who lived to tell the tale" (GBF 177). Again the question occurs: What is the difference?

Towards the end of his digression on cultural theory, Rai points out that for Ormus and Vina "music, popular music, was the key that unlocked the door for them, the door to magic lands" (GBF 95). Sticking to his chosen imagery of germs and bugs he goes on to quote possible objections against this path to freedom:

> In India it is often said that the music I'm talking about is precisely one of those viruses with which the almighty West has infected the East, one of the great weapons of cultural imperialism [...] Why then offer up paeans to culture traitors like Ormus Cama, who betrayed his roots and spent his pathetic lifetime pouring the trash of America into our children's ears? [...] Why defend impurity, that vice, as if it were a virtue? (*ibid.*)

It is perhaps significant that these questions are not explicitly answered by Rai. Instead he resorts to the polemical side of his imagery and retorts: "Such are the noisome slithers of the enslaved micro-organisms, twisting and hissing as they protect the inviolability of their sacred homeland, the glass laboratory slide" (*ibid.*). This evasion implies that there might be a downside to a cultural mutiny in terms of Western popular culture after all, and Vina's and Ormus's peculiar combination of success and unhappiness illustrates this without spelling it out.

Is there an alternative? This is where Rai comes in as the third hero of the novel. Unlike Vina and Ormus he professes to be "the under-attached type" (GBF 78), although his narrative, full of nostalgic attachment as it is, belies this self-image to a certain extent. Nevertheless, he conforms to a theory of "outsideness" outlined in his own narrative. Sir Darius Xerxes Cama, Ormus's father, puts it like this: "But what about *outsideness*? What about all that which is beyond the pale, above the fray, beneath notice? [...] The only people who see the whole picture [...] are the ones who step out of the frame." (GBF 42f.) As we have seen, Vina and Ormus stepped out of the frame all right, but they were certainly not beneath notice. Rai, on the other hand, talks about his "knack for invisibility" (GBF 14), which aids him in his professional life as a photographer and in his private life, too, where in his love for Vina he is a kind invisible shadow to Ormus. Another crucial symptom of his "outsideness" is what he calls "the gift of irreligion, of growing up without bothering to ask people what gods they held dear, assuming that in fact, like my parents, they weren't interested in gods, and that this uninterest was 'normal.' You may argue", he adds defiantly, "that the gift was a poisoned chalice, but even if so, that's a cup from which I would happily drink again" (GBF 70).

In spite of this deeply ingrained secularism, his own story has to wait while, as he puts it punningly, "the Gods are occupying centre stage," and slightly impiously he adds: "But after the stars have finished all their tragic dying, the extras come on stage [...] and we get to eat up all the fucking food" (GBF 341). This seemingly casual remark sums up the plot of the novel quite adequately: framed in chapters 1 and 15 by Vina's death on Valentine's day 1989 (also the day Khomeini issued his fatwa, so there is certainly an interesting defamiliarized and perhaps even allegorized autobiographical dimension to the book), Rai's narrative tells the family- and life-stories of Ormus, Vina and Rai from 1937 to 1989 in chapters 2 to 14. After chapter 15, however, in chapters 16 to 18, there is a story of life-after-death with Rai increasingly taking centrestage and eating up all the fucking food: he is the one unexpectedly reaching the state of happiness denied to his heroes.

The main ingredients of this happiness are love and art. After his life-long secret love for Vina, Rai unexpectedly finds the love of his life in Mira. Forced by social and cultural circumstances into the flourishing business of Vina-impersonators, Mira meets Rai when she is summoned by Ormus who finds her act close enough to Vina to believe in her return from the dead, or rather in his ability to resurrect her. Ormus's belief, however, is mistaken, and the comeback of VTO Mk. 2 with Mira impersonating Vina is on the verge of failure until Mira unfolds the full force of her personality. Ultimately Mira manages to resurrect VTO by simply being her powerful self and moves on, after Ormus's death (he is mysteriously shot, Lennon-like, in front of his appartment by a figure strangely resembling Vina) to a highly successful solo career. Reaching Vina's heights of artistic brilliance, she nevertheless manages to do so on very different grounds, and the same goes for her relationship with Rai. While Vina, ever the media personality, is perfectly able to do a professorial twenty minutes on "trust as an aspect of modernity" – Rai remembers her bitingly as "holding some sort of honorary chair in one of the newer disciplines" (GBF 338) –, she lives a life of instability without any secure emotional bonding. Mira, on the other hand, "is only interested in that rarest of all emotional contracts between men and women: total engagement, total fidelity, instantly" (GBF 531), and it is in this version of the issue of trust that Rai has difficulties to keep up his belief in when Mira is on tour with Ormus (cf, GBF 540f., 563). It does work out, however, and the novel ends on a very positive note in this respect.

Love in the emancipated sense favoured by the novel in a fairly realistic way, however, takes two fully developed personalities, whatever their unavoidable shortcomings. In Rai's case, we have a fairly complete picture, albeit as presented by himself. This is where the matter of art comes in. As with all of Rushdie's work, and most markedly so with his first-person narrators whose existence in the fictional world can be observed by the reader, the act of narrating itself becomes an act of existential heroism. Accordingly, somewhere near the middle of his Ormus-and-Vina story, in a chapter aptly entitled "More Than Love", Rai sums up the subject of his narrative as follows, employing the typically Rushdiean mode of hinting at answers by putting questions: "Death is more than love or is it. Art is more than love or is it. Love is more than death or art, or not. This is the subject. This is the subject. This is it" (GBF 202). With regard to the art component in this matrix it is important to note that Rai shares the fate of Rushdie's earlier first-person narrators in *Midnight's Children* and *The Moor's Last*

Sigh: he is rhetorically not so very far away from his god-like authorial creator. But unlike his markedly non-realistic predecessors with their extraordinary features and capabilities, Rai strikingly insists on being a completely unexceptional person who is nevertheless engaged in an Rushdiean act of narrating. Everyone can (and should) do it, the novel seems to suggest, and while there is still some magic to the power of narrative, the narrator is no longer magical realism incarnate. Instead, a realistic sense of the cultural embedding of all narrators/authors is copied into the text so that the power of narrative *within* culture is staged in a fictional universe parallel to but not unlike the reader's. This is a risky move, and at times Rai seems an implausible source for many of his elaborate statements, indicating a severe case of character usurpation by authorial voice. But then, its many fantastic episodes make it abundantly clear that *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* is not a realistic novel, so aesthetic misgivings about Rai's stature as a (realistic) character should perhaps be overcome by an acknowledgement of his functional status within the novel's inclusive mode of postmodern cultural allegory.

As it stands, Rai's statement is based on a marked development in his aesthetic stance. From the "invisible" and more or less passive photographer who "can spontaneously generate new meaning from the putrifiying carcase of what is the case" (GBF 22), as he himself puts it, he moves on to a fully-fledged theory of the creative imagination based on his secularism and thus formed in opposition to religion. "Systems of belief" are for him "flimsy, unpersuasive examples of the literary genre known as 'unreliable narration'" while "the only leaps of faith [he is] capable of are those required by the creative imagination, by fictions that don't pretend to be fact, and so end up telling the truth" (GBF 123). From this there follow two statements of faith. With regard to art Rai pronounces unequivocally and in line with Rushdie's stance in "Is Nothing Sacred?": "The god of the imagination is the imagination. The law of the imagination is, whatever works. The law of the imagination is not universal truth, but the work's truth, fought for and won" (GBF 447). With regard to life in general and culture at large he arrives at a recognition of what he calls "the godless equivalent of redemption; call it self-respect" (GBF 467). It is, however, crucial to the outlook of the novel that all these serious pronouncements are not made by a morally or otherwise exceptional person. Instead, Rai is quite conscious of his weaknesses and faults and, what is more, in no position to claim a high moral ground because of a black spot in his biography – he let pictures taken by a murdered photographer pass as his own after retrieving them from the dead body under mortal danger himself (cf. GBF 244f.). In the light of all this Rai turns out to be aptly named after all: his real name, Umeed, means hope (GBF 19), but what hope there is is certainly hampered by the nitty-gritty of life as hinted at by his family name, Merchant. What remains is just a ray of hope. But then, Rai, spelt with an "i", also means prince (GBF 18). But then again, on a different level in keeping with the novel's musical orientation, rai is also a type of Northern African music, and a politically supressed one at that (GBF 573).

Obviously the novel tries hard to do justice to the human condition by positing an unidealistic ideal on the model of its own (and Rushdie's) theory of the imagination and of fiction. What is aimed at is honesty within the parametres of the given, acknowledging the fact that more often than not "[H]onesty is not the best policy in life", as Rai observes, pointedly adding "Only, perhaps, in art" (GBF 213). On the whole, the novel's immanent theology of self-respect serves

as a kind of emancipatory regulative idea(l) and as an idealistic insurance policy against the danger of "losing our grip on our humanity" (GBF 391) that Rai diagnoses in contemporary globalized culture. At the centre of Rai's vision of humanity is love, which implies roots, though, as he realizes, not necessarily "the ones we are born with, [...] but the ones we put down in our own chosen soil, the you could say radical selections we make for ourselves" (GBF 414). While not the real thing, i.e. life and love, itself, art is certainly the next best thing, and Rai explicitly combines the history of Western art since the Renaissance (cf. GBF 386), the non-Western traditions of oral storytelling (cf. GBF 387), and a truly global network of mythical tales with Orpheus featuring most prominently in order to arrive at his own artistic endeavour; an honest, self-conscious and self-confident narrative which conforms to the standards of Rushdie's poetics of the novel. Faced as it is by a paradoxical world of simultaneous cultural differentiation and integration, such a project will always be open to criticism from any number of less inclusive perspectives. However, an open-minded look could reveal that in spite of all divisions there might indeed be a common ground of humanity beyond or beneath culture, and in order to facilitate such an open-minded look we need communicative spheres which can accomodate them. Though art and literature are likely candidates in this respect, they need not be the only ones. A recent article in the *New York Review of Books* argued persuasively that ideas which are currently often taken to be compromised by their Western ancestry, such as, for example, individual liberty or the power of reason, can in fact also be found in other cultural traditions and have been marginalized in a long-standing discursive practice of conferring and forming identity by contrast.[18] In addition to all projects of postcolonial emancipation, the integrative and, in the long run, similarly emancipatory potential of unearthing and cultivating this common ground would indeed be a worthwhile cultural mutiny, which has already been instigated by the New Literatures in English. It will be an arduous and long process, but a quote from Amartya Sen's article in the *New York Review of Books* provides a neat summary of the argument behind Rushdie's regained optimism and a fitting conclusion to this essay:

> [O]nce we recognize that many ideas that are taken to be quintessentially Western have also flourished in other civilizations, we also see that these ideas are not as culture-specific as is sometimes claimed. We need not begin with pessimism, at least on this ground, about the prospect of reasoned humanism in the world.[19]

Darmstadt *Christoph Reinfandt*

[18] Amartya Sen, "East and West: The Reach of Reason". *New York Review of Books*, July 20 (2000), pp. 33–38.

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 36.

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