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## FORUM

### "What's the Use of Stories that Aren't Even True?" Salman Rushdie as a Test Case for Literature and Literary Studies Today

*unnaturalism*, the only real ism of these  
back-to-front and jabberwocky days  
*The Moor's Last Sigh*<sup>1</sup>

The title question of this article is taken from *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (cf. H 20/22/27),<sup>2</sup> Salman Rushdie's immediate literary response to the "affair" to which his name has become indissolubly chained.<sup>3</sup> In the book, the question motivates a plot which relies on fairy-tale conventions and leads to a happy ending that is unlikely or even impossible in a real world of irretractable *fatwas*. The fairy tale itself acknowledges this and has one of its characters point out: "Happy endings must come at the end of something [...] If they happen in the middle of a story, or an adventure, or the like, all they do is cheer things up for a little while." (H 202) Accordingly, an acknowledgement of the open-endedness of reality and history as opposed to the limits of human experience lies at the heart of the poetics of Rushdie's novels, all of which, except for, ironically, *The Satanic Verses*, end with the death of the narrator and/or central protagonist(s). It is obvious that there must be more to a literature of this kind than just the modest claim of cheering things up for a little while, especially if it is so seriously engaged with history, politics and religion and their effects on individual lives. Thus, Rushdie's fiction, its reception, and the extraordinary controversy it has generated may serve as useful indicators of what is held to be the place and function of literature today. The present article will trace Rushdie's career in the light of these ideas, while Rushdie's latest novel provides the frame for doing so.

In 1995 Salman Rushdie published *The Moor's Last Sigh*, his first full-length novel after Khomeini's *fatwa*. Reviews were largely favourable, the book went on to be shortlisted for the 1995 Booker Prize in due course and finally won the 1995 Whitbread Novel of the Year Award. However, many reviews show signs of discomfort, complaining about passages "frantic and overwritten"<sup>4</sup> and pointing to the risks Rushdie takes in employing "garrulousness", "melodrama", "hyperbole", "explanation", and "writing in pictures" as the central ingredients of his technique.<sup>5</sup> All in all, a complex tension emerges: although most reviewers sympathize with Rushdie's espousal of hybridity and pluralism on the content

<sup>1</sup> Salman Rushdie. *The Moor's Last Sigh* [1995], London: Vintage pb., 1996: 5, original emphasis. Page references preceded by MLS are to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> H = Salman Rushdie. *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* [1990], London: Granta/Penguin pb., 1991.

<sup>3</sup> For a reasonably balanced sketch of the issues involved see Horton 1993.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Coetzee 1996: 13.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Wood 1995.

level, they have some misgivings with regard to the structural viability of these concepts. Conceding that *The Moor's Last Sigh*, like Rushdie's previous works, "is a novel with large ambitions composed on a large scale," J.M. Coetzee finds its "architecture [...] disappointing,"<sup>6</sup> and the review in *The Times Literary Supplement* ends on an unequivocal negative note: "But, more intentionally disorganized than complex, more funny than compassionate, more bitter than moving, *The Moor's Last Sigh* lacks a central logic."<sup>7</sup>

It is obvious that the idea(s) of hybridity and pluralism on the one hand and the demand for a central logic on the other hand are conflicting notions which cannot be easily reconciled. Even so, it might be that the central logic of *The Moor's Last Sigh* can be found on its outside edge, that is in its relationship to Rushdie's development as a writer under extremely unusual circumstances. The novel itself suggests such a reading against the background of his complete oeuvre by consistently employing his previous novels as intertexts: *Midnight's Children*, the bedrock of Rushdie's standing as an eminent writer of the emerging "postmodern" canon, figures most prominently,<sup>8</sup> and the close relationship between *Midnight's Children* and *The Moor's Last Sigh* is strongly emphasized by thematic (→ Bombay) and formal (→ first person narration) similarities. On the other hand, there are (not quite as many) references to *The Satanic Verses*, *Shame* and *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*<sup>9</sup> so that *The Moor's Last Sigh* can surely be read as a kind of stock-taking on Rushdie's part. The present article will follow this lead and trace Rushdie's career in the light of the conflict which came to a head in the so-called "Rushdie affair" but had developed on a less existential level much earlier, that is the conflict between Rushdie's status as one of the cosmopolitan champions of Western postmodernism on the one hand and his status as a non-Western, postcolonial writer on the other hand.<sup>10</sup>

### 1) "I must peel off history, the prison of the past." (MLS 136)

This statement by Moraes Zogoiby, nicknamed "the Moor," the self-conscious narrator and central protagonist of *The Moor's Last Sigh*, conveniently sums up a central impulse of Rushdie's writing<sup>11</sup> after his first novel, *Grimus* (1975), an interesting experiment in establishing a timeless cosmopolitan cultural space as the

<sup>6</sup> Coetzee, 14.

<sup>7</sup> Pamuk 1995, 4. See also Cundy 1996, whose postscript (110-117) views *The Moor's Last Sigh* as a deeply problematic work.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. MLS 100, 163, 175/6, 189, 264, 273, 280, 295, 341, 353, 355/6, 363, 374.

<sup>9</sup> For *The Satanic Verses* cf. MLS 329, 337, 351, 364, 373. The intertextual links between *Midnight's Children*, *The Satanic Verses* and *The Moor's Last Sigh* will be explored in detail in part three of this paper. References to *Shame* (cf. MLS 33/43, 184/226/408/409) and *Haroun* (cf. MLS 350) are more in passing and indirect.

<sup>10</sup> A groundbreaking study of these conflicting attitudes in Rushdie's oeuvre is Brennan 1989. See also During 1987; Fletcher 1994; Parnell 1996.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Price 1994.

setting of a novel, failed to convince readers and reviewers alike.<sup>12</sup> Keeping many of *Grimus'* stylistic characteristics Rushdie's next novel, *Midnight's Children* (1981), attempted an encompassing treatment of 20th century Indian history and was immediately successful. It won the prestigious Booker Prize, met an enthusiastic worldwide readership,<sup>13</sup> and has subsequently established itself as a "post-modern classic", serving, for instance, as a prime example of historiographic metafiction in Linda Hutcheon's influential explications of the poetics and politics of postmodernism.<sup>14</sup> The eminence of the novel was finally acknowledged by awarding it the 25th anniversary "Booker of Bookers" prize in 1993.<sup>15</sup>

The reasons for this outstanding success can be found in the novel's subtle balance of reader-friendliness and aesthetic ambition. *Midnight's Children* combines the narrative thrust and subjective appeal of the fictional autobiography – from a Western perspective the novel can be read as the parody of a *Bildungsroman* – with the playful digressiveness of Indian traditions of oral narrative. The latter, however, does not only play up to a Western audience's interest in the exotic (although this may have contributed decisively to the book's worldwide success) but also to the alternative Western tradition of anti-illusionistic, anti-realistic novel writing originating in Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605-15), finding its supreme early realization in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759-67), and finally attaining prominence in the early 20th century.<sup>16</sup> Rushdie himself has hinted at this connection: "One of the strange things about oral narrative – which I did look at very closely before writing *Midnight's Children* – is that you find there a form which is thousands of years old, and yet which had all the methods of the modernist novel."<sup>17</sup> Taking its cue from this intercultural link,<sup>18</sup> *Midnight's Children* displays a highly sophisticated manipulation of narrative technique, moving swiftly between a) first-person and third-person narration and b) retrospective or sometimes magical narratorial omniscience on the one hand, a representation of immediate experience on the other hand, and finally a discursive inquiry into the problematic nature of narrative in general. All in all, the book

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Brennan 1989, 70/71: "*Grimus* fails even though it is carried off with professional brilliance simply because it lacks a *habitus* [...] It doesn't know where it is and 'tries on' cultures like used clothing." See also Harrison 1992, 30-40; Cundy 1996, 12-25.

<sup>13</sup> On the reception of *Midnight's Children* see Brennan 1989, 79ff.; Fokkema 1990; Smith 1989; Börner 1986.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Hutcheon 1988/1989. See also Alexander 1990 and Lee 1990.

<sup>15</sup> For the implications of the "Booker of Bookers" with regard to Rushdie's position between postmodernism and postcolonialism cf. Huggan 1994.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Hawes 1993.

<sup>17</sup> Salman Rushdie in an interview in Adelaide 1984, quoted in Shepherd 1985, 184. As Rushdie points primarily to the narrator entering his story in order to comment or digress, he seems to use the tag "modernist" in a wider sense which includes "postmodernist" writing techniques.

<sup>18</sup> This oral quality is clearly marked in the text by the presence of Saleem's addressee (and prospective lover) Padma, whose "what-happened-nextism" (MC 39; cf. note 21) is the central propelling force of the narrative.

reads like an encyclopaedia of the storyteller's art and a deft integration of the broadest possible scope of influences from Eastern and Western cultures.<sup>19</sup>

In fact, a transgression of boundaries seems to be the novel's central feature.<sup>20</sup> Its narrator-protagonist, Saleem Sinai, hovers quite comfortably between the conflicting demands of realistic (i.e., sociological and psychological) plausibility and a clearly recognizable if highly complex representative function: the son of a low-caste Hindu woman and an Englishman, but raised, because of a baby swap, by fairly well-to-do middle-class Muslim parents, he is in many respects "mysteriously handcuffed to history" (MC 9).<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, he and his 1000 fellow midnight's children<sup>22</sup> encapsulate the whole of Indian reality in "a kind of metaphor of hope and possibility [...] A metaphor of hope and possibility denied."<sup>23</sup> Again, the overall number of 1001 children who have supernatural abilities contrasts with Rushdie's calculation of a 'realistic' number<sup>24</sup> and the sociologically convincing positioning of the children in Indian society. All of this makes Rushdie's novel an often-cited example of 'magic realism',<sup>25</sup> although his relationship to this 'genre' of international "postmodern" fiction is not unreserved and repeats the pattern of a double allegiance to Eastern/postcolonial (> magic realism) and Western/(post-)modernist impulses (> surrealism).<sup>26</sup>

Whether this double allegiance can be interpreted as an affirmative homogenizing integration of postcolonial counterforces by the mainstream of ("post-") modern Western culture, or, contrariwise, as a critical transgression of Western horizons of meaning towards a complete acknowledgement of a non-Western Other depends on the political and/or cultural affiliation of the interpreter. However, the

condemnation of Rushdie by the Islamic post-colonial world raises interesting questions about 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.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Scanning the proliferating research into Rushdie's use of intertextuality Fletcher 1994 (11/12) lists the following references for *Midnight's Children*: classical Indian allegory, ancient Indian epics (*Mahabharata*, *Kathasaritsagara*, *Ramayana*), the *Arabian Nights*, the Genesis, Snow White, the tradition of descent-into-hell episodes, Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, the British novel of Empire, Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, Garcia-Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Grass's *The Tin Drum*, Bombay cinema, and Indian history in its formal sense. See also Phillips 1989.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Nünning 1993, Reinfandt 1997.

<sup>21</sup> MC = Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* [1981]. London: Picador pb., 1982.

<sup>22</sup> That is, those children also born on the "precise instant of India's arrival at independence" (MC 9).

<sup>23</sup> Rushdie 1985, 6.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 5.

<sup>25</sup> For a general introduction to the concept of 'magic(al) realism' cf. Slemon 1988 and D'haen 1993, 34-41, for its relationship to *Midnight's Children* cf. Harrison 1992, 55-60.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Cundy 1996, 96-99.

<sup>27</sup> Mishra/Hodge 1991, 400. One of the earliest attacks on Rushdie's use of English in *Midnight's Children* can be found in Jussawala 1984, that is, well before the *Satanic Verses* controversy brought the issue to the attention of a wider public.

Accordingly, the whole spectrum of politically motivated Rushdie criticism seems to indicate that the special significance of his writing does not lie in being either "postmodern" or "postcolonial" but rather in being both or being in-between. In this, Rushdie may be fairly representative of the postcolonial condition in general, but his worldwide fame and the fact that he has made his home in England make him an easy target for accusations of 'complicity'.<sup>28</sup> While this may amount to a lack of political correctness in some circles, it does not necessarily imply a lack of political commitment, and it is the novels which bear out the sincerity of Rushdie's engagement by consistently transgressing the boundaries between fiction and 'reality'.

Most strikingly, it is *Midnight's Children* which first manages to do this from *within* the otherwise clearly demarcating textual feature of first-person narration. Focusing on the contrast between Saleem Sinai's individual and overtly fictional account of Indian history on the one hand and a politically monopolized "India, the new myth – a collective fiction in which anything was possible" (MC 112) on the other hand, the book culminates in the years of Indira Gandhi's Emergency Rule (1975-1977). It is here that the central image of Saleem's narrative, the highly ambitious and idealistic if already compromised Midnight Children's Conference, is finally destroyed by the historically authentic programme of forced sterilization which Emergency Rule had in store for India's poor.<sup>29</sup> In the end, all of Saleem's hopes are shattered by the political power of Indira Gandhi, who is also responsible for his impotence and physical destruction. Saleem stage-manages this overlap of history and his story by introducing the figure of "the Widow" as a suspense-creating device.<sup>30</sup> After a number of vague anticipatory hints (cf. MC 181ff.) it is Saleem's surrealist fever fantasy (MC 207ff.) which firmly establishes "the Widow" as a portentous mythical figure looming in the background of his narrative. Her 'real' identity is finally disclosed when the plot reaches its disillusioning climax (MC 421), shortly before narrating time and narrated time converge. While this transgression of the fiction-reality boundary has occasionally triggered a hostile critical response,<sup>31</sup> it nevertheless lies at the heart of the novel's design. At the end of his narrative Saleem falls to pieces mentally and physically, literally and figuratively, but the text he created will endure, both in the story world, where the offspring of the midnight's children and especially Saleem's "son" Aadam<sup>32</sup> (whose actual father is Saleem's *alter ego* Shiva) live on, and in the world of the reader who has just finished a novel called *Midnight's*

<sup>28</sup> For an enlightening discussion of the issues at stake see the survey of positions in Fletcher 1994, 3-10.

<sup>29</sup> Saleem himself emphasizes this short circuit between the historical and the metaphorical dimensions of his narrative by coining a neologism: "Sperectomy: the draining-out of hope." (MC 437) In addition to being deprived of their procreativity and hope the midnight's children are also deprived of their supernatural powers.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Batty 1987.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Parameswaran 1983, 45, note 9: "Rushdie's interpolation as to the identification of the Widow with Mrs Indira Gandhi [...] is in poor taste and is also an artistic weakness. Such explicit parallels are better left out of a novel, and left to critics."

<sup>32</sup> Towards the end of his story Saleem states explicitly that he addresses his "son": "I did it for him." (MC 458)

*Children*. That this outcome can appear to be positive or at least conciliatory depends to a large extent on the supplementation of Western strategies of meaning, which are strongly focused on individuality and subjectivity, with their East-ern/Indian alternatives:

Western concepts of good and evil, of the tragic and the comic, of purpose and history slither and lose hold in this narrative [...] For reproduction is, in the governing perspective of Rushdie's novel, something of what transformation is to the West: a principle – perhaps *the* principle – of art and life.<sup>33</sup>

*Midnight's Children* illustrates this convergence of art and life by staging a transformational process in which the subjective dimensions of meaning inherent to Saleem's act of narrating are gradually fading while the text of the novel we are reading emerges.<sup>34</sup> It is this novel which provides an alternative history of 20th-century India and claims a fully naturalized or even privileged position for literature among the social procedures of constructing and appropriating historical reality. If, as *Midnight's Children* implies, 'reality' and 'history' are fictions which result from a complex interplay of perspectives and ensuing processes of objectivation by means of power, then literature, i.e. the place where private fictions can become public fictions, assumes an important function as a corrective against the monopolizing tendencies of political and/or economical interests. In the light of these ideas, which *Midnight's Children* puts forward both forcefully and successfully, it seems only consequent that Rushdie turned to a self-reflexive authorial narrative stance in his subsequent works, *Shame* (1983) and *The Satanic Verses* (1988).

**2) "The sheer strangeness of the activity of art made her a questionable figure; as it does everywhere; as it always has and perhaps always will." (MLS 130)**

Moraes Zogoiby's characterization of his mother Aurora, the brilliant painter on whom his presentation of his family's history in *The Moor's Last Sigh* is focused, presents the question of the artist's position in society (or the world at large) in strangely ahistorical and general terms, pointing to the outsider-status of the artist in all times/places/cultures. Twelve years before, the self-reflexively omniscient narrator of *Shame*, who can be regarded as a stand-in for Rushdie himself,<sup>35</sup> was much more specific about the problems inherent to his position as a migrant from India/Pakistan to England at that historical moment. Having started his imaginary

<sup>33</sup> Swann 1986, 355/359.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Wilson 1984.

<sup>35</sup> Commenting on his choice of a third-person narrator in *Shame* Rushdie remarked in 1983: "This time I was going to tell the story and not allow a mere character to usurp me." (Rushdie 1985, 13) Instead of going for traditional third-person narration, however, Rushdie chose to equip his self-conscious narrator with a clearly recognizable "authorial" background (cf. Dingwaney Needham 1994, 149ff.).

account of Pakistani history he encounters the following objections from a voice external to his narrative:<sup>36</sup>

*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)*<sup>37</sup>

His justification is of central importance to any understanding of Rushdie's post-colonial/"postmodern" poetics:

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)

From a writer's point of view migration can be turned into a virtue because the otherwise problematic side-effect of in-betweenness opens up new possibilities, combining authentic if slightly angled inside knowledge of the postcolonial condition with the freedom from constraint reached in "postmodern" Western literature. Furthermore, the fact that the text is directed at two different audiences opens up an emancipatory potential by enlarging the scope and richness of possible readings. Thus, Rushdie points to the fact that "[m]any people, especially in the West, [...] talked about [*Midnight's Children*] as a fantasy novel. By and large, nobody in India talks about it as a fantasy novel; they talk about it as a novel of history and politics."<sup>38</sup> Ironically mirroring this comment, the narrator of *Shame* speculates about the reception of his work in Pakistan:

But suppose this were a realistic novel! [...] By now, if I had been writing a book of this nature, it would have done me no good to protest that I was writing universally [...] The book would have been banned, dumped in the rubbish bin, burned. All that effort for nothing! Realism can break a writer's heart. Fortunately, however, I am only telling a sort of modern fairy-tale [...] nobody need get upset, or take anything I say too seriously. No drastic action need be taken, either. What a relief! (S 69/70)

Thus, in-betweenness finds its correspondence on the level of poetics, productively combining poetic licence with a strong orientation towards reality, which is in turn enriched by playing off different cultural frames against each other.

<sup>36</sup> While Rushdie used *Shame* to tackle the postcolonial/"postmodern" problematics of his writing explicitly, he failed to foresee the feminist edge which this novel provoked as a supplement to negative assessments of his work from a postcolonial perspective. Cf. Grewal 1988, Ahmad 1992, and, on *The Satanic Verses*, Ellerby 1993.

<sup>37</sup> S = Salman Rushdie, *Shame* [1983], London: Picador pb., 1984.

<sup>38</sup> Rushdie 1985, 15.

Interestingly enough, the defensive note struck by Rushdie in the guise of the migrant narrator of *Shame* strongly resembles Western affirmations of literature's importance in the face of powerful evidence to the contrary. For example, Wolfgang Iser's programmatic introductory essay to a recent volume entitled *Why Literature Matters*<sup>39</sup> puts down "entertainment", "information", "documentation" and "pastime" as current functions of literature and acknowledges that "these have now been distributed among many independent institutions that not only compete fiercely with literature but also deprive it of its formerly all-encompassing function."<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, Iser points to three topical functions of literature:<sup>41</sup> 1) With regard to questions of politics literature provides a medium for forming "cultural capital" in a struggle for social recognition. 2) In a systematic account of the workings of society literature can be considered as a medium for creativity which provides "perturbing noise." 3) From an anthropological point of view literature offers a self-reflexive medium for "human self-enactment." It is clear that all these functions focus on the critical potential of literature in opposition to the mainstream of Western society. Accordingly, Iser concludes his essay by celebrating the "strength of [literature's] marginality,"<sup>42</sup> and the affinities between Rushdie's position of in-betweenness and the "post-modern" state of Western literature are quite obvious.<sup>43</sup>

However, while theoretically advanced formulations of 20th century Western attitudes to literature have developed a by and large impersonal concept of literature as a social medium, Rushdie's postcolonial angle and the resulting authorial narrative stance have reintroduced the author as a focus of debate.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, the authorial narrator of *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie's tale of "translated" people in general and two "translated" men in particular, explicitly embraces authorship as a transcendent principle in a secular world. He intrudes into the story world as God sporting the outward appearance of Salman Rushdie (cf. SV 318/409),<sup>45</sup> and this provocation is only slightly alleviated by the fact that it is only the deranged Gibreel who sees him.<sup>46</sup> After all, the reader 'sees' him, too, and the same goes for those passages which are offensive to Muslim sensibilities. What is more, the authorial narrator also poses as Satan (cf. SV 93, 257), and he does so without the mediating presence of Gibreel's deranged mind.<sup>47</sup> Obviously,

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Ahrens/Volkman, eds. 1996.

<sup>40</sup> Iser 1996, 13.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Iser 1996, 14/16/19.

<sup>42</sup> Iser 1996, 22.

<sup>43</sup> These symptoms of making a virtue out of necessity find their equivalent in the notorious naming of the prophet-businessman Mahound in *The Satanic Verses*, which is justified in the book as a strategy of "turn[ing] insults into strength" (SV 93, cf. note 45).

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, Albartazzi 1989; Dossa 1989; Close 1990. In this respect the otherwise unfortunate but nevertheless widespread usage of the tag "Rushdie affair" is quite justified.

<sup>45</sup> SV = Salman Rushdie. *The Satanic Verses*. London: Viking, 1988.

<sup>46</sup> Gibreel's madness has occasionally served as an excuse for the offending passages, but this strategy is definitely not supported by the book's overall design.

<sup>47</sup> The resulting imbalance is quite in keeping with the novel's theme and design, and partly remedied by the fact that the satanic gestures assume the form of questions.

this is where the problems begin. While a clash between permissive Western concepts of literature and art on the one hand and non-Western attitudes on the other has on the whole been avoided by exactly that "marginality" which Iser celebrates, it was the explosive mixture of options of global distribution and Rushdie's persisting orientation towards an Indian audience which resulted in an unprecedented clash of cultural attitudes, even if the decisive events were triggered by seemingly quite Westernized notions of political expediency on an increasingly global scale.<sup>48</sup> There can, however, be no doubt that Rushdie's novel had (and has) the potential to hurt the feelings of devout Muslims. It would be naive (or complacent) to simply state that Muslims have no right to feel that way because they do not read the book adequately, that is as fiction/literature. Nevertheless, this argument crops up again and again in the dispute, and even Rushdie himself has used it in his defence, most prominently in his essay "In Good Faith" (1990, cf. IH 393-414).<sup>49</sup> Here Rushdie insists on *The Satanic Verses*' status as "a novel, a work of fiction, one that aspires to the condition of literature" (IH 393): "Not to see this, to treat fiction as if it were fact, is to make a serious mistake of categories. The case of *The Satanic Verses* may be one of the biggest category mistakes in literary history." (IH 409) The problem with this stance is not only that it fails to acknowledge the fact that the "category" in question – which requires a "literary" reading of the kind Rushdie performs in his explanatory essay – presupposes a Western/modern tradition many Muslim readers do not and are not willing to share. Even *within* this framework it relies on rather outdated ideas of the autonomy of the literary work of art. To be sure, Rushdie is in this respect – and in marked contrast to his literary practice – strangely out of tune with contemporary literary theory.<sup>50</sup>

While this may serve to illustrate the retrogressive tendencies of defensive discursive strategies,<sup>51</sup> it is also a symptom of the duplicity of the self-reflexive turn Western "postmodern" culture has lately taken. Implying and subverting, perturbing and perpetuating Western standards at the same time, Western cultural practices are seemingly ill-equipped for dealing with more self-assured, less doubting cultural forces. Rushdie himself addresses this state of affairs in a pro-

<sup>48</sup> Interestingly enough, it was Rushdie's pre-publication interviews and accompanying excerpts from the novel in the *Times of India* which set the ball rolling when the book was not available anywhere. Starting in a very specific context of Indian politics the conflict achieved global dimensions with Khomeini's *fatwa*, which originated not in Islam *per se* but in a particularly dogmatic and conservative brand of Islam with worldly power at its disposal because of very specific historical circumstances not unaffected by Western politics (cf., for example, Darwish 1990). For documentation of the affair cf. Appinanesi/Maitland, eds. 1989 and the volumes of *Contemporary Literary Criticism*.

<sup>49</sup> IH = Salman Rushdie. *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*. London: Granta/Penguin, 2nd ed., 1992.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Newton 1992.

<sup>51</sup> The most unsettling example is certainly Rushdie's desperate attempt at reconciliation at the end of the first edition of *Imaginary Homelands*, "Why I Have Embraced Islam" [1990] (IH, 1st ed., London: Granta 1991, 430-432), which was replaced by an acknowledgement of his betrayal of himself and his supporters in the second edition ("One Thousand Days in a Balloon", IH 430-439, esp. 436). For a retrospective account of the episode by Rushdie himself cf. Banville 1993, 36.

grammatical essay entitled "Is Nothing Sacred?" (1990, cf. IH 415-429).<sup>52</sup> After referring to his pre-*Satanic Verses* position on the title question – "No, nothing is sacred on and of itself" (IH 416) – he asks himself in the light of the attacks on the novel and himself:

Do I, perhaps, find something sacred after all? Am I prepared to set aside as holy the idea of the absolute freedom of the imagination and alongside it my own notions of the World, the Text, the Good? Does this add up to what the apologists of religion have started calling 'secular fundamentalism'? And if so, must I accept that this 'secular fundamentalism' is as likely to lead to excesses, abuses and oppressions as the canons of religious faith? (IH 418)

His answer is a somewhat qualified 'no' on all counts. Acknowledging that he tends to make "sweeping claims for literature" in a "slightly messianic tone" he nevertheless finds himself "backing away from the idea of sacralizing literature" and rejects "the idea of the writer as secular prophet" because, in contrast to everything held to be sacred in human history before, "all art must inevitably end in failure":

Literature is an interim report from the consciousness of the artist, and so it can never be 'finished' or 'perfect'. [...] Nothing so inexact, so easily and frequently misconceived, deserves the protection of being declared sacrosanct. [...] The only privilege literature deserves [...] is the privilege of being the arena of discourse, the place where the struggle of languages can be acted out. (IH 427)

It is this mixture of self-confidence and self-consciousness which is staged in all of Rushdie's novels and finds its most radical expression in the question-ridden authorial narration of *The Satanic Verses*,<sup>53</sup> which nevertheless results in a complex assessment of the most pressing issues of the day.

On a larger scale, this mixture has become a defining quality of modern art in its "postmodern" manifestations, and the same ambiguity runs through many positions held in contemporary literary theory. It offers a chance for the future if it manages to shed modernist tendencies of achieving artistic optimism at the cost of civilizational pessimism. As these have proved to be quite persistent, Rushdie has even been hailed as the "Prophet of a New Postmodernism."<sup>54</sup> In the face of current anti-essentialist cultural trends, which more often than not seem to cut the ground from under the feet of constructive politics, it is to be hoped that Western culture will manage to adopt the position of "Taking a Stand While Lacking a Centre"<sup>55</sup> blueprinted in Rushdie's *oeuvre*, and that the hollowness and oppor-

<sup>52</sup> For a systematic approach to the role of the concept of the sacred and the resulting rhetoric on both sides of the debate cf. Kuortti 1997.

<sup>53</sup> The book revolves around the questions "What kind of idea are you?" and "What happens when you win?", which are followed up by a multitude of answers and thus not really answered at all. Another central question, however, finds an unequivocal answer: "Question: What is the opposite of faith? Not disbelief. Too final, certain, closed. Itself a kind of belief. Doubt. The human condition [...]., (SV 92).

<sup>54</sup> Edmundson 1989.

<sup>55</sup> Hume 1995. For an interesting scientific realization of this attitude, even from a feminist perspective, cf. Ellerby 1993. More often than not, however, this stance has been interpreted as Rushdie's "failure to construct a viable alternative ideology for himself or for post-colonial society in general." (Afzal-Khan 1993, 143).

tism equally implied by the idea will be counterbalanced by a productive blend of positive spirit and self-critical attitude. Although this state of affairs has been brought about by the evolution of Western culture, it nevertheless offers a chance for an improvement of future intercultural understanding and a new quality of debate in terms of multiculturalism and, where possible, hybridity. In fact, the emergence of a positive concept of cultural hybridity is one of the most prominent features of Rushdie's *oeuvre*,<sup>56</sup> and the concept has since become "something of a dominant orthodoxy in contemporary post-colonial theory."<sup>57</sup> However, it takes (at least) two to debate and it seems likely that postcolonial or otherwise non-Western subjects will spurn the option precisely because of its Western origins, even if the conveniently protective shields of cultural isolationism and its progressive counterpart, cultural relativism, will not suffice for solving material problems in the long run. In the face of these seemingly insurmountable problems, it seems as if the erstwhile hopeful concept of hybridity might share the fate of multiculturalism in mutating from hopeful ideal to fully developed and finally discarded concept. However, Rushdie's novels, and especially *The Satanic Verses*, stand as a monument to this ideal and how it can all go wrong.<sup>58</sup>

### 3) "In the end, stories are what's left of us, we are no more than the few tales that persist." (MLS 110)

In the light of the preceding survey it is obvious that Moraes Zogoiby's remark on the uses of storytelling strikes a note of resignation not in keeping with the emphatic realization of literature's emancipatory potential characteristic of Rushdie's novels up to this point. Although these ideals are once more defiantly summoned in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990),<sup>59</sup> Rushdie's mood seems to

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Donnerstag 1996.

<sup>57</sup> Cundy 1996, 107. See also Ashcroft/Griffiths/Tiffin 1989, Adam/Tiffin, eds. 1990, and Reckwitz 1993.

<sup>58</sup> For a convincing anti-*Satanic Verses* reading which highlights the text's inherent cultural ambiguity from an ethnographic perspective cf. Asad 1990. Rushdie acknowledges the problem of ambiguity when he draws two aesthetic lessons from the affair which are, nevertheless, contradictory: "One is that one must place clarity above all other virtues in a work of art. If the work is capable of being misread or misunderstood, it is the artist's fault. The other lesson is: it is impossible to learn from what other people think of your work. All you can do is write the books that are in you to write. And sometimes you'll be right and sometimes you'll be wrong." (Fenton 1991, 29)

<sup>59</sup> To name but two points: in centring its plot on the question which gives this article its title, *Haroun* affirms the value of doubt and questioning for bringing about improvement. Furthermore, the central image of the text, the Ocean of the Streams of Story (cf. H 71/72), fuses a reference to the *Kathasaritsagara* by the 11th century Kashmiri poet Somadeva with the "postmodern" concepts of textuality and intertextuality. As to defiance, cf. Cundy 1996, 89: "The irony of these images at the heart of a 'children's' narrative [Khattam-Shud/Khomeini, the Land of Chup/Iran, the idol Bezaban/the Ka'bah] is that in some respects they surpass in their allegorical literalness the obscurer offences against Islam in *The Satanic Verses*."

have changed in the years which followed.<sup>60</sup> In fact, *The Moor's Last Sigh* offers pessimistic assessments of almost everything dear to him, and the emergence of a militant Hindu nationalism in his beloved Bombay provided a topical backdrop for his personal plight. In a comment on the final phase of Aurora Zogoiby's creativity, which coincides with the increase of religious tension in Bombay, Moraes "the Moor" Zogoiby remarks:

Aurora had apparently decided that the ideas of impurity, cultural admixture and mélange which had been, for most of her creative life, the closest things she had found to a notion of the Good, were in fact capable of distortion, and contained a potential for darkness as well as for light. (MLS 303)

This problem is obviously the central point of the book: in the paintings in question Moraes himself figures prominently as a stand-in for that first "Moor", Boabdil, the last Sultan of Granada, whose last sigh on the occasion of his ejection from the Alhambra palace in 1492 (!) marked the end of Moorish Spain and provides the title of the novel. For Rushdie, Moorish Spain stands for "a fusion of cultures – Spanish, Moorish, Jewish, the 'Peoples of the Book' – which came apart at the fall of Granada," "the only time in history when there was a fusion of those three cultures."<sup>61</sup> It goes without saying that Rushdie is aware of the dangers of taking a sentimental view of history:

Of course one should not sentimentalize that entity, for the basis on which it existed was Islamic imperialism. [...] All the same there was a fusion [...] In that fusion are ideas which have always appealed to me, particularly now; for instance, the idea of the fundamentalist, totalized explanation of the world as opposed to the complex, relativist, hybrid vision of things.<sup>62</sup>

But then, he is after the story, not the history, and the

story is a metaphor for the conflict between the one and the many, between the pure and the impure, the sacred and the profane, and as such it is a continuation by other means of the concerns of my previous books.<sup>63</sup>

So what are these 'other means'? It is striking that the narrator of *The Moor's Last Sigh* views the problem of sentimentalizing history from a slightly different angle: "Am I sentimentalizing? Now that I have left it all behind, have I, among my many losses, also lost clear sight? – It may be said I have; but I still stand by my words." (MLS 350, my emphasis) Could it be that those 'other means' are a retreat from history in the face of overwhelming evidence of the failure of one's

<sup>60</sup> Interviewing Rushdie in 1993, when he was already working on *The Moor's Last Sigh*, John Banville observed "an immense and somehow sustaining sadness" and "a kind of hopeless misery" in Rushdie (Banville 1993, 34).

<sup>61</sup> Banville 1993, 35. Interestingly, Rushdie has since offered a comparable view of Sara-jvo (cf. Rushdie 1994). On the one hand, this triggered a satirical response in the *Times Literary Supplement* (May 6, 1994: 14), which suggests that such feats of the imagination work better or only in a clearly demarcated literary context. On the other hand, a later letter to the editor (*TLS*, Oct 14, 1994: 19) points to an extremely hostile response by the Bosnian Minister for Special Production, which rejects the concept of a secular Bosnia unequivocally and thus supports Rushdie's assessment of the contemporary political climate in *The Moor's Last Sigh*.

<sup>62</sup> Banville 1993, 35.

<sup>63</sup> *ibid*, my emphasis.

ideals? That the transgression of the fiction-reality boundary has been replaced by mere words?

There are certainly many passages in *The Moor's Last Sigh* which point to the pitfalls of pluralism and hybridity. Even "India's deep-rooted secularism," one of the ideas most cherished by Rushdie, appears to have mutated into an "inter-community league of cynical self-interest" (MLS 332). Furthermore, and most strikingly, one of the central female characters of the book, Uma Sarasvati, turns out to be a murderous psycho-(or socio-?)path, and the Moor comments:

[...] what had happened was, in a way, a defeat for the pluralist philosophy on which we had all been raised. For in the matter of Uma Sarasvati it had been the pluralist Uma, with her multiple selves, her highly inventive commitment to the infinite malleability of the real, her modernistically provisional sense of truth, who had turned out to be the bad egg (MLS 272).

It is obvious that Uma stands as a warning against the dangers of the "Taking a Stand While Lacking a Centre" attitude of contemporary Western culture, and this warning is all the more resonant as it incorporates the private sphere: Uma is the great love of Moraes' life, and love is explicitly embraced as an instance of hybridity on the individual or rather trans-individual level (cf. MLS 289). Finally, the Moor arrives at the bleakest judgement imaginable: "*Mad or bad?* [...] I will not allow her to be mad [...] insane persons are excused from moral judgement, and Uma deserves to be judged. *Insaan*, a human being. I insist on Uma's insaanity." (MLS 322, original emphasis)

A similar reversal of hopeful ideals can be observed in the intertextual dimension of *The Moor's Last Sigh*. While employing strategies similar to those in Rushdie's previous novels,<sup>64</sup> the book uses them to rather bleak effect within the confines of Rushdie's own *oeuvre*. Most importantly, there is a glimpse of the future of the midnight's children in the appearance of Saleem Sinai's "son" Aadam, originally envisaged as "more cautious, [...] stronger, harder, more resolute" than the children of Independence (MC 425). This positive if unidealistic assessment of Aadam is an integral part of the optimistic side of *Midnight's Children*. However, being adopted by Moraes' father Abraham (!), Adam Braganza, formerly Aadam Sinai, becomes Adam Zogoiby and turns out to be a masculine version of Uma Sarasvati (cf. MLS 341-343, 353-355, 358-360), as Moraes clearly recognizes:

His refusal to talk about the past, the fluidity of his changes of stride as he tried to bewitch and woo, the cold calculation of his moves: I had fallen for such an act once, though she had been a far greater practitioner of the chameleon arts than he, and made far less mistakes. (MLS 354)

Similarly, Zeenat Vakil, the female character who is an integral part of the positive outcome *The Satanic Verses* offers to Saladin Chamcha,<sup>65</sup> makes a somewhat

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Lernout 1996, who takes *The Moor's Last Sigh* as a paradigmatic example of "Salman Rushdie's Intertextuality."

<sup>65</sup> Cf. SV 547: "'Come along,' Zeenat Vakil's voice said at his shoulder. It seemed that in spite of all his wrong-doing, weakness, guilt – in spite of his humanity – he was getting another chance. There was no accounting for one's good fortune, that was plain. There it simply was, taking his elbow in his hand. 'My place,' Zeeny offered, 'Let's get the hell out of here.' 'I'm

flat appearance as a send-up of the eminent theorist of postcolonialism and hybridity, Homi Bhabha (MLS 329), deflates the unifying fundamentalist rhetoric of Hindu nationalists from a "Post-Marxian" perspective (MLS 337/8), makes a couple of interventions on behalf of secularism and art (MLS 351, 364),<sup>66</sup> and finally dies in the violence which consumes Bombay (MLS 373). In fact, all the women, which, on the model of *Shame*, take centre stage or at least figure prominently in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, die a violent death or are permanently disfigured by the end of the novel. It might be apt to quote the novel's final words in order to complete this bleak panorama. After he has written his story's end, Moraes "the Moor" Zogoiby rests on a small graveyard on a mount of olives (!), just "a little down the track from the Ultimo Suspiro gas station"(MLS 3-4/432-434). Like his 15th century *alter ego* he gazes at the Alhambra:

*See: here is my flask. I'll drink some wine; and then, like a latter day Van Winkle, I'll lay me down upon this graven stone, lay my head beneath these letters R I P, and close my eyes, according to our family's old practice of falling asleep in times of trouble, and hope to awaken, renewed and joyful, into a better time. (MLS 433/434, original emphasis)*

While all this certainly makes depressing reading, it does not fully account for the aesthetic misgivings voiced in many reviews of the novel. Why does the book, in spite of a systematic redeployment of the same ingredients, read "like an inferior, because less engaged and less heartfelt, version of *Midnight's Children*"?<sup>67</sup> Obviously, Rushdie's ongoing predicament, his isolation from reality, his disillusionment with the world as it is, and, as a consequence, with the political dimension of his art, may serve as biographical explanations.<sup>68</sup> Structurally speaking, however, the replacement of politics by resignation, nostalgia, and a longing to "write about other things"<sup>69</sup> has deprived his writing of its central unifying force. His undiminished stylistic powers seem to lack direction in a huge novel which is unified by such diverse strategies as, on the one hand, a slightly problematic historical conceit, and, on the other hand, the equally problematic conventions of the family tree and retrospective first-person narration. While the book certainly has its merits either as an elegy or as a cautionary tale, its linguistic exuberance seems strangely out of place and can only be explained as a remnant of a poetics of the novel which cannot be sustained in Rushdie's present situation. In this respect the change of genre undertaken in *Haroun* seems a prerequisite for its suc-

cessing, he answered her, and turned away from the view." On the crucial role of Zeenat Vakil in *The Satanic Verses* cf. Cundy 1996, 78-80.

<sup>66</sup> Her attitudes echo the ones put forth in Rushdie's earlier novels and essays: "I blame fiction [...] The followers of one fiction knock down another popular piece of make-believe, and bingo! It's war. [...] So, OK. I'd rather die fighting over great poets than over gods." (MLS 351)

<sup>67</sup> Cundy 1996, 115.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 110-117.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Rushdie to John Banville in 1993: "What I find now is that the ideas that present themselves as things I want to write about are much less public, much less politically generated than they used to be. I have now had enough politics to last a lifetime. I now want to write about other things." (Banville 1993, 36)

cess. Although Rushdie insists on its status as a novel,<sup>70</sup> it is certainly not a novel in the typically Rushdiean sense. Nevertheless, *Haroun* offers a concise literary (and, for that matter, Rushdiean) answer to the question posed in the title of this article, but it does so at the cost of its removal from reality. *The Moor's Last Sigh*, on the other hand, can be read as an "interim report from the consciousness of the artist" (IH 427) trying to come to terms with an "overdose of reality" (MC 360). Perhaps the book is, in this sense, too true, and it is obvious that the use of stories is to a large extent dependent on their not being true at all.

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<sup>70</sup> See, for example, Banville 1993, 34.



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