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The Exploration of the Cultural Kernel in *Shalimar the Clown* by Salman Rushdie

In his latest novel, Salman Rushdie explores new territories. After Pakistan in *Shame*, India in *Midnight's Children*, Great Britain in *The Satanic Verses*, Portugal in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, America in *The Ground Beneath her Feet* or in *Fury*, this time, he chooses Kashmir and also Europe and America. Salman Rushdie is nourished by images, which are now familiar to his English-speaking readers: his Indian roots, the tragedy of India's partition, his family's migration to Pakistan and his stay in England. In a cosmopolitan world, his characters travel like migrants. Different worlds collide and get intertwined, so that the migrants' memories, which occupy a central place in his novels, sum up many displacements. The worlds get mixed up and the characters find themselves in in-between worlds. Hybrid thoughts appear and numerous mutations take place. Man's destiny is shattered.

Shalimar the Clown is divided into five parts (India, Boonyi, Max, Shalimar the clown, Kashmira), based on the destiny of four characters. The action takes place in Kashmir — a country which both India and Pakistan tried to possess after the partition in 1947 —, in a village called Pachigam which is at war with its neighbour, Shirmal, but it also takes place in Los Angeles, in Paris, in Strasbourg. The novel shows a multitude of places and times. People and historical events intervene, such as Indian wars but also the

French resistance. At the bottom of the Himalaya, the characters come and go. Shalimar, an inhabitant of Pachigam, a professional acrobat, spends happy days with his beloved Boonyi until she leaves him. Then, the strange acrobat turns into a murderer. Max Ophuls, an ex-ambassador in the United States, is involved in antiterrorist wars in America. He has an affair with Boonyi who seduces him with her bewitching Anarkali¹ dance. India, their illegitimate daughter lives in California, Los Angeles, this nowhere city. In the last chapter, she finds her name of origin, Kashmira, by returning to Kashmir, a land denied to her until her father's death.

The choice of English, as a language of expression, can be interpreted as a first rupture in the cultural kernel. By adopting the colonial language, Salman Rushdie plays with the English grammar by introducing new sounds and also Hindu legends. This English spoken by the elite is indianized as eastern visions and sensations are inserted in it.

In an article published in 1997 entitled "Damn, this is the Oriental Scene for you",² Salman Rushdie discusses contemporary Indian literary works. According to him, R.K.Narayan and Vikhram Seth are two separate cases. They are not interested in any context. Those Indian writers like V.S. Naipaul and Harati Mukhjerjee who refuse to be called "Indian writers" come from nowhere. And

¹ Anarkali is a legendary slave during the Mogol period, who seduced Prince Salim. As she did not belong to the nobility, Akbar, the Mogol emperor, the Prince's father, put an end to this romance and ordered that she should be buried alive in a bazaar wall. Her name evokes her beauty. It means pomegranate flowers.

² See Salman Rushdie, *Step across this Line, Collected non-fiction, 1992-2002*, London: Vintage, 2002, pp.159-173.

some writers are migrants who have fled the numerous wars in the country, like the Kashmiri-American poet Agha Shahid Ali that Salman Rushdie quotes in his epigraph to *Shalimar the Clown*. His conclusion caused a scandal:

[...] The prose writing – both fiction and non-fiction – created in this period by Indian writers working in English is proving to be a more interesting body of work than most of what has been produced in the sixteen “official languages” of India, the so-called ‘vernacular languages’ during the same time.

[...] my own mother-tongue, Urdu, the camp-argot of the country’s earlier Muslim conquerors was also an immigrant language, forged out of a blend between the conquerors’ imported tongue and the local languages they encountered. However, it became a naturalized subcontinental language long ago, and by now that has happened to English, too. English has become an Indian language. Its colonial origins mean that, like Urdu and unlike all other Indian languages, it has no regional base; but in all other ways, it has emphatically come to stay.

[...] As an individual, Hindi-Urdu, the ‘Hindustani’ of north India, remains an essential aspect of my sense of self; as a writer, I have been partly formed by the presence, in my head, of that other music, the rhythms, patterns and habits of thought and metaphor of my Indian tongues. (Rushdie 2002:160)

So, Salman Rushdie’s “Hindi-Urdu” kernel is still at the heart of his writing. From this centre, multiple branches are formed which expand in time and space, towards eastern and western directions. By refusing to express himself in Hindi or in Urdu, Salman Rushdie introduces an Indian music in the English syntax.

The linguistic debate or struggle in India is a specific reality, which is inconceivable elsewhere. Let's think of the 49th celebration of India's independence in 1996 where the Prime Minister Deve Gowda made his traditional speech at the bottom of the ramparts of the Red Fort in Delhi. Like his 48 predecessors, he spoke in Hindi, he spoke in Hindi, a language that was totally unknown to this Southerner who came from the state of Karnataka. So, he read his speech in a phonetic transcription in his own language, Kanada.

India is a country of minorities with 22 official languages and 35 spoken languages and the language of Salman Rushdie has the rhythm and the sounds of his native India transposed in an English language that is constantly bullied and reshaped. Emphases and hyperboles are excessively used with a flow of nouns, adjectives and syllogisms in a textual eruption. There is a Rushdian volcano, or a Rushdian virus, which the commentator Pankaj Mishra called "Rushdie-itis". (Rushdie 2002:164) It contaminates the page with its imaginative force and it blows up frontiers. Fables, earthly paradises, legends, cooks and oriental poets give birth to a fury, suffusing a tragic dimension. This language becomes utterly free and passionate.

So whom are Salman Rushdie's novels addressed to? He himself admits that his texts are more read in Western countries. But even in a country like Iran, *Midnight's Children* was a great success in its Persian translation. The Indian and Iranian minds are very close. They have common cultural references: the poets Hâfez, Khayyâm or Saadi, many identical roots between Urdu and Persian. The English-speaking reader is propelled into a spicy indianized language in a world of fiction ruled by a bold writing, a broken syntax and a polymorphous story. In the saffron

fields of Kashmir, the names of the inhabitants are also metamorphosed as if one union of sounds were not enough to define a migrant:

It was the pandit Pyarelal Kaul who taught him about the grabbing and it was the pandit's green-eyed daughter Bhoomi whom he loved. Her name meant "the earth", so that made him a grabber. Noman supposed, but cosmological allegory didn't account for everything, it didn't explain, for example, her interest in grabbing him back. Except on performance days when there were audiences within earshot she never called him Shalimar, preferring the name he had been born with, even though she disliked her own name – "my name is mud," she said, "it's mud and dirt and stone and I don't want it," and asked him to call her "Boonyi" instead. This was the local word for the celestial Kashmiri chinar tree. (Rushdie 2005:46)

So, a name is rooted in a land. Approaching Boonyi means approaching Kashmir, a mysterious Kashmir, which is difficult to invade. By wishing to possess a woman, the hero tries to possess an illusion, a sublime and wild country. Shalimar the acrobat flies in the air to hold his green-eyed star. He has his own sense of honour and his destiny is written in the stars. He shall kill his wife and his descendants in case she is taken from him.

Life is a stage and Salman Rushdie multiplies the Shakespearian echoes,³ with Boonyi and Shalimar as Kashmiri Romeo and Juliet:

³ Let us think for example of the monologue of Macbeth:
"Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale

From forth the fatal loins of these two foes

A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life.⁴

There are also oriental references like the poet and astrologer Khayyâm. Man's reincarnation in animals or common objects is one of the recurrent themes that we can find in the quatrains of this Persian poet of the twelfth century.⁵ Some passages in the novel illustrate his conception of life:

To comfort and invigorate Noman, Adbullah explained that after death the souls of their family members entered the local birds and fled around Pachigam singing the same songs they used to sing back when they were people. As birds they sang with the same level of musical talent they had possessed in their earlier human life, no more, no less. (Rushdie 2005:58)

The planets take control of the events in *Shalimar the Clown*, with a cosmology ruled by Hindu mythology. For instance, Rahu is often present, the snake which swallows the sun and the moon, and provokes eclipses. In astronomical terms, Rahu and Ketu are two meeting points between the sun and the moon in their celestial

Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.” (*Macbeth* V, 5, 24-28).

⁴ *Romeo and Juliet*, I, 1, 5-6.

⁵ One of the quatrains of Khayyâm can illustrate this idea:

“This jug was love-sick like me,
Tangled in a fair girl's locks;
This handle you now see on its neck
Was his hand on the neck of the girl”. (*The Ruba'iyat of Omar Khayyam*, translated by Peter Avery and John Heath-Stubbs, London, Penguin Books, p.61).

movements. They respectively represent the north and the south.

So, the reader finds his way in this vast labyrinth, sometimes guided by the narrator, but also very often by a series of insinuations:

Above them, however, the shadow planets Rahu and Ketu existed without actually existing, pulling and pushing, intensifying and suppressing, inflaming and stifling, dancing out the moral struggle within human beings while remaining invisible in the brightening heavens. (Rushdie 2005:89)

But, like Juliet, the reader is brought to ask: “What’s in a name?”⁶ In *Shalimar the Clown*, which has two epigraphs, one by the Kashmiri-American Agha Shahid Ali and one by Shakespeare with an extract of *Romeo and Juliet* where Mercutio’s says “A plague to both your houses”, the names are and are not. Like an echo of the oriental fairy tales, which, instead of the western “once upon a time”, start with “there was, and there wasn’t”, the names of the characters slip out. Bhoomi is renamed in the text and in the chapter, which is devoted to her, and she becomes “the

⁶ “Tis but thy name that is my enemy.
Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.
What’s Montague? It is nor hand nor foot
Nor arm nor face nor any other part
Belonging to a man. O, be some other name!
What’s in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other word would smell as sweet.
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo called,
Retain that dear perfection which he owes
Without that title. Romeo doff thy name;
And for thy name, which is no part of thee,
Take all myself”. (*Romeo and Juliet*, II, 2, 38-48)

celestial Kashmiri chinar tree”. The English-speaking reader does not speak Urdu, so he cannot identify the ‘chinar’ with a plane tree. But already, in his imagination, he visualizes a tree in Kashmir, with all the mystery and the heavenly beauty that this region evokes. The sounds, the rhythms in the simple word “chinar” trigger off a series of images from an unknown and sublimated Kashmir. The history of this region is part of all these associations. Because, this old princely state, from which Nehru came, was first a happy valley where Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists lived together. The Muslim majority is the specificity of this state and its strategic situation provokes wars. Yet, peace ruled in Kashmir, where Muslims and Hindus led a quiet life. In 1960, the situation worsened and Kashmir became an object of rivalry. Three Indo-Pakistani wars were declared.

The reader is half way between a historical knowledge and a fantasized picture. Salman Rushdie does not hesitate to insert words such as a “pandit”,⁷ without giving their precise meanings. There is never a glossary in Salman Rushdie’s novels. Once again, it is the reader’s imagination, associated with his Indian knowledge, which is the basis of a reading pact. An army of characters appears with exotic names added with nicknames: Colonel Mammirdev Suravans Kachhwaha is called “Hammer”, Pandit Gopinath Razdan is nicknamed “Batta Rasashud”, or again Noman Sher Noman is called “Shalimar the Clown” except by Boonyi.

There is a flow of images with a far distant music:

Consider the superior luck of the animals. The wild beasts
of Kashmir, to enumerate a few, include Ponz the

⁷ A pandit is a Brahmin with a vast knowledge in Sanskrit texts.

Monkey, Potsolov the Fox, Shal the Jackal, Sur the Boar, Drin the Marmot, Nyan and Sharpu the Sheep, Kail the Ibex, Hiran the Antelope, Kostura the Musk Deer, Suh the Leopard, Haput the Black Bear, Bota-khar the Ass, Hangul the Twelve-Pointed Barasingha Stag and Zomba the Yak. (Rushdie 2005:92)

A double language, like a two-headed monster is created, in addition with exotic beasts such as “the Musk Deer”, which remind us of animal representations in oriental carpets, of the Persian manuscripts of the Shah-Nameh⁸ or even the road taken by the mystic which is represented in the silk carpets of Tabriz with imaginary animals. One may think of onager hunts or characters such as Bahram-e-Gur in Persian literature, whose quest is associated with a hunt. This cultural basis is exploited here in an English language which has a Hindustani rhythm, which, let us not forget, has a Penjabi and Persian basis.

So, the names evoke a far away country (Pyarelal, Giri, Abdullah Norman, Firdaus, Pamposh, Bombur Yambarzal...), and so do the meals (pulao, methi, aab gosh...). Here, the reader has the Indian meals in mind, like the thali, which is made of sumptuous dishes presented in different bowls.

Salman Rushdie presents us with a new grammar. Movements are constant, and he imagines other visions of chaos. As in Greek traditions, where chaos is a symbol of

⁸ The Shah-Nameh is “The Book of Kings” written by the Persian poet Ferdowsi in the tenth century. It is a presence, not only in the Persian literary world, but also in many artistic expressions. During the reign of the Safavids, in the sixteenth century, Shah Tahmasb ordered a Shah-Nameh with the best calligraphers, illuminators, and painters in the royal court. The few pages of this book, which remain today, show the splendors of an art which mixed literature and painting.

life, in Rushdie's novels, it generates infinite demons and angels. With a music of the spheres, fertile tensions are created between various codes of vision. There is a mixture of allegories (Greek, Christian, Hindu and Muslim allegories of creation) which give way to moments of grace, like the Persian and Arab calligraphies with intertwined curbs which are joined and separated in infinite interlaces.

The murder of the ambassador Max Ophuls creates a complex choreography, with traveling characters in a territory that is as wide as the world, as infinite as the cosmos. The characters' identity is broken and the frontiers between languages disappear:

The words Hindu and Muslim had no place in their story, he told himself. In the valley these words were merely descriptions, not divisions. The frontiers between the words, their hard edges, had grown smudged and blurred. This was how things had to be. This was Kashmir. (Rushdie 2005:57)

Each one must create his own territory:

Why not stand still and draw a circle round your feet and name that Selfistan? (Rushdie 2005:102)

Indian history becomes involved in the mapping of novelistic territories. Like the very name of Pakistan which was created out of an anagram: P for Penjab, A for the Afghan province in the North-West, K for Kashmir, S for Sind and the suffix -tan for Baluchestan, the maps are reshaped during the years, with wars and resistances. From Los Angeles to Pachigam, from Pachigam to Strasbourg, there is only one step that the narrator crosses. Again, the town of Strasbourg is emblematic of uncertain frontiers,

where wars and struggles took place. Alsace, with its mixed identity, is again a picture of a broken identity. It stands like Kashmir:

Abdullah then mentioned Kashmiriyat, Kashmiriness, the belief that at the heart of Kashmiri culture there was a common bond that transcended all other differences. (Rushdie 2005:110)

The heroes in *Shalimar the Clown* drag themselves in a living past and their lives look like a series of exiles. The images of childhood have disappeared as if a whole world had vanished. From then on, a new time is born based on in-between realities.

Max Ophuls is caught between two worlds, like a foreign wanderer. He is a diplomat with a ghostly identity. His daughter India, who is the fruit of a forbidden and banished love, has grown up in America, without any feeling of belonging to this land. The two other Kashmiri characters, Boonyi and Shalimar will face exile, Boonyi in an apartment and then in a forest, Shalimar in America, both waiting for death. Only India, whose name of origin, Kashmira, is recognized in the end, is victorious. She is the product of the West and the East which are at war. She is the fruit of a broken kernel and her final battle reenacts the lives of Hindu goddesses:

She was ready for him. She was not fire but ice. The golden bow was drawn back as far as it would go. She felt the taut bow string pressing against her parted lips, felt the foot of the arrow's shaft against her gritted teeth, allowed the last seconds to tick away, exhaled and let fly. There was no possibility that she would miss. There was no second chance. There was no India. There was only Kashmira,

and Shalimar the clown. (Rushdie 2005:398)

With the return of this bastard child on the land of her mother, Salman Rushdie creates an illusion of eternity, as if Kashmir would always belong to her.

The name of this last novel contains a whole imaginary world. The royal gardens of Shalimar, in Lahore, created by the Moghol emperor Shah Jahan, are linked with the multiple heavenly visions of Kashmir through an acrobat hero. Because Salman Rushdie presents us with a certain idea of what a garden can be: it is the refuge of the soul. The descriptions look like a dream-like garden which, like the gardens drawn by sixteenth century oriental artists, float in the air. It represents an inner garden with a dish composed of quinces and pomegranates, with a golden jar, and with guests around a banquet. This ideal garden, this garden of the soul, is offered here to the reader who is seduced by the incongruous colors with blue mountains, a golden sky and pink trees. The absence of perspective destroys any vision of distance. There is only an impression of eternity. Salman Rushdie shows us mystic visions and he is in harmony with the mystic poet Rumi⁹ who considers that “there is not greater exile in this world than love”.

The motif of the garden is also shattered between eastern and western visions within streams, which struggle and also nourish one another. In a flow of images, the reader observes two visions of the world, like in a magic moment:

Then the magic of the garden began to take hold.

⁹ Mowlana Jalaleddin Rumi (1207-1273) is the great mystic poet, whose masterpiece, *Masnavi* mixes stories with philosophical and moral questions. His *Divan-e Shams-e Tabrizi* offers multitudes of ecstatic images.

Paradise too was a garden – Gulistan, Jannat, Eden – and here before him was its mirror in earth. He had always loved the Mughal gardens of Kashmir, Nishat, Chashma Shahi, and above all Shalimar, and to perform there had been his lifelong dream. (Rushdie 2005:78)

The association between Gulistan, Jannat and Eden is emblematic of this shattered linguistic kernel in Salman Rushdie's language. Gulistan (the garden of roses) and Bustan (the orchard), refer to the works of Saadi, the Persian lyric poet of the 13th century whose poetry is famous for its "inaccessible simplicity". Easterners also call him the master of speech, or the master of poetry. The garden is here a projection of the world where human souls can project themselves and be analyzed in a mystic vision. "Jannat" means gardens, paradises in Urdu. With Eden, the vision is complete, from the east to the west, in a song of the world.

From an intimate story, Salman Rushdie moves to national and international stories punctuated by his native tongue, the "Hindustani". Like Satyajit Ray's movie, *The Music Room* which from a ruined zamindar creates a vast feeling of desolation far above Bengal, Salman Rushdie reaches universal spheres from a kernel planted in India.

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