FICTION WITH A MISSION: HISTORY AS LIVED EXPERIENCE IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S NOVELS

Angela STĂNESCU
„Valahia" University of Târgoviște
angelastanescu@yahoo.com

Abstract:

The present article focuses on the central idea of historical recuperation permeating the novels of Salman Rushdie, especially as it appears from the novelist's professions of intent regarding his own work. For Rushdie's auto-diegetic narrators, the shape of private history can only be discerned from the kaleidoscopic lens of micro-history. Most of them are writer-cum-historian figures deploying the written word as a defence against the illusion-fostering discourses of the powers that be and their official version of history. Albeit painfully aware of the unreliability of their perceptions and memory, baffled by politicised delusion and contending official versions of history, Rushdie's protagonists strive to salvage the truths of their experience from the corruptions of time, change or forgetfulness. Their compulsion to narrate stems from an often messianic sense of mission, which means retracing the meanings of their living history, dissipated in the clamour of the multiplying discourses of metamorphic historical realities.

Keywords:

History, historiography, postcolonial, fiction, discourse.

If for Naipaul home is ultimately nowhere, for Rushdie home is potentially everywhere. While Naipaul sees cultural collisions and collusions as irredeemably tainting and corrupting, Rushdie casts a more lenient eye on the beneficent possibilities of intercultural encounters. Naipaul writes from what he perceives as the historical void of the Caribbean, which he wishes to replenish with his historicising discourse, marked by the embittered consciousness of geographical and political marginality. Conversely, Rushdie's novels are swamped with the overwhelming multiplicity of layers and strands of history crisscrossing the massive subcontinent, whose centrality as the 'Jewel in the Crown' situated it at the very heart of the British Empire. His multi-voiced novels evince a tumultuous inter- and intra-cultural plenitude, aimed to replicate the teeming

multitudes of the former Raj. The postcolonial sensibilities of his characters are shaped by past and present historical dislocations, but Rushdie's protagonists, unlike Naipaul's, do not bear the wound of the Caribbean Indian diaspora displaced by indenture. With Naipaul, the double displacement of the Caribbean migrant accounts for a rawer exilic sensibility. Rushdie's characters, at home or in diaspora, have a more stable sense of belonging and are therefore more prodigious spinners of myths of home. His characters are not so much un-housed by their histories of deprivation or afflicted by an innate psychic homelessness, but become de-housed by the tidal waves of history which throw their destinies in the whirlpool of contending ideological currents and political forces. While many of Naipaul's discontents find consolation in the philosophy of Hindu withdrawal, Rushdie's characters are often caught in the crossfire of embattled orthodoxies or forced into action in the public front.

'Handcuffed to history', in the notorious formulation of *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie's heroes are compelled to go with the tide of historical change, or rather against the tide. Obsessed with messianic missions, they become embroiled in public affairs more heartily than Naipaul's withdrawn, meditative narrators, yet they invariably end up displaced on the periphery of history, defeated and disabused. Striving, as Graham Swift has put it, 'to disentangle history from fairytale', they resort to writing in order to make sense of what they often perceive as the fantastic, surreal nature of their experience of history. The opposing camps or forces contending for their souls are not disposed according to Naipaul's binary axes of colonialism – master/slave, colonizer/colonized, civilization/bush, centre/periphery – but dichotomously aligned between intra-cultural ethical poles – tolerance/intolerance, community/communalism, unity/factionalism, belief/disbelief, faith/fundamentalism, purity/impurity, humanism/barbarism, despotism/liberalism, progress/regression. The displacement they undergo is bound up not only with migration or the country's history of colonial and cultural subservience, but with dramatic swings of the balance of reason and tolerance to extreme positions of negation. For Rushdie's victims of history, dislocation and marginalisation means banishment from the centre of rationality to the fringes of extremism, ranging in kind from hard-line nationalism and ethnic separatism to fundamentalist or essentialist ideologies. Their quest for the centre equates with the struggle to redress the balance, to recover, as in a fairytale, the gift of rationality and equity swallowed by ogres spawned by the darkness of hate.

In Rushdie's novels, moments of historical crises or turnabouts become the major dislocating agents of private destinies. The private space is at the mercy of the political. Public and private disasters are inextricably

bound together. The crumbling of socio-political stability entails the collapse of individual certainties. The personal narratives of Rushdie's characters parallel the writing of the subcontinent's history. Almost all his novels gravitate around the crucial moment of India's coming into being as an independent nation. The ending of India's colonial history and the beginning of its national history are the still point from which individual destinies are reshaped, for better or worse, depending on the individual's positioning in the divisions of ethnic, national or religious belonging. Personal identity is redefined and reconstructed alongside the construction of other national, ethnic and religious identities. The characters' sense of self mirrors the twists and quirks of a nascent nationhood which revises its myths of origin and rewrites its past from the vantage point of independence and its future challenges. Rushdie's protagonists often experience the promise of independence as the beginning of the end. Their narratives are as much fables of complex public and private becoming as there are stories of survival. More than tales of doing, theirs are tales of undoing, of being undone and left to reassemble the broken fragments into a mirror in which they hope to recognise their own and their country's face. Through his compulsive narrators, Rushdie attempts to create a grand narrative of colonial and postcolonial India, though the crumbling fantasy of Indian unity is mirrored in the very fragmentation of the narratives themselves. As if to challenge Lyotard's prophesy of the death of grand narratives or meta-narratives under the crumbling certainties of postmodern fragmentariness, Rushdie deconstructs totalising myths only to reconstruct new ones, attempting at the same time to create the grand narrative of modern India, bringing together its images of what Lyotard calls 'the unharmonizable' in a totalising, if disharmonic, universe.

Much like his protagonists, Rushdie seems ineluctably 'handcuffed to history', to use his catchy metaphor from *Midnight's Children*. Even literally so, he would argue, invoking the family joke about his birth, which preceded India's independence only by a few months, and was jestingly supposed to have scared the English away. A self-conscious 'midnight child' himself, he undertakes to chronicle the advent and aftermath of Indian independence in the sweeping epic project of *Midnight's Children* (1981). Rushdie shares Naipaul's conviction that for the former colonies and colonial subjects of European empires, there is no escape from historicity, that the emerging independent nations of the postcolonial era are inherently marked by the socio-economic and cultural conditioning of their colonial past. The postcolonial chronicles of both writers revolve around the momentous break from empire, the iconic temporal landmark dividing national history into the two agonistic, yet complementary historical

temporalities of before and after independence. Most of their novels inscribe family sagas spanning colonial and postcolonial histories, in which the protagonists' destinies follow the peripatetics of the nation from utopian dreams of freedom and nationhood to the dystopian experience of new kinds of tyrannies and bondage.

Decolonisation is seen to replace the old disorders of imperial rule with the even greater disorder brought about by the challenges of self-determination. The disruption of the colonial order and the massive upheavals of nationalism often spiral down to a political, social and economic chaos fraught with the menace of historical apocalypse. The former unity in diversity of colonial societies, sustained by the gluing solidarity of their opposition to imperialism and nationalistic ideals, crumbles under the post-independence escalation of interethnic tensions, of embittered factionalisms fuelled by power struggles and proliferating parochial ideologies. The unifying myth of the nation, supposed to catalyse its collective self-consciousness into what Benedict Anderson calls the 'imagined community' of nationhood, is pulverised into separatist myths of ethnic purity and origins. Both Rushdie and Naipaul portray fragmenting worlds in which the formerly unquestioned impurity of the colonial formation is brought to the fore of public consciousness and a long-standing history of interethnic cohabitation is radically qualified. The emerging postcolonial nation becomes riven by the purging drive of ethnic communities awakening to new self-images, questing for an original identity prior to colonialism's conjunction of spatial, temporal and cultural human coordinates. The erstwhile ambiguity of the composite, multi-layered sense of identity of the colonial society, whose self-image was always refracted by the white man's stereotyping, othering gaze, becomes subject to violent articulations of new-found certainties, agonistically projected against every kind of imaginable otherness: racial, ethnic, linguistic, economic, cultural, historical, ideological or religious. The long cherished ideals of nationhood and national identity become diffused amidst the jarring voices and images of multiplying identities fiercely articulating their separateness from one another. What was once accepted as a communal, if multi-faced, colonial identity dissipates in the galled irruptions of communalism and civil strife, whose acerbic orthodoxies breed tyrannies far worse than the oppression of imperial rule.

The image of postcolonial politics emerging from Rushdie's novels figures proliferating, begrudging rivalries which divide the public forum, in which the national ideal is corrupted by the will to power and ideological fixations of commanding but single-minded leaders. The generalised corruption of political practice infects the moral and ethical values of public

affairs as well as the ethos of the private space. In Rushdie's representations of postcoloniality, politicians are more often than not relegated to the status of venal 'politicos', for whom national interest evanesces under the weight of their personal agendas. Political ideologies and concepts of national welfare are twisted in order to accommodate and rationalise all kinds of authoritarian excesses, ranging from Mrs Gandhi's Emergency to the religious-military fundamentalism of General Zia. Accession to power is based either on electoral fraud or fulminating coups, while power is discretionarily exercised to legitimise oppressive regimes and personal dictatorships. The politicians' private fantasies of identity invade the public space as they identify the countries they rule with their own persona and self-aggrandising, messianic sense of mission. Moreover, the communal construct of the historical, teleological becoming of the nation's 'imagined community' is adapted and rewritten in order to accommodate the rule of private whims and illusions of centrality. The self-absorbed distancing of monocracies and personality cults from the communal idea of nationhood fissures the national space by an ever-widening rift between the rulers and those they rule, cast in the interdependent roles of all-powerful victimisers and powerless victims.

Rushdie's historiographic metafictions foreground the symptomatic estrangement between the political elites and oppressed multitudes of emergent nations by focusing on stories narrated from the perspective of marginal, peripheral figures, whose family history both contains and is contained by the meta-narrative of national history. Macro-history is framed, mirrored and refracted by the myriad private stories of individuals whose life-stories are in their turn ensnared in the nation's story. Saleem Sinai is Rushdie's paradigmatic narrator, who is unable to disentangle his private plight from the engulfing predicament of the nation. His peripatetic destiny parallels that of the nation, just as the fragmentation and confusion of his sense of identity, literalised in the metaphor of his cracking body, reflects the disintegration of the nation's collective consciousness. The disruptions of the family's organic unity originate in the brutal upheavals of macro-history, though the central conceit of *Midnight's Children* is ironically based on the opposite assumption, according to which the individual assumes responsibility for the disasters in the public sphere. His helplessness before the changes afflicting the national organism is displaced by the illusion that he can hold sway over the course of history and that he is blameable for all its deviations from commonsensical norms of normalcy. Saleem displaces the guilt of misguided postcolonial politics by becoming the repository of national guilt. Ironically, by his misplaced sense of personal responsibility, Saleem illustrates at micro-level the hunger for

centrality and omnipotence which have instrumented the failure of democracy in the new-born states of India and Pakistan.

Saleem differs from Naipaul's disabused, disillusioned narrators, who withdraw into a fence-sitting, cynical detachment from public engagement. Numbly contemplating the shipwreck of a community in which they no longer anchor themselves, they can only gloss over their impotency to stop their world's racing on a crash course towards self-annihilation. By contrast, Rushdie's protagonists, though similarly displaced by the tides history, strive to transcend their marginality by indulging in the fantasy of their mastery over the stride of history. Saleem imagines that his actions and dispositions affect directly the course of public affairs, even when he becomes the helpless victim of the Black Widow's dark night of Emergency. Vying for centrality with a politician who, like him, substitutes his image for that of the whole India, he displaces the enormity of political action onto his own actions, assuming the unfelt guilt of the Prime Minister's untroubled conscience. According to the displacing logic of historical agency which informs *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*, the rulers' lack of public responsibility converts as the self-assumed shamefulness of peripheral individuals, whose hypersensitive public conscience functions as the repository of all the shunned guilt and shame of the grandees of the day. The perpetrators of illusion in the upper political echelons are shown to be sapping and destabilising the sense of reality of the disoriented individual, to the extent that all across the social spectrum the nation's reality becomes entrapped in a web of delusion which obscures the demarcations between fact and fiction, reality and imagination, actuality and fantasy. In his purportedly truthful account of his collisions and collusions with history, Saleem becomes increasingly distrustful of his own capacity to capture the truths underlying the tragic fates of his family and nation. He embarks on his narrative project in order to preserve the truth of his experience, but the confusions and distortions of his own memory come to reflect the political manipulations of the self-appointed history makers. Despite his professed uncertainties, inadequacies and difficulties in disentangling reality from illusion, Saleem pins his hopes of survival and moral edification on the illuminating power of writing. Like Naipaul's or Ishiguro's compulsive writers, most of Rushdie's narrators are writer figures use the written word as the only defence against the illusion-fostering discourses of the powers that be, with their manipulations and distortions of public perception. Albeit painfully aware of the unreliability of their perceptions and memory, baffled by politicised delusion and contending official versions of history, they strive to salvage the truths of their experience from the corruptions of time, change or forgetfulness. Their compulsion to narrate stems from an often

messianic sense of mission, in the name of which, though unable to redeem the decayed humanity of their world, they can at least shoulder the burden of collective guilt and shame and thus retrace the meaning dissipated in the clamour of the multiplying discourses of a metamorphic historical reality.

Rushdie himself is convinced of his public duty to expose the political mystifications of the subcontinent's colonial and postcolonial history through the medium of fiction. Under the burden of his double displacement, first from India and then from Pakistan, two inimical countries which he is equally supposed to call his own, he has also assumed the burden of representation, of being the spokesman for the growing community of immigrants and refugees to the West, who have fled the post-independence disorder in the subcontinent. He feels compelled to give these deracinated people of the postcolonial era a voice, as well as help them forge a new sense of identity and belonging as participants in the multiethnic culture of the former imperial metropolis. All his novels figure uprooted individuals whose destinies have been fractured by the experience of migration and who have to face the challenges of exile and the indignities of their minority status on the margins of the host culture. Rushdie's writing aims to articulate and voice the minority discourses of marginal immigrant communities, whose geographical and cultural displacement exacts a radical readjustment of their racial, ethnic, cultural and national identity, often challenged by the prejudiced, othering perception of the host society. By telling and retelling their histories, Rushdie voices the anxieties and self-interrogations of the migrants, refugees or exiles of postcoloniality, on whose behalf he feels it is incumbent on him to speak. His fictions do not merely represent, but actively participate in these people's quest for identity by trying to answer their dilemmas and warning about the pitfalls of racial, interethnic or inter-religious strife, propagated by those entrenched in the orthodoxies infecting the construction of communal identity in their native countries. After all, the writer's own life is touched by the socio-political or communalist excesses on the subcontinent. The security and stability conferred by his British citizenship is overshadowed by his knowledge of the predicament of his family, who are forced to exchange the persecutions of Muslims in India for the stifling religious oppression of Pakistan. The family ties bonding him to both countries preclude him from becoming detached from their realities, or rather what he perceives as the 'unrealities' of their socio-political turmoil. Like his narrators, Rushdie feels compelled to record and interpret the troubled and troubling histories of the fraternal but fratricide nations of the subcontinent, to excavate the truth from under the ideological disguises of political misrule. His self-conscious fictions, paradoxically proclaiming both their fictitiousness and their referential

fidelity to historical factuality, are construed as instruments of historical exploration which challenge the historiographer's claims of objectivity in interpreting the shifting realities of the postcolonial world, still agonistically divided by the iniquitous binary the so-called First and Third World. As the eventuality of the subcontinent's history has often surpassed even the fabulist's wildest imagination, the provocation posed by Rushdie's fiction is stems from his contention that imagination can in its turn illuminate our understanding of historical phenomena and processes. Damian Grant argues that Rushdie's writing focuses on the duplicitous nature of political discourse and on the mechanisms of discursive manipulation, construed as a particular kind of public fiction-making, a fictionalising of national reality orchestrated by the political in order to obscure the indelible private realities of the oppressed. In other words, Rushdie's novels seem to substantiate the syllogism by which if public politics and history often assume the make-believe nature of fiction, then fiction may as well aspire to the cognitive authority of historiography, assuming the truth status and claims of objectivity, factuality and veracity of traditional historical discourse.

According to Grant, the novelist's challenging pronouncements on the role of fiction-writing in engaging the world and enhancing our understanding of historicity as a discursive and imaginative experience both revive and enrich the seminal theories of the imagination of the great Romantic tradition. Rushdie is a firm believer in the experiential and cognitive function of the imagination, which he considers, as do the Romantics, to be the instrument and medium of superior knowledge. From this belief follows the claim that the work of imagination accedes to meanings and truths obscured and perverted by the proliferating mystifications of political and historical mythologizing. Rushdie observes that the post-modern *Weltanschaung* is marked by a growing scepticism about the beneficence of political agency and about the honesty of its engagement with the quandaries of contemporary geopolitics. Such a pervasive mistrust of global political affairs stems from public misgivings about the occult nature of official truths. In one of his essays, Rushdie comments on the atmosphere of distrust permeating public opinion even in the celebrated bastions of democracy of the West: 'the notion that "visible" history was a fiction created by the powerful, and that …"invisible" or subterranean histories contained the "real" truths of the age, had become fairly generally plausible' (Rushdie 1991: 376). Grant's diagnosis of Rushdie's particular vision of political history can be generalised to the mainstream perspective of most postmodern literary interrogations of history: 'The novelist's mistrust of history is pervasive' (Grant 3). Rushdie's own professions of creed, reflect a widespread postmodern outlook on the

immanent intersections and overlapping of fiction and history. Commenting on Julian Barnes's *History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, Rushdie envisions 'the novel as a footnote to history', which constructs 'not a history but a fiction about what history might be' (Rushdie 1991: 241). In articulating the validity of the novel as a life-enhancing medium of cognition and truth, he concurs with Wilson Harris's argument that 'a philosophy of history may well lie buried in the arts of the imagination'.

But what Rushdie strives after is more than the articulation of a philosophy of postcolonial history. He seeks to anatomise the psychic effects of ideological mass manipulation, the socio-political mechanisms by which the collective dream of nationhood, the focus of Rushdie's obsessive fascination with how 'newness enters the world', is rapidly corrupted and confiscated by political orthodoxies which turn the nationalistic dream into the nightmare of the nation. No clear answer to his reiterated query about the nature of historical renewal is ever definitively enunciated in his texts. Nevertheless, the answer is implied in the pervasive pattern of his fiction, from which we can infer the pessimistic tenet that newness always enters the world as social Utopia only to open a door onto political Dystopia. This two-facedness of historical cyclicality constitutes the prevalent subject of Rushdie's novels, whose multiplicitous, prismatic perspectives on the zeitgeist are refracted in the structural complexity and technical innovativeness of the narrative form and discourse. Rushdie combines the time-honoured tradition of European historical realism or Eastern archetypes of oral storytelling with patently postmodernist approaches to narratological experimentation such as surrealism and magic realism, so as to create a highly synthetic and syncretic novelistic form, which illustrates Bakhtin's concept of the dialogical or polyphonic novel.

The dialogism of Rushdie's writing derives from the centrality of its historical reference and relevance, which turns his novels into fictional palimpsests of real history. Rushdie's penchant for fabulation is constantly qualified by his engagement with the factuality of real history. His hallmark resides in his unique blend of realism and fantastic elements, his arresting juxtapositions between fantasy and the temporal and spatial contours of the real. Avowedly inspired by the South American masters of magical realism, particularly by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Rushdie's novels themselves illustrate how newness enters the world. For Rushdie, the work of fiction represents the ultimate medium for mapping out the ever shifting boundaries of historical and geopolitical realities. Therefore he contends that the novelist's role is to write 'books that draw new and better maps of reality, and make new languages with which we can understand the world' (Rushdie 1991: 100). Imagination functions not only as a ploy to disguise reality, but

as a finer instrument for capturing the elusive meanings of competing realities. Defining it as 'the process by which we make pictures of the world', Rushdie aptly concludes that imagination 'is one of the keys to our humanity" (Rushdie 1991: 143).

Another key to our humanity is our desire to discover the truths and meanings of our passage through the world, and it is this aspiration that Rushdie's literary pursuits respond to. The bitter truths of the subcontinent's postcolonial history invariably pierce the disguise of his prolific fantasy. Despite the writer's disingenuous disclaimers and teasing smoke-screens which profess to the ingenuousness of his fictions, the revelations and indictments of Rushdie's satirical shafts hit their targets, as the numerous suits for libel levelled against him have shown. In defence of his art, Rushdie declares: 'I genuinely believed that my overt use of fabulation would make it clear to any reader that I was not attempting to falsify history, but to allow fiction to take off from history…the use of fiction was a way of creating the sort of distance from actuality that I felt would prevent offence from being taken' (Rushdie 1991: 409). Yet, in this he minimises the impact of his own provocations, because the effect he strives after is, conversely, to allow historical truth to take off from fiction, even when, with feigned innocence, he disproves the referentiality of his fictions. Unfortunately, offence was taken every time and Rushdie's fictionalised representation of real historical referents was taken to trial and found guilty by the offended party, acting as both prosecutor and jury.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Sources

RUSHDIE, Salman, 1981, *Midnight's Children*, London: Jonathan Cape.

RUSHDIE, Salman, 1983, *Shame*, London: Jonathan Cape.

RUSHDIE, Salman, 1988, *The Satanic Verses*, London: Viking.

RUSHDIE, Salman, 1991, *Imaginary Homelands*: *Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, London: Granta Books.

2. References

ANDERSON, Benedict, 1991, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

GRANT, Damian, 1999, *Salman Rushdie*. London: Northcote House.