

Rushdie's *Quichotte*: Chasing the Chimera

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Abstract

The worlds of Rushdie's novels and short stories register largely failed attempts to move beyond the bounds of the present; to imagine other pasts and futures that might discharge the curse of similitude. The paper interrogates that if there is fear in Rushdie's fiction it is the fear of repetitions of entrapment in self-perpetuating structure. The attempt to break free, however, often leads to further confinement. From *Midnight's Children* to *Quichotte*, Rushdie has narrated stories of abortive revolution, of attempted transformation that only usher in destruction.

Keywords: Colonialism; Entrapment; Inheritance; Transformation.

I

Although the very notion of beginning a narration with world-ending events seems perverse, especially if the underlying theme of the novel is going to be optimistic, such a fantasy is very much in-line with millenarian thought. As Mircea Eliade points out "... The idea of the destruction of the world is not basically pessimistic" (Eliade 139). The same idea validates Quichotte's perception of the world around him. It seems Rushdie's Quichotte too is prompted by the following question- "Do people want to or have to live the way do now and what happens to the ones who want to change?" Though, most of his fictional writings traverse through varying pursuits for transformation his protagonists are prompted by the seeming need to escape from the nightmare of an eternal present. The invented worlds of Rushdie's novels and short stories register largely failed attempts to move beyond the bounds of the present; to imagine other pasts and futures that might discharge the curse of similitude. For if there is fear in Rushdie's fiction it is the fear of repetitions of entrapment in self-perpetuating structure. The attempt to break free, however, often leads to further confinement. From *Midnight's Children* to *Quichotte* Rushdie has narrated stories of abortive revolution, of attempted transformation that

only usher in destruction. They display, at the same time, their wariness toward the instant change promoters: the entertainment industry, with its manufactured dreams and bogus promises; the world of corporate advertising with its array of revolutionising products; the New Age with its offer of spiritual renaissance available at a bargain price. "The future is a trap laid out by commercial image archers; the past, meanwhile, transformed into a packet of well-thumbed images..." (Jameson 152) present an avenue of escape into a historical theme park or the reconstructed media event.

Is it possible then to reinvent the past or to fashion a different future when both these projects have been co-opted by an all-devouring media culture? Carey's answer seems to be a qualified 'Yes'. Some of Rushdie's recent works, notably the novel *Quichotte* and *The Golden House*, are narratives that sketch the dreadful beauty of the apocalypse exposing the corruption of a post-modern world obsessed with images of its destruction. And yet like the earlier stories, the recent work somehow transcends destruction-its violence, though unresolved, prefigures a different future. As the author -Sam Du Champs, nay Brother contemplates:

The decay of the Earth in the novel would be a parallel to the decay- the environmental, political, social, moral decay of the planet on which he lived (Rushdie 356)

And again:

The growing catastrophe was not limited to the damaged and disintegrating physical fabric of everything that was. The laws of science themselves appeared to be bending and breaking, like steel girders melting under the pressure of an unimaginable force (Rushdie 370).

In *Quichotte*, Ismail Smile's journey revolves around the attempt to groom and reconcile himself with Sancho, his son; whereas Sam Du Champ's mission is to restore his relations with his sister. His success turns into a chimera. The attempt to retrieve the past unleashes a flood of painful memories; the family's secret history remains an unpaid debt. Both, thus inscribe a tension between *inheritance* and *invention*, between the obligation to relive the past and the will to recreate it. The constant pulls of Rushdie's work deal with transformation and entrapment, as the will to change is channelled into dominant structures of power. There is a consensus throughout his work, whatever its temporal location that the world must change or perish, that a point of Crisis has been reached. The 'crisis' is probably best described in the well-known terms of Gramsci, "...the old is dying and the new cannot be born in this interregnum, a great variety

of morbid symptoms appear" (Gramsci, 276). Rushdie's fiction examines this threshold state, captive to pathology; the state of the exotic hybrid and the sexual /cultural 'other,' and the realm of the grotesque, presided over by the monster. His characters represent well-worn images vulnerable to commercial exploitation. He explores the mythic power inherent in the conception of the remade world; he also shows how those myths may be used as a medium of enslavement. Colonialism, transnational capitalism, the advertising and entertainment industries are the structures of domination and are changing the parameters of being human and in this process these phenomenal 'isms' empower themselves.

This tension manifests itself throughout Rushdie's work in the theme of imaginary surrogate parentage. In this sense, like many others, *Quichotte* is very different from the seventeenth-century picaresque novel *Don Quixote* by Cervantes. Cervantes immortalised an old Spanish nobleman who constantly reads and is carried away by chivalric romances. On the other hand, Rushdie's *Quichotte* is a pooped medical representative salesman from India who is carried away a little too much by watching TV, so much so that he loses the ability to make a distinction between truth and fiction. Even though he retires, he nurses a passion to meet and marry a talk show star Salma R and begins writing letters to her. He even drives across America in his old Chevrolet Cruz along with his imaginary longed for son -Sancho. His journey adds picaresque dimensions to his quest to meet Salma R. On the way he picks up a conversation with Sancho:

"My silly little Sancho," he cries "my son, my sidekick, my squire! Hutch to my star sky, Spock to my Kirk, Scully to my Mulder BJ to my Hawkeye, Robin to my Batman! Peele to my Key, Stimpny to my Ren, Niles to my Frazier, Arya to my Hound! Peggy to my Don, Jesse to my Walter, Tubbs to my Crockett, I Love you!"

"Cut it out, Dad" the imaginary young man replies "What's in all this for me?" (Rushdie 189)

Rushdie's style mesmerises the reader due to elegance of literary allusions. The novel is more or less a caricature of Cervantes' *Quixote*:

'There once lived at a series of temporary addresses across the United States of America, a travelling man of Indian origin and retreating mental powers...' (Rushdie 3)

II

Quichotte has multiple layers of narration. Characters, in each layer, have the lives of their own and they even determine what they want to be as the

narratives evolve. In the beginning of the novel the reader is introduced to Sam Du Champ who is described as:

...the author of the preceding narratives.... was a New York based writer of Indian origin... who had written eight modestly (un) successful spy fictions under the pen name of Sam Du Champ' (Rushdie 21).

He has a life of his own and its sufferings too. Sam Du Champ's *Quichotte* story is a late breakthrough. On several occasions he creates an impression that there are several similarities between Quichotte's life and his own, though he, sometimes, vehemently denies to have any:

'Granted' he writes or rather someone else writes of his thinking, 'his creation and he was approximate of the same age: they had near-identical old roots, uprooted roots...and their parents lives parallel each other, so much so that he... on some days had difficulty remembering which history was his own and which was Quichotte's' (Rushdie 129).

Quichotte's hangover regarding India compels him to draw a parallel with the seven valleys^{1a} of a conventional prerequisite. He looks at the large map of the United States and says:

It doesn't have to be actual valley...The valley is a metaphor. His son asks him, not unreasonably, why in that case they are bothering with a map and Quichotte says; "Every quest takes place both in the sphere of the symbolic ...we maybe after a celestial goal, but we still have to travel along the interstate. 'You lost me there' his son replies (Rushdie 105)

The novel concurrently narrates the life stories of the characters that are doomed and at the same time damned. Contemporariness of socio-cultural and socio-political atmosphere of America, India, and the U.K. are replicated in *Quichotte*. The novel is a road trip story that lives on a steady diet of pop culture references. It could be argued that *Quichotte* is a novel that attempts to reflect the total crumbling insanity of living in a world emancipated from veracity, that shows what happens when lies become as good as facts. Rushdie does not take these issues to their consequential end, he chooses to ignore them, or simply does not care because, in the end, it is a novel about belief more than anything else. Or about *believing*, anyway that is to say about having faith in the conviction that credence alone is enough to make things authentic. At times *Quichotte* is congealed in such a way that the reader loses himself in its shifting reality, one forgets whose imagination one is visiting, detests the narrator for the bad-joke,

the suppleness of his voice, and the constant elbowing. But Quichotte has a tremendous capacity for enchantment because it has a seductive narrative, the saga of a man who loves a woman and a father who loves a son and who will do anything to earn their love. Sometimes that is adequate.

In *Quichotte* Rushdie ossifies his style. In his debut novel *Midnight's Children* (1981), he narrates a story of a boy "handcuffed to history". The narrative voice was that of Bombay dealing with migration and identity. He continued the pattern with *Shame*, the novel on birth of Pakistan, then came *The Satanic Verses* which compelled him to go into hiding for nine years and now the latest *Quichotte* in which his style is strenuous and grating, unlike his earlier works in which he seemed more flamboyant and freer. Parul Sehgal in her review article on *Quichotte* in the *New York Times* quotes Rushdie what he had said for a character in *The Enchantress of Florence*, "If he had a fault, it was that of observation of seeking to be not only himself but a performance of himself, as Rushdie notes regarding a character in *The Enchantress of Florence* which could be read like self-critique". The later books *Shalimar the Clown*, *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty Nights*, *The Golden House* are all tics, technique and hammy narration that try to troupe over patchy stories, exhausting themes, types passing as characters.

For a writer so frequently praised for ingenuity, Rushdie follows a formula of sorts. One can make a bingo card^{2a}: classic novel or myth used as a scaffolding, *Femme Fatale*, story within a story (recounted by a Loquacious Narrator), Topical concern, and defence of Hybridity. *Quichotte* has *Don Quixote* as scaffolding and has debts to *Alice in Wonderland*, *Back to the Future*, the *Odyssey*, *Moby Dick*, *Lolita*, *Pinocchio*, Eugene Ionesco's play *Rhinoceros* and the twelfth-century epic - *Conference of the Birds*. The prose is dense with cultural allusions too: *Candy Crush Saga*, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, the model Heidi Khan, *Men in Black* and many others. Rushdie offers his Google encyclopaedic awareness. Quichotte, the hero, becomes putrefied by his craving for American television host (*Femme Fatale*), Salma R. He sets off in search of his beloved, and chooses for himself a companion, a son he calls, naturally, Sancho. In their mission, they encounter an America of Trump Voter (Trumpistan) and rancorous racism, (allowing for the defence of Hybridity) and become tangled in the subplot involving opioid crises (Topical Concern). The story is revealed to the readers as a work in progress, however, the creation of a second-rate crime writer, another uneasy Indian in America who writes under the name Sam du Champ (the Garrulous Narrator), having some unfinished business at home. But taking a cue from Coleridge's phrase Rushdie creates "a world of willing suspension of disbelief" for his readers in which the reader

"willingly" suspends oneself in the writer's world of disbelief. Regarding chimera, E.M. Forster had contended that it involves fine-tuning on the part of the reader, a special suspension of disbelief. It is not necessarily a great adjustment but it must be accounted for and it must be made, otherwise, the reader will be left on a tenterhook, watching the author's proud meaningless exertion with increasing detachment and coldness.

III

Don Quixote is the first modern novel with its commentaries on fiction, metafiction and reality. "He doubts everything and believes everything." Quixote tells Sancho Panza a translucent precondition for reading fantasy (like a chimera). Don Quixote tells Sancho: "Teeth are more precious than diamonds." Rushdie's *Quichotte* inverts Cervantes' *Quixote* cheekily: 'Author and construct are joined at the hip, their lives entwined by race, place, generation and circumstances'. A Sancho and a Brother give Quichotte a sense of completeness. Though Sancho is invisible to the world and to his father at the beginning of his romantic quest, Sancho Smile begins to acquire a form and identity of his own because this is an era of "Anything can happen", a time of prejudice, bigotry, and racism all amplified by social media where everyone is someone else. Rushdie reiterates that "electronically propagated hysteria" has ushered in an age "in which mob rules and smart phones rule the mob." To critique the regression of the world, Rushdie explains, through Quichotte, "I think it is legitimate for a work of art made in a present time to say, we are crippled by the culture we have made by having made by its popular elements above all"; he even trusts that love is an audition and that he knows how to present himself best to the beloved (Salman R)

In an interview regarding *Quichotte*, Rushdie points out that in 'the present times we experience the end of realism as a form of literary fiction since it depends on a compact between the writer and his/her readers on the meaning of the world and that is no longer disruptive elements like the social media and false news emerging'. Though magic realism uses fantastic elements but where earlier forms incorporating the fantastic affirmed a moral order with divinity in command Rushdie's magical realism is an exploration of the Godless Universe. He often probes into quasi fantastic view in his earlier works, but in *Quichotte*, he is explicitly satirical. He depends on historical research to construct his novels because his childhood memories of India might have faded but he feels tied to India and tries to reinvent it egregiously and satirically. *Quichotte* is a difficult reading, because of the multitudes of characters not differentiated from each other. Their conversations are playful and appear to be more like ineffectual talk.

Salma R's aunt Nargis Kumari, on her estranged sister's death says:

What a fool I have been!" Nargis Kumari cried in full tragic actress mode, to allow a mere man to destroy my closest friendship. What is a man compared to the love between soul sisters? He is a passing shadow. He is a random sneeze. He is a short rain shower on a sunny day. I should have been beside her every minute [whether in] sunshine or rain, now I am as empty as a bottle from which all the wine has been poured. I am a word in a dictionary whose meaning has been erased. I am as hollow as a rotten tree. (Rushdie 41).

Though some of it seems to be amusing if employed very often, it becomes pointless dialogue. If cross talk is inserted paragraph after paragraph in all kinds of situations, one recognises an acute writer's block. Rushdie does mention Priyanka Chopra and her TV show *Quantico* and hints at Indian Bollywood star-show like *Koffee with Karan* to draw a parallel with Salma R's show.

Quichotte is billed as a satire by several critics and reviewers. Satires have to have some elements of mockery of political and social phenomena it picks up as the targets. This argument holds good for classics such as *A Tale of a Tub* or *Gulliver's Travels* or George Orwell's *Animal Farm* or *1984*. But Rushdie feels that times have drastically changed. In the fast-moving and changing times, he tries to satirize not only ethnic and racial hatred in the U.S., U.K. and India, he also responds to the addiction of opiates, cow vigilantism in India, Brexit quagmire and the C.I.A. subterfuges, or mob lynching. It seems Rushdie feels lost regarding contemporary India and even the world affairs that are beyond his comprehension.

If one tries to interpret *Quichotte* from another perspective, it is a picaresque tale of *Quichotte*, framed within the narrative of the author writing it –framed within the outer text which encompasses both these stories. It is not just a story within a story but is a story that admits its artifice. *Quichotte* not only has characters that know they are being written but characters that have opinions on the writing. Thus, it becomes a metafiction within metafiction, where the story is so layered those characters are made up by characters and they cannot only question their existence but also that of the existence of their maker. They are self-reflexive, self-critical, self-conscious and are constantly reminding the reader about their fictionality. At times it compels the reader to question why at all invest so much of time and energy in reading, but one goes on and on. Like his predecessor Quixote, *Quichotte* too invents to build his story with the

characters of his choice to suit his quest. Quixote is on his chivalric quest and Quichotte on his enterprise to meet his dream-girl Salma R. He also identifies members from his memory, family and imagination to start his own voyage. Except for this family, these memories are not his alone but those of the author writing his story. Like his main character, Brother is also an Indian *immigrant* operating under a pseudonym, also in the twilight of his years, weighed down by dysfunctional family history. Brother is not sure if life is mimicking art or it is vice versa. The world of Quichotte is in flux, it is full of glitches, fast and noisy, and every wall is permeable. No one knows what will happen next:

A long quest comes to an end; here they stand in the valley of Annihilation, with the power to disappear into the universe and just possibly into something new. (Rushdie 389)

One may keep on enquiring about the existential identity of fictional characters. The author dozes off on his study table with:

‘...his forehead resting on the wood, bowed down before the computer screen as if performing some ancient rite of worship. So it was on this day of the ending, he was in a half-sleeping, half-waking state when he thought he saw a tiny door open at the very bottom of a corner of his room, less than half of half a millimetre high and through that door a bright light flowed, an intense pinpoint of light, as if it might bethe light of other reality, another Earth, bleeding into his... (Rushdie 390)

The ending reminds the reader of Charles Lamb’s essay ‘Dream Children’, channelling logic and flow of a dream in a series of long sentences, of the string together phrases and no paragraph breaks to be found. Like Lamb Rushdie deftly uses these stylistic concerts to pull the reader into a reverie, creating a sense of tumbling through this dream world with its series of dovetailing tangents. Though it is confusing and hard to navigate through the narrative of *Quichotte* until the reader reaches the end when, with a savvy twist, Rushdie explains the formal oddness of the yarn he has been spinning all along more like a reconnaissance of eupaptic chimera. We are ripped out of the hypnotic start into the most familiar one where:

There they [Miss Salma R and Quichotte] are in the gateway, on the threshold of an impossible dream. (Rushdie 390)

Thus one may conclude that Rushdie’s novel is like its creator: ambitious, smart -sometimes over smart- critical and undoubtedly brilliant.

IV

Another level of interpretation of *Quichotte* can be in the light of Jean Baudrillard's 'Simulacra and Simulations'. According to Baudrillard to create in the new age is inevitably to recycle or simulate signs of the past cultures. Instead of some prior reality, for him, the Disneyland is an artefact that so obviously announces its fictiveness that it would seem to imply some counterbalancing reality. This, however, is a false dualism as the U.S. is a prolonged simulation (this is its reality). Thus, our perceptions are so entangled in pre-packaged media perspective that we can only make sense of the 'real' as a strategy, a means to certain ends decreed by apparently transparent media. It is in this sense that Quichotte's journey from Atlanta to New York can be interpreted. It is intensely woven into his and his creator's incidents of life. One has to ask why man in contemporary society has lost the sense of reality. If one intends to interpret *Quichotte* in Baudrillardian perspective one will have to probe into the five dimensions through which the narrative of the novel passes: media culture, exchange value, multinational capitalism, urbanization, and language and ideology. All these phenomena explain the loss of 'reality' both in the lives of Quichotte and Brother. They are in the grip of contemporary media which is only concerned with interpreting the most private selves of the individuals and compels them to approach the world around them through media lenses, far away from reality.

Secondly, in a globalised world in which money has become a "universal equivalent" against which everything in our lives is measured, things have lost their material reality. Characters like Dr R.K.Smile, Nargis Kumari, Salma R and several others only think in terms of money rather than in terms of reality and lose the sense of 'use-value'. Another essential aspect of the novel is 'multinational capitalism' where it is capital that defines the identities of the characters; the consumer-oriented society hardly pays attention to the proletarians. *Quichotte* is a satire on urbanization. Quichotte and Sancho travel from the West to the East of America, through the urban centres. Due to rapid urbanization man has lost touch with the natural world, so much so that natural spaces across the globe have now become "protected reserves and while travelling they cross the signs "Behold Nature". At times Rushdie suggests that language keeps us from accessing "reality" The earlier understanding of ideology corresponding to Baudrillard was that it puts out of sight the truth, that it represented a "false consciousness," and real working of the state, economic forces or the dominant groups are never visible. There is no outside ideology that can be articulated in language because one becomes so reliant on language to structure that any representation of reality is always ideological and is

always constructed by simulacra.

Notes:

- 1a. The Seven Valleys, a book of mystical writings by Baha'u'llah, the founder of the Baha'i Faith, leads the human soul on a path of spiritual discovery. Baha'u'llah's mystical treatise lists seven valleys, which symbolize the stages of spiritual development: The Valley of Search, The Valley of Love, The Valley of Knowledge, The Valley of Unity, The Valley of Contentment, The Valley of Wonderment, The Valley of True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness. In The Seven Valleys, Baha'u'llah wrote that the seeker's quest for union with God requires a powerful internal desire to search for knowledge and truth. That spiritual love of God, or truth, constitutes the guiding force that signifies both detachment and love.
- 2a. In the United States, **Bingo card** is a game of chance in which each player matches numbers printed in different arrangements on **cards** with the numbers the game host (caller) draws at random. It is also used as a literary device here to highlight characterisation, antagonist, protagonist, external conflict, internal conflict, foreshadow, irony, mood, tone, symbolism, theme, illusion, imagery, metaphor, personification, text- to- life connection, inference, pathos, ethos, logos, rhetorical question, diction and dialogue

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