UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DO RIO GRANDE DO SUL
INSTITUTO DE LETRAS

Paula Bellé Ganzer

The Interstice of the Comma:
Five Instances of Ironic Inversion in Salman Rushdie's *East, West*

Porto Alegre
2018

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Trabalho de conclusão de curso apresentado ao Instituto de Letras da Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul como requisito parcial para a conclusão do curso de Licenciatura em Letras – Língua Inglesa e Literaturas de Língua Inglesa.

Orientadora: Profª Drª Marta Ramos Oliveira

Porto Alegre
2018

CIP - Catalogação na Publicação

Bellé Ganzer, Paula
The Interstice of the Comma: Five Instances of Ironic Inversion in Salman Rushdie's East, West / Paula Bellé Ganzer. -- 2018.
50 f.
Orientadora: Marta Ramos Oliveira.

Trabalho de conclusão de curso (Graduação) -- Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Instituto de Letras, Licenciatura em Letras: Língua Inglesa e Literaturas de Língua Inglesa, Porto Alegre, BR-RS, 2018.

1. Salman Rushdie. 2. irony. 3. migrant identity. I. Ramos Oliveira, Marta, orient. II. Título.

Elaborada pelo Sistema de Geração Automática de Ficha Catalográfica da UFRGS com os dados fornecidos pelo(a) autor(a).

To my dad

In memoriam

AGRADECIMENTOS

A minha trajetória como aluna de Letras na Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul foi longa e não sem os seus percalços. Hoje, ao olhar para trás, não deixo de pensar em Homi Bhabha e em uma frase que, para mim, se destacou em seus agradecimentos. Disse ele que “the memory of gratitude is not best served by the neat lists of people and places that acknowledgements can accommodate. The help we receive is a more haphazard affair.” Dito isso, não posso fugir ao clichê das listas de agradecimento, mesmo sabendo, como Bhabha, que a ajuda e o incentivo que recebemos não pode ser catalogada neste formato.

A todos os professores com quem tive a honra de ter aulas e que contribuíram com a minha formação. Em especial à professora Sandra Maggio, pelo amor genuíno que tem pela literatura; à professora Mônica Nariño, pelos valiosos conselhos e exemplo de força; ao professor Ian Alexander, cujas valiosas indicações literárias contribuirão para a ampliação da minha formação como leitora.

À minha professora e orientadora Marta Ramos Oliveira, pelas inspiradoras aulas de cultura e literatura norte-americanas que serviram para que meu olhar ao outro se tornasse um olhar mais gentil. Em especial, pelas aulas de literatura indiana que ajudaram a expandir meu universo literário e cujo ensaio final foi o embrião deste TCC. Muito obrigada por ter aceito embarcar comigo nesta jornada pelo universo maravilhoso criado por Salman Rushdie, pela orientação delicada, pelos almoços, cafés e conversas.

Aos meus queridos amigos, por todos os anos de amizade e pela compreensão que mostraram durante a minha jornada. É um trabalho árduo o de listar a todos, mas vocês sabem quem são e o lugar especial que ocupam em meu coração. Em especial, gostaria de agradecer a amizade de uma vida inteira que tenho com Aline Ponssoni e Natália Lopes; aos amigos que levei dos meus muitos ambientes de trabalho para a vida: Fernando Weber, Rafael Volpatto, Pat Zílio, Pati Garcia, Andréia Bittencourt, Eduardo Sampaio, Michele Schwertner, Tatti Canto de Carvalho, Rodrigo Vanni; à sensacional Luciana Ehlers, pela amizade e parceria dentro e fora da Letras; aos queridos colegas do NELE. Gratidão.

À Rodrigo Enrich de Castro, companheiro incansável, por todo amor, carinho e paciência.

Aos meus pais, Aldemar Ganzer e Leonice Maria Bellé Ganzer, por todo amor e incentivo, por me motivarem e serem meus exemplos, por encherem a casa de livros e alegria. Ao meu irmão, Fernando Bellé Ganzer, por ser meu contraponto e por me ensinar a ser mais paciente.

Aos entes queridos e amigos que já cruzaram a única fronteira da qual não podemos voltar.

Nunca estamos quietos

Somos trashumantes, somos

Padres, hijos, nietos y bisnietos de inmigrantes

Es más mío lo que sueño que lo que toco

Yo no soy de aquí, pero tú tampoco

(Jorge Drexler, "Movimiento")

Stories of cultural contact and change have been structured by a pervasive dichotomy: absorption by the other or resistance to the other. A fear of lost identity, a Puritan taboo on mixing beliefs and bodies, hangs over the process. Yet what if identity is conceived not as a boundary to be maintained but as a nexus of relations and transactions actively engaging a subject? The story or stories of interaction must then be more complex, less linear and teleological. What changes when the subject of "history" is no longer Western?

(James Clifford, Predicament of Culture*)*

RESUMO

O objetivo deste trabalho é analisar a forma como Salman Rushdie usa ironia e humor em sua coletânea de contos *East, West* para desconstruir ideias preconcebidas sobre o Oriente ao mesmo tempo em que usa a ironia para colocar o Ocidente sob escrutínio similar ao que as culturas orientais são submetidas. Para conduzir essa análise, foram selecionados cinco contos do livro *East, West*: "*The Prophet's Hair*", "*Good Advice is Rarer than Rubies*", "*At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers*", "*Christopher Columbus and Queen Isabella Consummate their Relationship (Santa Fé, AD 1492)*, e "*The Courter*". Como escritor indiano diaspórico, Salman Rushdie ocupa uma posição "entre" a cultura orientas e a ocidental, e esse posicionamento intermediário permite que ele borre os limites historicamente construídos entre o Oriente e o Ocidente ao mesmo tempo em que faz uma inversão irônica de temas como religião, lar, pertencimento e a identidade do escritor migrante. Na seção "*Identity, Diaspora, and Rushdie's "In-Betweeness'*, " esses temas e a natureza de seu impacto na escrita de Rushdie, cujo uso da ironia permite a desconstrução da expectativa de leitores sobre o que encontrar em histórias existentes na coletânea *East, West* foram explorados. Portanto, torna-se fundamental que ironia seja definida, o que foi feito na seção "*Conceptualizing Irony*. " Na seção subsequente, foi realizada a análise estendida dos cincos contos, o que permitiu que se conclua que Salman Rushdie promove o trânsito entre fronteiras culturais e geográficas em *East, West* e que ele é capaz de navegar sua própria posição intermediária usando a ironia e o humor como compasso.

Palavras-chave: *East, West;* Salman Rushdie; ironia; identidade migrante

ABSTRACT

The aim of this work is to analyze how Salman Rushdie uses irony and humor in his collection of short stories *East, West* to deconstruct some preconceived ideas about the East while using irony to put the West under the similar scrutiny that Eastern cultures are subject to. In order to carry out this analysis, I selected five selected short stories from Rushdie's *East, West*: "The Prophet's Hair", "Good Advice is Rarer than Rubies", "At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers", "Christopher Columbus and Queen Isabella Consummate their Relationship (Santa Fé, AD 1492), and "The Courter". As a diasporic Indian writer, Salman Rushdie occupies a position "in-between" Eastern and Western cultures, and this liminal position permits that he blurs the historically built boundaries between East and West at the same time that he provides ironic inversion on themes such as religion, home, belonging and the identity of a migrant write. In the section, "Identity, Diaspora, and Rushdie's "In-Betweeness'," I address these issues and explore the nature of their impact on Rushdie's writings. His use of irony helps deconstruct the readers' expectations as to what to find in stories such as those found in *East, West*. Therefore, conceptualizing irony becomes a fundamental step, which is addressed in the section "Conceptualizing Irony." In the next section, I carry out the extended analysis of each of the five stories which helped draw the conclusion that Salman Rushdie promotes the transit between cultural and geographical borders in *East, West* and that he is able to navigate his own liminal position by using irony and humor as a compass

Keywords: *East, West;* Salman Rushdie; irony; migrant identity

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INTRODUCTION

As unusual as it may seem, the seed for this work was planted in my mind mere months before I needed to officially decide on its theme and focus. And it may seem even stranger to know that my contact with my subject—Salman Rushdie—was a fairly new one, having been established because of the readings in the English Literature IV course, with its focus on Indian literature. Before these classes, I can easily say that my knowledge of Indian writers, diasporic or not, was limited to a few titles and many assumptions. Salman Rushdie, for instance, was that guy who had been charged with a death sentence by that other guy, the Islamic religious leader of… was it Iran? I feel neither pride nor regret for having had these assumptions, since it was because of them that, after coming in contact with such a vast and rich universe, I was able to reformulate my ideas and expand my own literary universe.

The matter of deciding what to write about in such a formal and mandatory context is never an easy one, and the advice is to choose a topic which brought more questions than answers, or to perhaps step out of our comfort zone exactly to challenge old formed ideas and concepts. The choice of Rushdie, an Indian born migrant writer whose birth practically coincides with the very formation of the Indian state in 1947, was very natural to me: I was drawn by his style of writing, his use of the English language, the way he reworked boundaries—literary, cultural, religious, and historical—so as to play with a Southern Brazilian reader's expectations regarding the East. Such expectations not only deal with the East, as commonly thought of as "a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes" (SAID, 2003, p. 1), but also with assumptions usually made whenever the binary opposition East/West is concerned. As such, the West is also in a position to be challenged, although not in the same way as the East, something which has to do with both having different, albeit complementary, definitions.

In his book Orientalism (2003), Palestinian-American intellectual Edward Said defined the East as Europe's "cultural contestant and one of the deepest and most recurring images of the Other" (SAID, 2003, p. 1). He is recognized as one of the most important intellectuals, along with Frantz Fanon, Édouard Glissant and others, who laid the basis for was is now known as postcolonial studies. Discussing colonial modes of asserting knowledge and power, he defines the concept of Orientalism "as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the

Orient" (ibidem, p. 3). This authority, he argues, enables the West to act as the validating institution when it comes to dealing with the Orient, so much so that "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (ibidem, p. 3).

Said presents Orientalism as an academic subject which shows that the knowledge stemming from the dominant West provides its authority over the East and all things related to it. In Said's argument, Orientalism also carries an imaginative meaning where the fantastic aspect of the Orient is in evidence: the Orient as a place of desire, eroticism and exoticness subjugated to relations of power imposed by the Occident. In this sense, accepting the East as a Western invention further emphasizes its fictional character, reinforcing that the East is subject to fantasy and that the West can only be the reality which gives it form.

Still according to Said (2003), and providing another perspective to this opposition between Orient and Occident, both the East and the West are man-made geographical constructions, and, as such, both have histories and traditions that exist in their presence in and for the other. It is this relationship of cohabitation with one another that enables the construction of stereotypical views of Europe as superior to all other non-European cultures, "reiterating European superiority over Oriental backwardness" (SAID, 2003, p. 7).

It is in this context that Salman Rushdie emerges as an important voice, contesting this ideological construction by exploring his own post-colonial identity as a South-Asian expatriate and migrant writer. Rushdie is concerned with the migrant subject who is displaced, living in the midst of another culture, trying to find his own sense of belonging within that reality. This thematic becomes most visible in his work once we consider that he inhabits an "in-between space" (BHABHA, 1994, p. 2) both as a writer of migrant characters and as a migrant subject himself. What Indian critical theorist Homi Bhabha means by an in-between space is the condition that lies at the fundamental existence of migrant subjects: that of inhabiting liminal spaces of existence. An in-between subject is able to look at life from both ends of the telescope so to say and navigate these different perspectives that are not, one might argue, mutually exclusive.

In fact, it is precisely because he is placed at the intersections that Rushdie is able to explore a discursive terrain "that is crowded with previous (mis)representations" (NEEDHAM, 1989, p. 610). Colonial discourse about the Orient served the purpose of reinforcing its foreign reality and

its cultural backwardness in an imperial world which defined itself as civilized and rational. The opposition created by this discursive construction created forms of representation that further emphasized the quasi-abysmal gap between East and West. Because representations of class, gender, local subjects, religion, architecture and many other aspects that constitute a culture were defined by those in positions of power, these representations do not actually reflect the real Orient, they are mere shadows that have always defined the East as a place of magic and exotic beings in a far-off, wild land.

This polarized view of the East leads to the obvious cultural clash between East/West, with all its irreconcilable differences. From his unique position, Salman Rushdie challenges this polarity and subverts it in *East, West* (1994), a collection of short stories which combines history, biography, elements of pop culture and autobiography, thus crossing all the boundaries of fantasy and making it possible for him to recreate reality through fiction. The book is divided into three complementary sections—"East," "West," and "East, West," each consisting of three short stories.

In the first section, "East," Rushdie presents stories that, at first glance, reinforce the traditional stereotypical view of the East, as the Other to the West, only to destroy them. The second section, "West," appears right after East, which in itself is already a reversal of the concepts which Said presented as complementary, a change in perception that shows that, like the East, the West may also be configured as a cultural creation. In the final section, "East, West," in a mimicry of synthesis that turns into a dialogic relationship, Rushdie merges the East and the West perhaps in an attempt to show that there is no opposition between the two and that the usual view of this cultural separation is not one-sided, but plural.

Native American Literature professor David L. Moore proposes different ways of conceiving and negotiating epistemological binaries that stem from cultural contact. According to him, binaries are defined by dichotomies like East vs. West, colonizer vs. colonized, civilized vs. uncivilized. In essence, those dichotomies, even though represented as a duality, are always one-sided and, therefore, not balanced because "one side is closed and the other is open" (1994, p. 9), which implies either an absorption of or a resistance to one of the sides.

The relationship established by Rushdie in the final section of his book is not one of duality, since he does not understand them as static notions in which one would exert more power over the other. On the contrary, Rushdie playfully points to a mimicry of synthesis while showing that the

relationship between East and West cannot be reduced to a binary in Rushdie's *East, West*. While acknowledging the existence of this historically built dichotomy, the very nature of his work serves to further explore how one permeates the other through multiple cultural exchanges that actually deconstruct colonial binaries. The relationship becomes dialogic because it

> emphasizes […] the changeability of meaning in "both" participants, the colonized and the colonizer, the text and the author, the text and the reader, by showing how they are not aligned dualistically but rather are surrounded by influences in a multiple field. (MOORE, 1994, p. 18)

The new meaning that arises from the dualistic opposition East/West is a dialogic construction that navigates between two opposite sides, enabling a dynamic exchange that accepts multiplicities outside its binary nature. It is in this dialogic conversation that Rushdie emerges as the comma, traversing both opposing concepts and reinforcing their dialogic character. In this sense, the comma resists any binary opposition by situating itself as neither East nor West at the same time that it is both the East and the West. In his review of *East, West* for the *London Review of Books*, Marxist literary critic Terry Eagleton conceptualizes the comma as the most important thing about the title

> because it can be seen both as a separator and a bridge. This demarcation seems to be an element of playfulness that invites readers not to take the two terms too seriously, and as each other's opposite, but to accept them because they exist anyway. (EAGLETON, 1994)

In his review of *East, West*, Homi Bhabha complements this idea by arguing that Rushdie "furnishes the little room for literature with a voice that rises from the comma that both divides and joins East and West" (BHABHA, 1994 apud NOAKES and REYNOLDS, 2003). This amalgamation of cultures permeates the whole of Rushdie's fiction, and as the author himself states in his collection of essays *Imaginary Homelands*, his work "rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. Mélange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world" (RUSHDIE, 1991, p. 394). It is no wonder, then, that *East, West* fully explores this cultural mix in the varying forms of fiction present in the book: satire, parody, parable, allegory, and postmodern historiographic metafiction, all presented with pinches of irony and humor.

My difficulty then rested on which criteria to employ when choosing from the nine short stories in the book—since analyzing all nine stories would be outside the scope of this work, not only because there needs to be a common thread of analysis binding them together but also because there is uniqueness and plurality in all of them. My aim with this work is to investigate Salman Rushdie's use of irony and humor since it is my understanding that Rushdie deconstructs some preconceived ideas about the East while using the same irony to expose the West thus showing readers that both East and West are constructions subject to a "leaking" of one into the other, and exposing them as unstable, relative, narrow-minded, contradictory and even hypocritical. With this aim in mind, I have selected the five stories that provide the grounds for my analysis of irony and humor while representing the spirit of the book: the conversations that happen "in-between" East and West.

In the "East" section, I chose "The Prophet's Hair," where a relic belonging to the Prophet causes reversals of fate in a tale of religious fanaticism and its consequences; and "Good Advice is Rarer than Rubies," which shows how carefully built gender stereotypes can be demolished by a young Pakistani bride who delicately decides her own fate outside the social expectations of marriage. In the "West" section, I selected "At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers," a futuristic tale that plays with the blurred lines separating fantasy and reality and further explores that idea of deification of objects, something which is forbidden by Islamic law; and "Christopher Columbus and Queen Isabella of Spain Consummate their Relationship," a fantastic retelling of the relationship between Christopher Columbus and Queen Isabella of Spain, which plays with the notion that, with a change in the discourse, the West can become someone else's East. Finally, in the "East, West" section, I opted for "The Courter," where an elderly Indian ayah who cannot pronounce her Ps is courted in London by an old Eastern European porter and where relationships of belonging to each end of the spectrum East/West are challenged and resignified.

By using irony to bridge the gap between these two ends of a historically and culturally built spectrum, Rushdie helps deconstruct what a reader might expect when encountering stories about the East and West written by an Indian writer. For, what kind of text should any reader expect from such a writer? Surely not stories showing the hypocrisy of Islamic fundamentalism or a story that retells the history of Columbus expedition as a story of desire and consummation driven by power. The irony is not lost on him.

In order to achieve a better understanding of these stories and how they help resignify the relationship East/West, it seems essential to learn about Rushdie himself, his life story as well as his position "in-between" cultures. Whether as a central focus or at the margins of the selected short stories, his relationship and attitude towards Islam also play an important role in his writings. As Rushdie explains in *Imaginary Homelands,* being a Muslim in India made him part of a minority group, highlighting—from very early on—the interstitial character which is present in his body of work. He further defines this relationship with the Islamic religion as a distant one, a relationship that seems more related to his upbringing rather that with religion itself.

> Although I come from a Muslim family background, I was never brought up as a believer, and was raised in an atmosphere of what is broadly known as secular humanism. (I should mention that most Indian Muslims affirm the value of the secular principle, seeing it as their best safeguard as a minority group in a predominantly non-Muslim country.) (RUSHDIE, 1991, p. 430)

Reading and watching Rushdie's interviews as well as reading his essays showed how important religion and identity—especially that of a migrant writer—are to him, so it is only natural that the next section, "Identity, Diaspora, and Rushdie's 'In-Betweeness'," addresses these issues and explores the nature of their impact on his writings. His use of irony helps deconstruct the readers' expectations as to what to find in stories such as those found in *East, West*. Therefore, conceptualizing irony becomes a fundamental step, one to be undertaken in section three, "Conceptualizing Irony." Following this, in section four, "Ironic Inversion in Rushdie's *East, West*," the five selected short stories will be analyzed in an attempt to prove the thesis that Rushdie's use of irony enables a deconstruction of some preconceived ideas about the East while using the same irony to put the West under similar scrutiny that Eastern cultures are subject to. However, all of these aspects can only be truly understood when one acknowledges Rushdie as a diasporic writer and explores his life before and after the fatwa[1] was issued.

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[1] A fatwa is any religious decision made by an Islamic scholar according to Islamic law. A fatwa is not necessarily a death sentence—like Rushdie's. It is an authoritative legal opinion or interpretation regarding Islamic law.

IDENTITY, DIASPORA, AND RUSHDIE'S "IN-BETWEENESS"

Homi Bhabha uses the term "in-between" to refer to liminal spaces where subjects, positioned much like the comma in the title of *East, West*, abandon their identity as colonial subjects—in which race, gender, generation, institutional location, geopolitical locale, sexual orientation, etc., are defined by an imposition—in order to articulate their cultural differences as a sum of those limiting parts. Using Renée Green's stairwell metaphor, Bhabha further develops this idea of "in-betweeness" as liminal space:

> The hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities. This interstitial passage between fixed identification opens up the possibility of a *cultural hybridity* that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy. (BHABHA, 1994, p. 5) (my emphasis)

Navigating these liminal spaces that allow for cultural hybridity, Salman Rushdie's position reminds his audience that "the truest eye may now belong to the migrant's double vision" (BHABHA, 1994, p. 8), a vision only possible for a person "caught between or inhabiting two cultures [...] simultaneously—a native or indigenous culture and a culture imported and selectively imposed by the Europeans" (NEEDHAM, 1989, p. 610). Rushdie writes a migrant story in his fiction, reflecting a post-colonial identity which, because it is "now partly of the West, […] is at once plural and partial" (RUSHDIE, 1991, p. 15). Inhabiting multiple cultures further emphasizes his border existence as "fluid, multiple, shifting, and responsive to varied situations and varied audiences" (NEEDHAM, 1989, p. 613), echoing the comma to which he has been associated with.

Born in Bombay in 1947 months before India's independence, Salman Rushdie experienced what he dubbed "unbelonging" from an early age. His family, a traditional, wealthy Indian family, fell under suspicion "because they, being Muslim, did not emigrate to Pakistan" (FRANK, 2008, p. 130) after the controversial Partition that created (secular, "Hindu") India and (Muslim) Pakistan. In *Imaginary Homelands* Rushdie says,

> I was born an Indian, and not only an Indian, but a Bombayite— Bombay, most cosmopolitan, most hybrid, most hotchpotch of Indian cities. My writing and thought have therefore been as deeply influenced by Hindu myths and attitudes as Muslim ones. (RUSHDIE, 1991, p. 404)

For Rushdie, the Partition "ultimately took away his country and hometown" (FRANK, 2008, p. 130) because, following this, he started a series of migrations which instilled in him one of the central themes in his work: home. Rushdie first moved from India to England as a thirteen-year-old boy going to a boarding school. This move marked the last time he lived in India permanently. After finishing his studies—and briefly living alongside his family in England—he went to Pakistan where his family was living, but only for a few years. Rushdie moved back to England, and nowadays he has permanent homes in London and New York. Nothing makes his position of "in-between" cultures, his feeling of "unbelonging" clearer. "Being situated on borders is also tied in with the notion of distance from the center; distance, that is, not as the opposite of proximity, but as that which can, though does not necessarily, produce a critical and self-aware mode of inquiry" (NEEDHAM, 1989, p. 615).

Questioning, critical, self-conscious and self-aware, Salman Rushdie is at once inside and outside cultures, he represents the "insider's outsideness" (BHABHA, 1994, p. 20), using distance from his homeland and his multiple homes—where he could never be anything but foreign—as a tool for self-consciousness. According to Anantha Murthy, the "critical insider" is a writer who "embraces the contradictions of his own position as a mark of creative potential, not of a cultural decline or of a continuing colonial domination" (1986 apud ASHCROFT, GRIFFITHS e TIFFIN, 1989, p. 119) and Rushdie makes use of his position of "critical insider" in his works of fiction and critical essays, transforming his "unbelonging," his "outsideness," in his identity.

> There was always a tug-of-war in me between 'there' and 'here,' the pull of roots and of the road. In that struggle of insiders and outsiders, I used to feel simultaneously on both sides. Now I've come down on the side of those who by preference, nature, or circumstance simply do not belong. This unbelonging—I think of it as disorientation, loss of the East—is my artistic country now. (RUSHDIE, 2002, p. 266, apud FRANK, 2008, p. 129)

His own displacement as an immigrant granted him a place in the Indian diaspora, "a group of natives who find themselves outside the borders" (GEORGE, 2012, p. 180). According to feminist postcolonial author Rosemary Marangoly George, "the literature produced out of

diasporic experiences has always been in the business of constructing fictions that fit realities that don't fit realities" (ibidem, p. 180). In that sense, the stories Rushdie tells all stem from his liminal position as a diasporic writer.

After the publication of *The Satanic Verses* on September 26, 1988, Rushdie went through another kind of migration, one "from a public life into a life in hiding" (FRANK, 2008, p. 130). Accusing Rushdie of blasphemy, Iran's Islamic leader Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa against him, encouraging all Muslims to kill Rushdie, his translators and editors. *The Satanic Verses*, a novel about two Indian emigrants and their comings and goings between Bombay and London and between faith and doubt, was considered blasphemous because it provided other, fictional, ways of reading the Quran, subverting its contents by, for example, misnaming the Prophet and naming the fictional prostitutes using the names of the Prophet's wives. It does indeed seem a serious offense to Islam, and Rushdie has since apologized to Muslims and, later in life, acknowledged the importance of his Muslim identity. However, when asked on a television show about a comedy sketch based on his fatwa, he commented that

> because the attack was not funny, it was assumed that the book couldn't be funny. And because the attack was kind of weird and incomprehensible and foreign and theological, it was assumed that the book would be weird and incomprehensible and theological and incomprehensible. You know, and somehow, I acquired the characteristics of the attack against me. And I've had to sort of get out from under that cloud. (RUSHDIE, 2017)

This sense of humor and wit also influence his work, allowing him to address birthplace, language, family, and culture, essentially all that constitutes human identity, as markers of his own identity as a migrant writer who is

> at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy. If literature is in part the business of finding new angles at which to enter reality, then once again our distance, our long geographical perspective, may provide us with such angles (RUSHDIE, 1991, p. 15)

In the same vein as Rushdie, Bhabha defines literature in the post-colonial world as the study "of the way in which cultures recognize themselves through their projections of otherness" (BHABHA, 1994, p. 17). Post-colonial literature deals with alterity, enabling other voices—voices

from the borders, from the margins— to tell their own stories. Otherness, thus, provides new grounds for literature and "migrant, colonized, or political refugees" (ibidem, p. 17) to stand upon. Although unstable, the ground upon which Rushdie stands, as a migrant writer, permits that he sees reality through different perspectives, while never ceasing to question his own migrant identity—a recurrent theme in his work. In *Midnight's Children* (1981), the novel that brought him praise and made his name famous—earning him the "Booker of Bookers" award in 1993—, his questioning nature and self-awareness, in the guise of the narrator, asks,

> Who what am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I've gone which would not have happened if I had not come. [. . .] to understand me, you'll have to swallow a world. (RUSHDIE, 1981, p. 383)

As exemplified in the excerpt above, the construction of identity is, simultaneously, an individual, inner process and a collective, external happening. According to Jamaican scholar Stuart Hall in his essay "Minimal Selves" (1987) "all identity is constructed across difference" (HALL, p. 45). In her book *Woman, Native, Other* (1989) feminist writer Trinh Minh-Ha, further qualifies difference by attributing a finality to it. Essentially, she says, it means a "division in the understanding of many. It is no more than a tool of self-defense and conquest." This dynamic construction between "us" and "them" provides the necessary conditions for identity to be formed. Individuals define themselves according to who they are not, and this interpersonal relationship evolves into a sense of belonging—or, as in Rushdie's case, "unbelonging"—to a certain group. This could not be more relevant than in the historically constructed relationship between East and West and Rushdie's role in between both worlds.

As both an outsider and an insider, he is capable of writing the nation through symbols, magical realism and irony. His style of writing approximates him to traditional Indian stories and storytelling—a true storyteller of the Indian diaspora—shedding light on how the East is perceived by the West but also on how this image of the East can be deconstructed in order to accommodate its multiple identities and cultures. His extensive knowledge of the West has also enabled him to take elements of Western culture (pop culture, movies, and TV series) and deconstruct them to fit his own reality. So much so that his works of fiction

> demand from the reader great familiarity with Eastern and Western cultures and the history that connects them both, especially the founding texts of his social, political and religious identity. His work shows that resistance to an imperialist cultural model is always built from parts of this culture, no matter how dismantled, criticized and transcended they may be. (my translation)[2]

Rushdie's migrant identity, characterized by his humor and wit, reinforces his position as the comma which connects both East and West, indicating that his voice rises from the interstices of what could be a gap left by these clashing cultures, but which works as a bridge, connecting both sides of the spectrum–whether cardinal, geopolitical, or just points of view. For Rushdie, or rather, in his *East, West,* "neither side of the border is exempt from critical scrutiny" (NEEDHAM, 1989, p. 618), and much "like flavors when you cook" (RUSHDIE, 1981, p. 38), they leak into one another, in a conversation which only Rushdie, armed with irony, could make real.

[2] "O trabalho de Salman Rushdie exige do leitor uma grande familiaridade com as culturas oriental e ocidental e a história que as entrelaça, principalmente os textos fundadores de sua identidade sociopolítico-religiosa. Sua obra mostra que a resistência a um modelo cultural imperialista é sempre constituída de partes dessa cultura, por mais que estejam elas desmontadas, criticadas e transcendidas. " (BORGES, 2011, p. 153)

CONCEPTUALIZING IRONY

Before attempting to analyze how Salman Rushdie uses irony to play with readers' expectations which eventually allows for a deconstruction of preconceived ideas regarding the opposition East/West, it is important to establish a concept of irony. However, this is not as simple a task. In its origin, irony functioned as a rhetorical device used by orators in ancient Greece to elicit laughter from the audience, laughter, as such, was a marker of the success of the orator. Greek philosopher Socrates used irony as a teaching technique: pretending his students to be wiser than him, he asked questions that would eventually expose his students to the ridicule of their own misconceptions. Following this definition established by the Socratic method—known as Socratic irony—until the Renaissance, irony was considered a mark of unreliable behavior that aimed at mockery and deceit, since it came to determine that what one person said was in fact contrary to what they meant.

This binary what-is-said vs. what-is-meant accompanies definitions of irony since Socratic times. According to Childs and Fowler (2006), in *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms*, irony can be defined as "a mode of discourse for conveying meanings different from, and usually opposite to, the professed or ostensible ones" (p. 123). In this sense, irony works as a kind of "impostor," as a rhetorical device used in contexts as simple as the ones where an ironic comment is used to state what is obviously untrue—saying "What a beautiful day!" when it is raining, for example. Irony enables the ironist and the interlocutor to establish meaning that may help decode human experience in a conflicting world. Australian cultural theorist Claire Colebrook, defines irony as a device that can also

> refer to the huge problems of postmodernity; our very historical context is ironic because today nothing really means what it says. We live in a world of quotation, pastiche, simulation and cynicism: a general and all-encompassing irony. Irony, then, by the very simplicity of its definition becomes curiously indefinable. (COLEBROOK, 2004, p. 1)

Accordingly, in this view, irony acquires a political meaning, which serves to conceal the ironist's intention. Such concealment allows for the characteristic ambiguity of irony to permeate our every interaction. If irony can happen as a broad social occurrence, then conceptualizing it has become progressively more diversified, ranging from the ability to keep an interpersonal distance

from what is being said to the ability of concealing—through an ironic statement—what one really means.

Understanding irony to be just as indefinable, critical theorist D.C. Muecke stated that "irony is an act, not simply a significance" (1970, p. 100 apud HUTCHEON, 1992, 219). It is a social act because irony leaves gaps for the interlocutor to fill with their own interpretation, which does not always happen as the ironist initially intended, filling these gaps with misunderstandings. According to Canadian theorist of postmodernism Linda Hutcheon (1994), this space between expression and understanding is where irony happens, and which is a tricky and unpredictable space, since it may lead to misunderstandings of ironic statements. Like Rushdie himself, irony occupies a space "in-between" and it is

> an interpretive and intentional move: it is the making or inferring of meaning in addition to and different from what is stated, together with an attitude toward both the said and the unsaid. The move is usually triggered (and then directed) by conflictual textual or contextual evidence or by markers which are socially agreed upon." (HUTCHEON, 1994, p. 11)

Irony can be understood as the dynamic relationship between the spoken and the unspoken, a sort of dialogue that happens in the interstitial space of coexistence that removes "the security that words mean only what they say" (HUTCHEON, 1994, p. 14). Such removal makes people uneasy around irony, it causes discomfort and suspicion. All irony elicits an emotional response from its interlocutors, "(from anger to delight) and the various degrees of motivation and proximity (from distanced detachment to passionate engagement)" (ibidem, p. 15).

Since this work aims at analyzing a literary work through the lenses of irony, it becomes important to draw a parallel between both irony and literature as acts for conveying ideas and sharing world views. Irony is very common in literary works, because it is the essence of literature to allow for the questioning of preconceived or stereotypical ideas. Much like literature, irony is

> both questioning and elitist, both disruptive of norms and constructive of higher ideals. On the one hand, irony challenges any ready-made consensus or community, allowing the social whole and everyday language to be questioned. On the other hand, the position of this questioning and ironic viewpoint is necessarily hierarchical, claiming a point of view beyond the social whole and above ordinary speech and assumptions. (COLEBROOK, 2004, p. 150)

This questioning and unpredictability in irony act against readers' expectations. Hence, "the word irony refers to the limits of human meaning; we do not see the effects of what we do, the outcomes of our actions, or the forces that exceed our choices. Such irony is cosmic irony, or the

irony of fate" (COLEBROOK, 2004, p. 13). This kind of irony is the one to be found in the short stories selected for this analysis, since the reader assumes a position in which they know more than the characters facing the ironic situations.

Another important aspect of irony present in the selected works of Salman Rushdie is the humor and wit that permeates the ironical twits in the stories, and which "can be seen as a positive characteristic of language usage, close to punning or perhaps even metaphor." (HUTCHEON, 1992, p. 222). The irony found in the selected short stories is used to challenge preconceived and irrefutable views of the world. Rushdie's irony is more similar to that of the Greek orator who deemed a speech successful if their interlocutors laughed at its conclusion. In such instances, humor follows if the irony is understood by those at its receiving end. Hutcheon points to the misconceptions regarding irony and humor, since not every ironic remark is humorous but humor can be the objective of irony. Hutcheon emphasizes that irony can be associated with humor since "both involve complex power relations and both depend upon social and situational context for their very coming into being" (HUTCHEON, 1994, p. 25).

For the purpose of this analysis, irony is not only going to be taken as more than just the saying of one thing meaning another, but as a way to present a "habit of making or perceiving incongruities [which] has an impressive tendency to broaden the view, leading to the perception of incongruities on a wider and wider scale" (CHEVALIER, p. 44 apud HUTCHEON, p. 223). Humor, in this sense, requires that readers understand the irony and are able to interpret it as a new perspective for the familiar to be seen differently.

As previously established in this work, the familiar is the historical construction of the East and of the West, each as carrier of one fixed, irrefutable connotation. Rushdie's positionality as inhabitant of multiple cultures—and his ironic view of many worlds—allows for these definitions to be challenged and rebuilt as expressions of the many possible perceptions that the East and the West enable. French philosopher Gilles Deleuze expands this idea of multiplicity when conceptualizing irony as "multiplicity [itself]—or rather, the art of multiplicities" (DELEUZE, 1994, p.182 apud COLEBROOK, 2004, p. 130).

Building on Rushdie's use of irony to refute any fixed ideas about the perceptions regarding the East and the West—thus exposing their ambiguity—and following this conceptualization of irony as "the art of multiplicities," the next section and its subsequent subsections will focus on the analysis of each of the selected short stories.

IRONIC INVERSION IN RUSHDIE'S *EAST, WEST*

As defined in the previous section, irony occupies an intermediary space between what is said by a writer and what is left unsaid, which depends upon the reader to decode and understand. Seen as this interactive process of decoding, irony may allow humor and wit to emerge from a text, assuming a characteristic of playfulness. Such words—irony, wit, humor, playfulness—are not uncommon in critical reviews and academic papers regarding of Rushdie's work. And they were fundamental in establishing the criteria for the selection of the following stories.

It is important to mention that, although the stories in *East, West* share many commonalities and may be read as conversational pieces, only one of the selected stories, "The Courter," was written for the book. The other four were published in different dates and places: "The Prophet's Hair" first appeared in *The London Review of Books*, on April 16th, 1981; "Good Advice is Rarer than Rubies" was published in *The New Yorker* on June 22nd, 1987; "Christopher Columbus and Queen Isabella of Spain Consummate Their Relationship (Santa Fé, AD 1492)" was also published in *The New Yorker*, but on June 17th, 1991; and, "At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers" was published in *Granta Magazine* on April 1st, 1992.

4.1. "The Prophet's Hair"

Written two years before the controversial novel *The Satanic Verses*, which put a price on Rushdie's life and made him a target for Islamic fundamentalists, "The Prophet's Hair"—a recollection of a true historical event told through the lenses of magical realism–also touches on the important topic related to the Islamic religion, namely the adoration of an object. It tells the story of how a family of non-believers was destroyed after coming in contact with a religious relic: a vial containing the hair of the Prophet Muhammad. This sacred relic is real and it was stolen from the Hazratbal mosque at Srinagar in 1963. The robbery caused many riots and violent confrontations in the area surrounding the mosque and among the Muslim population of Kashmir. The violent ramifications of this theft are also present in its fictionalized retelling: in the story of

how this powerful, “misappropriated relic” (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 45) apparently casts a curse on those around it, considering the fact that simply being under the same roof as the relic caused significant changes in the characters’ lives.

Told in a non-linear way, the story may be read as a postponement of the main events, almost as if it were a fable: it starts with the story of a young man entering a thieves’ lair only to be beaten into a coma, the it moves to his cautious sister also venturing into the same place to finally hire a thief to steal the relic found by their father and which brought the family nothing but disgrace. “This technique of circling back from the present to the past, of building a tale within a tale, and persistently delaying climaxes are all features of traditional narration and orature” (ASHCROFT; GRIFFITHS; TIFFIN, 1989, p. 184). According to the authors, such technique is registered from as early as ancient Sanskrit texts. Ancient Indian texts like *The Vedas*— the oldest scriptures of Hinduism—, the Hindu epic poems *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* as well as the Middle Eastern *The Thousand and One Nights* are oral narratives which had their traditional techniques preserved in written form and which extend their characteristics and influences to literary productions.

“The Prophet's Hair” taps into this bountiful source of eastern oral narrative to tell a story which is not linear and which uses fable-like elements in order to emphasize the story’s foreign aspect: characters which may be read as types—the Good Son, the Good Daughter, the Moneylender, the Thief of Thieves, and so on—, the appearance of fantastic elements in the story, and the fact that it functions as a cautionary tale about the destructive power of obsessive and misplaced worship.

Although the story starts with the son Atta and his failed attempt to hire a thief, the event that sets the story in motion is the day that his father Hashim, the moneylender, finds the relic floating on the river and takes it for himself. Hashim, the moneylender, is a collector. His study is full of impaled butterflies, three dozen scales models of a legendary cannon, countless swords, a Naga spear, almost one hundred terracotta camels, many Samovars, and tiny sandalwood animals. Upon seeing a glimpse of silver in the water in the morning of that fateful day, he takes whatever it is and brings it home for further inspection.

He knows instantly that he has in his possession “the famous relic of the Prophet Muhammad, that revered hair [which was stolen] from its shrine” (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 43). As an

honorable citizen, he should return it, thus helping restore the state to peace. However, his collector's mania, as well as his reasoning nature, speaks louder.

> And after all, Hashim told himself, the Prophet would have disapproved mightily of this relic-worship. He abhorred the idea of being deified! So, by keeping this hair from its distracted devotees, I perform—do I not—a finer service than I would by returning it! Naturally, I don't want it for its religious value… I'm a man of the world, of this world. I see it purely as a secular object of great rarity and blinding beauty. In short, it's the silver vial I desire, more than the hair. (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 44)

For the moneylender, the vial is just another collectible to add to his shelves, something to be treasured and kept hidden and safe from the prying eyes of the outside world. This inversion of values represented by the worshipping of the vial carrying a religious relic instead of the relic itself is how Rushdie explores the theme of fanaticism and how blind faith can be as devastating as a vice such as greed or pride.

The fact that Hashim and his family lived almost secular lives within a Muslim community breaks a Westerner's reader expectations as to what a Muslim family may be like. Hashim is not a godly man, he does not live by the Quran, he charges abusive interest rates over his loans, he raises his children in complete freedom and independence—his daughter does not even wear any kind of veil, she goes around the city barefaced, "which was unseemly for any good Muslim girl to do" (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 46). There is nothing is their lives that closely resembles any of the assumed austerity of Islamic law. Rushdie breaks with the assumed stereotype that Muslims are fanatics by presenting a family of Muslims whose nominal faith does not prevent them from living secular lives.

Coming in contact with the relic, however, seems to deprive the moneylender from his previous rationality. Ironically the contact with a relic which by itself should not be worshipped brings the very worst of fanaticism to Hashim, leading to the destruction of his family. This newfound fanaticism leads him to burn all the books in house, with the exception of the Quran, to forbid all kinds of entertainment and to become very violent towards his family and debtors. This change in the moneylender was not limited to his words. His habits were also changed by it.

> At five o'clock the next morning the moneylender forced his family to rise, wash and say the prayers. From then on, he began to pray five times daily for the first time in his life, and his wife and children were obliged to do so. (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 46)

This outburst of religious fanaticism is not well received by the inhabitants of a once happy home. For Atta, his son, and Huma, his daughter, the hair seems to carry a curse that can only be broken once the hair was out of the house and back at its shrine. After a failed attempt to get rid of the relic, Atta, enters a thieves' lair to hire someone to steal the relic. However, he is foolish enough to carry a large sum of money with him. His rich attire gives him away so that he is beaten by two thieves. Owing to the seriousness of his injuries, Atta enters a coma. Just as desperate as he was, Huma decides to go back to the place he had been beaten and demand the services of a thief herself, a task which she undertakes by taking more precautions than Atta. She says for everyone to hear:

> I should say that I am carrying no money, nor am I wearing any jewelry items. My father has disowned me and will pay no ransom if I am kidnapped; and a letter has been lodged with the Deputy Commissioner of Police, my uncle, to be opened in the event of my not being safe at home by morning. In that letter he will find full details of my journey here, and he will move Heaven and Earth to punish my assailants. (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 37)

Her little speech was her only protection against any harm. By all accounts, Huma might suffer a much worse fate than her brother did. She possesses an exceptional beauty that even the unexplained bruises and welts in her face and arms cannot hide; as a woman, she is very vulnerable especially because she is not wearing a veil covering her face. Huma breaks the assumed expectations of a woman brought up in a traditional Muslim community in the valley of Kashmir since she is shown as determined and brave. When her father commands her to go on purdah[3], she challenges his authority and refuses to do so, which earns her those bruises and welts. Her determination to end the curse of the relic only gains in strength after her brother's misfortune.

Considering that Muslim women are rarely given the space to speak out, that fact that Huma challenged her father and showed more intelligence than her brother counts toward the deconstruction of preconceived notions that the West has regarding Islam and its women. Huma is independent because her father raised her to be so. The fact that he comes in contact with the relic and becomes a fundamentalist affects Huma enormously because under Islamic law a woman should be more protected at the expense of her freedom as an individual. Her resolution to go after a thief, even after the violence that befell her brother, stems from her desire to get things back to normal, to regain her freedom, "to get rid of the hair *at all costs*" (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 50).

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[3] Purdah is the practice among women in certain Muslim and Hindu societies of living in a separate room or behind a curtain, or of dressing in all-enveloping clothes, in order to stay out of the sight of men or strangers.

And so it is that she comes across the enormous, boogey man of a thief called Sheikh Sín, the Thief of Thieves, who bears a horrible scar “in the shape of the letter sin in the Nastaliq script” (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 40). However, appearances are the most deceiving in this tale. The thief, an old man who is getting sicker and sicker, is desperate to escape his life of crime. So desperate in fact, that he accepts this one last job—which seems to be a cursed job—to secure a good old life for him and his blind wife. He is not concerned about his four sons, since,

> with a parent’s absolutist love, he had made sure they were all provided with a lifelong source of high income by crippling them at birth, so that, as they dragged themselves around the city, they earned excellent money in the begging business. (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 53)

With the promise of jewelry worth a fortune, the thief acts on the same night, a “burglar’s night [with] clouds in the sky and mists on the winter water” (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 53). Fantastically entering the silent house as a bird—recognized by the same horrible scar—, he goes into the moneylender’s bedroom to steal the relic, for the moneylender started sleeping with it under his pillow. The thief is within inches of finally taking the relic from Hashim, when Atta shouts his last deathbed cry before dying “*Thief! Thief! Thief!*” (ibidem, p. 54). This sudden burst of life from her comatose son, awakens his mother, who also starts screaming. All of this noise promptly awakens the moneylender, who has also taken to sleeping with one of his many swordsticks next to his bed in case he needs to defend his relic. While the thief hides in a dark corner, waiting for his chance to steal the relic, the moneylender blindly—from sleep or fanaticism or both—attacks a shadow in the passageway and kills it. Upon discovering that the shadow is his own daughter, Hashim takes the sword to his chest and kills himself. The only survivor of this strange night is his wife, who is driven mad after all those deaths and is forever committed to an asylum.

Abandoning his dreams of a rich retirement, the Thief is able to escape the house in possession of the relic and explains to his wife that he needs to go into hiding for a while. His fears of being betrayed by any younger criminal are confirmed when his hideout is revealed, he is found by the Deputy Commissioner of the Police, Huma and Atta’s uncle, and killed. Miraculously, his wife and four children wake up the next day blessed by being under the same roof as the relic. His sons, “hopelessly devout men” who, in spite of their crippled leg, wish to make “the pilgrimage to Mecca some day” (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 53), gain the full use of their legs back, as if they had never

been broken. Instead of rejoicing that they were cured by the power of the Prophet's hair, they were furious for diminishing their livelihood "by 75 per cent" (ibidem, p. 58).

Rushdie further extends his ironic twist by showing the thief's sons as greedy as the moneylender had been. When their legs were crippled they would never have an opportunity to go on the pilgrimage to Mecca. Now, by the fantastic powers of the relic, they are able to carry on with their wish to be closer to their faith. However, all they can think of is the loss they suffered by gaining their legs back. Only the Thief's wife, who did not even seem to be aware of its existence, was the worthy recipient of its blessings, gaining her sight back and being now able to "spend her last days gazing once more upon the beauties of the valley of Kashmir" (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 58).

Although, at first glance, the title "The Prophet's Hair" may seem, it is not a story about religion. It is a story about religion turned into obsession and it serves as a criticism to a specific religious cult surrounding Muhammad—a cult which even the Prophet would have disapproved of, since he never wanted to be deified. Rushdie's use of irony in this fable-like story is his way of expressing his criticism of aspects of Islamic religion opposing Islam.

In an article published in 1999 in *The New York Times*, Rushdie reflects upon the relationship of the Islamic world and the West and the different forms of treatment that West's "Islamophobia" generate. According to Rushdie, Muslims are right to protest against discriminations but

> it is absolutely wrong [...] of [Muslims] to demand that their belief-system—that any system of belief or thought—should be immunized against criticism, irreverence, satire, even scornful disparagement. (RUSHDIE, 2002, p. 287)

As a Muslim, Rushdie openly criticizes aspects of Islamism that he considers hypocritical. In "The Prophet's Hair," he breaks Western readers' expectation regarding the levels of devotion to be in a religion as complex as Islam. According to a possible reading of the short story, it is a stereotypical perspective that all Muslims are fanatics and can become fundamentalists. The irony of the story lies in the fact that it plays with the power of the relic and how it affected the characters differently: it turns a non-believer into a fanatic, while exposing the fanatics as greedy and ungrateful. Blinded by the power of the relic, those who wanted it for the wrong reasons were destroyed by it.

4.2. “Good Advice is Rarer Than Rubies”

The plot of “Good Advice is Rarer than Rubies” is very simple: it is the story of the encounter of the two main characters, Miss Rehana and Muhammad Ali. Muhammad Ali is an advice expert who profits from conning women who go to the British Consulate in Pakistan to get their permit to enter England. He calls them “Tuesday women” because they arrive at the gates of the consulate in a colorful and noisy bus on the last Tuesday of the month. Miss Rehana is one of those women and right from the start Muhammad Ali is impressed by her. Unlike most of the Tuesday women, Miss Rehana is beautiful, does not cover her face and arrives alone to ask for her permit.

Muhammad Ali earns his money by first scaring his potential victims with all the possible questions they might get in the interview for their permits and then by offering them a document which would guarantee their visas to England without going into the Consulate at all.

> Business was good, because the women would often pay him five hundred rupees or give him a gold bracelet for his pains, and go away happy. […] Life is hard, and an old man must live by his wits. It was not up to Muhammad Ali to have compassion for these Tuesday women. (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 10)

He chooses his victims well, usually the most vulnerable of the Tuesday women. However, fascinated by her beauty, he is drawn to Miss Rehana, offering her his “good advice.” Upon her refusal, claiming that “good advice is rarer than rubies” (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 6) and, therefore, she cannot afford it, he offers it to her for free, in the first of the many ironic twist in Rushdie’s tale: for a man who earns his living by swindling vulnerable women, offering his “services” for free is indeed unusual.

> *I am going crazy*, Muhammad Ali thought, because he heard his voice telling her of its own volition, ‘Miss, I have been drawn to you by Fate. What to do? Our meeting was written. I also am a poor man only, but for you my advice comes free. (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 7)

Before giving her his advice, he asks some questions and he, and the readers, learn that she has a fiancée in London, Mustafa Dar, and that she needs her permit to move to England and marry

him. Upon inspecting her documents, he says that going into the Consulate is not easy, and then he starts his customary speech, listing all kinds of questions she would be asked and telling her that if she answered any of the questions wrong she was not going to be given a permit at all.

Another ironic twist to the story is when Muhammad Ali surprised even himself and offered her a British passport that would guarantee her safe entry to England: “Anything was possible now, on this day of his insanity. Probably he would give her the thing free-gratis, and then kick himself for a year afterwards” (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 11). During this exchange, she seems to be laughing at him, but she refuses the passport using, as her reasoning, another twist on expectations: “you are proposing I should commit a crime […] and go to Bradford, London, illegally, and therefore justify the low opinion the Consulate sahibs have of all of us” (ibidem, p. 12).

Contrary to all expectations, she does not jump at the opportunity to go to England one way or another. She seems very aware of how Pakistani people are seen by those in power in the region, and how not to propagate the stereotype. Not only do the sahibs at the Consulate assume that all those women would lie and forge papers to go to England, but also does Muhammad Ali, who takes advantage of their desperation to leave to extort money from them. But Miss Rehana seems to have a mind of her own and refuses to accept anything illegal from him.

After she enters the Consulate, he stands outside, trying to persuade himself not to wait for her, but standing outside the gates all the same. When she leaves and sees him hovering at gates, she offers to buy him food to thank him for his advice and to apologize for her rudeness. As they eat, she tells him that she was supposed to go to England to meet the man her father chose for her when she was a little girl. This man, Mustafa Dar, is twenty-one years older than her, and a complete stranger.

> ‘It was an arranged engagement’, Miss Rehana said all at once. ‘I was nine years old when my parents fixed it. Mustafa Dar was already thirty at that time, but my father wanted someone who could look after me as he had done himself and Mustafa was a man known to Daddyji as a solid type. Then my parents died and Mustafa Dar went to England and said he would send for me. That was many years ago. I have his photo but he is like a strange to me. Even his voice, I do not recognize over the phone. (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 14)

The advice wallah is surprised to learn this, but since arranged marriages are a common practice he assures her that things will be alright for her in England. However, he gets even more surprised when he learns that she got all of the questions wrong deliberately. In another ironic

reversal of expectations, Miss Rehana takes the "good advice" that she received from the advice expert—namely how to convince the immigration officers that she knew her fiancé Mustafa very well—and uses it to her own advantage by giving the most incorrect answers possible, and "distinguishing marks I put on the wrong cheeks, bathroom décor I completely redecorated, all absolutely topsy-turvy, you see" (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 15). He is shocked at this tragedy. For how come a beautiful young woman would not want to go to England to get married to a well-off older man she never met? Doesn't she know she must want to marry and live in England?

Rushdie plays with the assumption that the best possible guarantee for a woman is to get married to a man who will take care of her and, as a surplus, lives in "Bradford, London," therefore, perpetuating the assumption that the West is more desirable than the East. Miss Rehana does not act like expected. In fact, she defies a social established consensus that places her as a woman in a patriarchal society always dependent on men (fathers, husbands, advice-wallahs).

In an article titled "In Praise of Strong Women," Salman Rushdie talks about the influence that real and fictional women had upon his life and his work. Taking specifically about the women in his family, he says that the clichéd stereotype of the South Asian women is not at all true.

> Whenever I come across the clichéd view of South Asian women as demure and self-effacing, I shake my head, because I don't know any women like that. Women in India and Pakistan have much to fear from a male-dominated society in which violence against women is all too common, but they are anything but cowed. (RUSHDIE, 2017)

Rushdie acknowledges that Pakistani and Indian women still suffer from being in a patriarchal society, but that they are strong nonetheless. He further explores the influence of these strong women by saying that they all find a way into his work. Miss Rehana is one example of such strong women. Contrary to the misjudgment she endures from Muhammad Ali, she is bright and determined, and she faces a nerve wracking situation like going into an interrogation by consulate officers with grace and courage. Her behavior is the opposite of what anyone would expect from her. And the irony is that she lets go of a safe future with an unknown husband for the good job she already has. Her happiness at this "tragedy" confused Muhammad Ali even more. For her, it was the perfect way to stay in Lahore, taking care of "three good boys" who would be very sorry if she left. She refused to fulfill the traditional expectations for women and is very happy about it: she was able to choose her own destiny, with a little help from Muhammad Ali's good advice

4.3. “At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers”

In the “The Prophet's Hair,” Salman Rushdie explores the danger of worshipping objects which are deemed more valuable than people’s lives. When the moneylender acquires the relic, instead of returning it, he decides to keep it, justifying his desire for the silver vial by comparing himself to American collectors who “purchase stolen art masterpieces and hide them away” (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 44). The same obsession in acquiring extraordinary objects in also present in “At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers,” a futurist parable of the American consumerist dream.

Salman Rushdie transports the readers to a dystopian future where an unprecedented number of the most varied array of personages show up for the auction of the famous ruby red slippers from the movie *The Wizard of Oz*. In Rushdie’s fictional world— dominated by violence, chaos and disease—, only a prize such as the slippers would tempt such an unusual assemblage of characters to leave their bunkers, so that the Auctioneers responsible for the event took extra measures to ensure everyone’s safety: teams of psychiatrists, obstetricians and the SWAT are all there to help with crowd control in case the excitement of the auction leads to violence or “unexpected births and deaths” (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 87).

The most unlikely characters circulate around the Grand Salesroom in “At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers,” from movie stars that exude personalized auras, to political refugees, exiles, religious fundamentalists, even children from nineteenth-century Australian paintings and a fragile looking alien—all of them wanting the slippers for the promise of the endless possibilities granted to whoever bids highest for them. In the world of the story, reality and fiction walk in tandem. The fictional auction was inspired by the real auction of the famous ruby slippers worn by Judy Garland in the movie *The Wizard of Oz*. In an article called “Out of Kansas,” written for *The New Yorker* in 1992, Rushdie explains not only his own enchantment with the movie *The Wizard of Oz*—which started when he was a small boy in India—but also the profound influence the movie has exerted in audiences old and new. One example of the effect produced by the movie, and everything related to it, is the auction of one of the many pairs of slippers worn by Judy Garland and the great amount of money paid for them at the time.

> A pair of ruby slippers found in a bin in a basement at M-G-M was sold at auction in May, 1970, for the amazing sum of fifteen thousand dollars. The purchaser was, and has remained, anonymous. *Who was it who wished so profoundly to possess*—perhaps even to wear—*Dorothy's magic shoes*? (RUSHDIE, 1992) (my emphasis)

The emphasis added relates to the fact that, in our world, the slippers became objects of desire and people paid a lot of money to own them. In his article, Rushdie questions this obsession to possess such an item, leading him to further explore this in his short story, where he acknowledges this mystique around the ruby slippers and magnifies it, perhaps in the attempt to satisfy his own inquisitive mind. The fictional auction of the slippers is one of the many intertextual elements connecting Rushdie's tale to the 1939 movie *The Wizard of Oz*.

People attended the auction dressed as Wizards, Lions, Tin Men, Scarecrows and Witches; many Totos occupy one corner of the room, having a "rubbed-gloved janitor" (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 89) just to clean after them. Besides those bidders who are dressed as characters, another strong intertextual reference can be found in the name of the narrator's cousin with whom he is in love: Gale, which is Dorothy's last name.

Those intertextual elements reflect how much the boy Rushdie was affected by the movie which he considered his "very first literary influence" (RUSHDIE, 1992), serving to inspire the ten-year-old Salman Rushdie to write his very first story, creatively titled "Over the Rainbow," which was about a ten-year-old Bombay boy who one day discovers a rainbow and embarks on a journey full of adventures and promises. Rushdie goes on explaining that as a boy he knew

> a great deal more about the cinema of the fantastic than any Western child of the same age. In the West, the film was an oddball, an attempt to make a sort of live-action version of a Disney cartoon feature despite the industry's received wisdom that fantasy movies usually flopped. […] In India, however, it fitted into what was then, and remains today, one of the mainstreams of production in the place that Indians, conflating Bombay and Tinseltown, affectionately call Bollywood. (RUSHDIE, 1992)

The melodramatic elements of Bollywood movies borders the fantastic by showing gods and demons interfering in human affairs and heroes and villains carrying exaggerated traits of their roles. Such elements are present in *The Wizard of Oz*: Glinda's arrival in a bubble from the sky was "exactly as a god should arrive [… and that] the Wicked Witch of the West's orange smoke puffs were equally appropriate to her super-bad status" (RUSHDIE, 1992) made perfect sense to Indian

audiences, and had a lingering effect on the boy Rushdie, who implemented all of these elements in his short story.

In “At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers,” the gods are the celebrities with their untouchable colorful auras and the deified ruby slippers encased in their electrified glass cage. The replacement of traditionally sanctified religious objects for these superficial ones carries a warning against the fanaticism of the religious-like worship of Hollywood pop culture items. The adoration of this object—turned into a relic by the Auctioneers and bidders—brings dire consequences to those who get too close to it, much like the unfortunate characters in “The Prophet's Hair.” When minor characters dare kiss the glass encasement containing the slippers, they are hit with a hundred thousand volts electric shock and die instantly.

Rushdie explores the idolization of the slippers to expose a society where commodities matter more than human life. The irrationality of a consumerist society is emphasized by the mindless cult of commodities that are bought and sold at those auctions. The irony of assigning arbitrary values to certain people and putting them on a pedestal is also a theme in the story. The Western cult of movie stars as almost god-like creatures is irrational and its ludicrous presentation in the story emphasizes the inversion in the assumption that the East is a place for irrationality and fanaticism whereas the West is rational and civilized.

> Movie stars are here, among the bidders, bringing their glossy, spangled auras to the saleroom. Movie-star auras […] are platinum, golden, silver, bronze. Certain genre actors specializing in villainous roles are surrounded by auras of evil–livid green, mustard yellow, inky red. When one of us collides with a star’s priceless (and fragile) aura, he or she is instantly knocked to the floor by a security team and hustled out to the waiting paddy-wagons. (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 88)

As one of the bidders, the narrator is prepared to buy the slippers at “whatever the cost” (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 97). His intention is to give them as a gift to Gale, his greatest love, so that she could perhaps use them to travel to Mars and bring back a spaceman who lost his life stranded there, or so that the narrator could go back to the time when he and Gale were happy together. For this is the real power of the ruby slippers: their ability to take whoever is wearing them back “through time as well as space” (ibidem, p. 93).

> We revere the ruby slippers because we believe they can make us invulnerable to witches (and there are so many sorcerers pursuing us nowadays); because of their powers of reverse metamorphosis, their affirmation of a lost state of normalcy in which we have almost ceased to believe and *to which the slippers promise us we can return*; and because they shine like

The narrator longs to return to his time together with Gale, ‘and the repetition of Dorothy’s line “There’s no place like home.” However, it raises a question that is central to Rushdie’s work: where *is* home? For the narrator, home is wherever Gale is. But the Gale of reality is not the Gale of his memories. In this sense, home is already lost for him, a “scattered, damaged, various concept is [his] present travails” (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 93). One of the lessons Rushdie learned from watching the movie *The Wizard of Oz* as a boy was that

> once we leave our childhood places and start to make up our lives, armed only with what we know and who we are, we come to understand that the real secret of the ruby slippers is not that “there’s no place like home” but, rather, that there is no longer any such place as home […] which is anywhere—and everywhere—except the place from which we began. (RUSHDIE, 1992)

In all of his stories, the idea of home and belonging appears as a central theme, echoing his own liminality, his own identity. In true diasporic fashion, he re-imagines worlds to fit this reality of uprootedness at the same time that he brings contemporary issues to light with his own ironic intervention.

The coexistence of fictional characters with the story’s real world is, in the eyes of the narrator, “a symptom of the moral decay of our post-millennial culture” (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 94). Heroes step out of movie screens and marry members of the audience and a “hairy escapee from a caveman movie” is the center of the dramatic end to the narrator’s romance with Gale. Isn’t this invasiveness of fiction an ironic representation of migration? As such, Gale represents the narrator’s nostalgia for a home he lost. His loss is a consequence Gale's affair with the ape-man. This element of the plot plays with the notion of the East as a place that produces primitive and seductive subjects.

Blurring the edges of fiction and reality, Rushdie addresses the hypocrisy of a real world that does not know how to deal with the migration of characters from fictional, fantastic worlds. His narrator is sure that few of them—the ones living in the rational, civilized world—would not take the opposite journey of going “backwards” to an uncivilized, irrational world from which the

most varied characters are trying to escape. As the narrator puts it, reinforcing the negative aspect of such migration in his world,

> There can be little doubt that a large majority of us opposes the free, unrestricted migration of imaginary beings into an already damaged reality, whose resources diminish by the day. After all, few of us would choose to travel in the opposite direction (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 94-95)

Once again the historical justification of colonialism as the necessary means to bring civilization to primitive, non–Western, societies is challenged. Rushdie deconstructs this colonial model of domination by showing how obsessive consumerism brings out the most primitive and irrational in Western societies. Not only the fanaticism around “the cult of the ruby slippers” (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 89) is responsible for this inversion, but also the idea of these auctions, where everything is for sale.

> We have witnessed the auction of the Taj Mahal, the Statue of Liberty, the Alps, the Sphinx. We have assisted at the sale of wives and the purchase of husbands. State secrets have been sold here, openly, to the highest bidder. On one very special occasion, the Auctioneers presided over the sale, to an overheated and inter-denominational bunch of smouldering red demons, of a wide selection of human souls of all classes, qualities, ages, races and creeds. (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 98)

The Auctioneers even put a price on human souls, as if only an established value “of our pasts, of our futures, of our lives” (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 101) would define their status as individuals, their identity. The trade of money for an identity, or rather the idea that identity is defined by how much is invested in its acquisition, is a marker of the neoliberal society we live in which is, according to journalist Stephen Metcalf, “one that venerates the logic of market and strips away the things that makes us human” (METCALF, 2017). Rushdie seems to agree as he takes us —through irony—to a dystopian world dominated by violence and disease where everything can be sold and in which money trumps humanity.

As the narrator is in the height of bidding for the slippers, he realizes that achieving his goal of acquiring them in order to reclaim a long-lost past is, in fact, just a fiction. He realizes that the promise of the ruby slippers are a fiction, and, according to him “fictions are dangerous” (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 102). Letting go of his dream, of his fictionalized projection of a happy ending, he lets go of his love for Gale, and of his longing for a home. This realization is not exactly

a happy ending for him, but as he rids himself of the desire to possess the slippers at whatever cost, he is finally free.

As he ponders about the next auctions, he claims that "thanks to the infinite bounty of the Auctioneers, any of us [...] can be—as long as we want to be; and, as cowering in our shelters, we fear we are not—*somebody*" (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 104), further exploring the idea that, in a society that puts everything up for sale, *being someone* is more important than *belonging somewhere*.

4.4. "Christopher Columbus and Queen Isabella of Spain Consummate their Relationship (Santa Fé, AD 1492)"

Similarly to what he did in "At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers," Salman Rushdie once more dives into history to rewrite it from his liminal position as a diasporic writer. This time he explores actual the relationship between Christopher Columbus and Queen Isabella of Spain, which resulted in the expansion of the Spanish empire as well as the beginnings of the colonization process of American peoples and lands by the Europeans. Rushdie turned it into a tale of seduction and conquest in an imagined love affair between these two well-known historical figures.

Historically, Columbus wanted to find another route west from Europe to Asia by sailing West and when he ran out of sponsorship in Italy, he turned to the Spanish monarchs, King Ferdinand of Aragon and Queen Isabella of Castile. Under their patronage, Columbus set sail and stumbled upon the New World. In his retelling of this same story, Rushdie puts Columbus in the Spanish court as a hopeless follower of the Queen. He

> hopes for preferment. He wants to tie the Queen's favour to his helmet, like a knight in a romance. (He owns no helmet). He has hopes of cash, and of three tall ships, *Niña Pinta Santa Maria*; of, in fourteen hundred and ninety-two, sailing across the ocean blue. (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 107)

By exploring his hopes, Rushdie already establishes the end of this well-known story: Columbus will gain his money, his three ships and will sail "across the ocean blue." However, what the fictionalized Columbus wants is, in fact, something much more than that, he wants, in his own words, "Consummation" (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 107). The question then lies in the kind of consummation he wants from the Queen.

Throughout the entire short story, Rushdie makes several allusions to consummation—including sexual innuendoes—between Columbus and the Queen, almost as if the only possible way in which he can achieve his dream of sailing west is by conquering her first. However, the Queen enjoys toying with Columbus, she grants him his desires one morning only to refuse him in the afternoon; she allows him entry to her chambers and allows him some intimacy, only to banish him to "the stables and piggeries for forty days" (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 109).

Rushdie portrays her as the absolute monarch, the one Columbus needs to please, no matter how, in order to achieve his goals. Her husband, King Ferdinand, is barely mentioned in the story. Historically, they were a power couple: their marriage united the kingdoms of Aragon and Castela and under their rule the Jews and Muslims were expelled from Spanish lands. They were also responsible for the spread of Christianity in Spain. In Rushdie's tale, however, the king is mentioned just once as "an absolute zero: a blank, couldn't be colder" (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 109) —and never again.

The focus of the story is on the complicated relationship that Columbus craves to establish with the Queen which is marked, at first glance, by sexual frustration and flirtation. Comparing her hunger for conquering more land and expanding her empire to sexual appetite, Rushdie takes the readers further away from the image of the Catholic queen who established the Inquisition in Spain to eradicate and punish heretics. In the story, Queen Isabella wins battles and removes Moors from their fortresses, only to show how "her appetites are expanding by the week. The more the land she swallows, the more warriors she engulfs, the hungrier she gets" (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 112). As her appetite increases, Columbus's diminishes with his advancing years. He is running out of time and patrons to accomplish his dreams, and if Isabella does not give him the consummation he seeks of her soon, "he will have to forget the western voyage" (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 112), as if the sexual drive to win the Queen's favor is directly connected to his enterprise of sailing west.

This complicated relationship can be defined in terms of the power and gender struggle that take place whenever Columbus and Isabella interact, even if not directly with one another. She is growing restless and bored with her conquests, so she toys with Columbus, whose only hope of achieving his purpose consists in pleasing her. As a woman, she uses her position to entice Columbus and his want for consummation. As a Queen, she "is Isabella, all-conquering [and he] her invisible (tough raucous, multi-colored, wine-bibbing) man" (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 111). For

Columbus, the search for money and patronage is similar to the quest for love. But eventually, Columbus gives up hope and leaves her court. Now, for him, "the loss of money and patronage [...] is as bitter as unrequited love" (ibidem, p. 115).

As he walks into the country, passing through her conquered lands, he gives in to despair and "falls off the edge of his sanity" (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 115). As he falls into unconsciousness, he has a vision of one of Isabella's prophetic dreams. In a touch of magical realism, the Isabella of Rushdie's tale, has prophetic dreams. Based on them, she draws up her invincible battle plans, foils the conspiracies of assassins, learns of the infidelities and corruptions for which she blackmails her loyalists (to ensure their support) and her opponents (to ensure theirs)" (ibidem, p. 113).

In his vision, Columbus sees her staring into a large stone basin, gazing upon all the known world, knowing that she has conquered all of it. She realizes that "she will never, never, NEVER! be satisfied by the possession of the Known. Only the Unknown, perhaps even the Unknowable, can satisfy her" (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 116). In his dream, much like the rejected vengeful lover, he rejects her request to go after it. Once he wakes up and is found by her heralds, he is tempted to say no, but he accepts her call and the rest is history. Or as much history as Rushdie allows us when reimagining this grand narrative of Columbus voyage to the New World as something as trivial as a lover's quarrel.

Rushdie's position of in-betweeness allows him to revisit these historical facts and important historical figures and rebuild their narratives as fictional accounts that serve to deconstruct the familiarity they carry as well as explore new perspectives to these familiar stories. Christopher Columbus is one of those familiar historical figures, known to us as Admiral of All the Oceans and Seas, the intrepid voyager that discovered the New World. This celebrated historical personage—who has his own holiday amongst the Italian community in the United States—is portrayed by Rushdie as a crazy man with excessively colorful clothes, almost always drunk, and with the nerve of asking the Queen of Spain for consummation. Reducing Columbus to the emblematic figure of the exotic foreigner in a more "civilized" world, Rushdie plays with two of the constant themes in his *East, West*: migrancy and otherness, and thus further deconstructing the binomial East/West.

Because "foreigners forget their place (having left it behind)" (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 108), Columbus is characterized by behaving and dressing as the exotic foreigner—the easterner—who

shocks those at court and becomes the butt of their jokes as well as the Queen's object of desire. Such desire does not need consummation on her part. What Rushdie's Isabella does when she toys with Columbus's wishes is an extension of the oversexualization of Eastern subjects. This power play of sex and gender is inverted in this imagined relationship between Columbus and the Queen, but it furthers emphasizes Columbus position as the other, the foreigner who is not taken seriously but whose presence adds an air of sophistication to the Court.

> Foreigners can be dogged. And can also, on account of language difficulties, fail to take a hint. Then again, let us not forget, it is *de rigueur* to keep a few foreigners around. They lend the place a certain cosmopolitan tone. […] They are often poor and consequently willing to perform divers necessary but dirty jobs. They are, moreover, a warning against complacency, *their existence in our midst reminding us that there are quarters in which (hard as it is to accept) we ourselves would be considered foreign, too.* (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 108) (my emphasis)

Rushdie calls attention to the fact that foreignness brings the question that being considered a foreigner anywhere is a matter of relative geographical and social location. This change in perspective broadens our definition of who in fact is an immigrant. An Italian "fool with glittering eye dreaming of a golden paradise beyond the Western Edge of Things" (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 109), Columbus is the loud, exotic and subjugated immigrant who fails to find his place in Queen Isabella's court because he is seen as a whimsical buffoon to them all. For the Spanish court, Italy produces the foreign, incomprehensible migrant; in this story, Italy is the East to Spain, which represents the West.

Columbus—both the real historical figure and the fictional drunken fool—dreams of reaching the East through a western route. He fails to find a new path to the eastern riches the Spanish crown so desires, but he stumbles upon a "brand new world" to be fully explored. As an Italian in Spain, he is the foreign element. However, as a European in the New World, he become the colonizer, the Conquistador. In failing to reach the east, Columbus creates another system of oppositions regarding the perceptions of East/West: the civilized Europeans (the drunken Columbus included) vs. the uncivilized Indians of the New World.

In "Christopher Columbus and Queen Isabella of Spain Consummate their Relationship (Santa Fé, AD 1492)," Salman Rushdie presents a very stimulating ironic twist to our perceptions of the familiar construction of otherness: that the Other comes from the East, and that the West

brings civilization to it. The ironic deconstruction lies on the fact that the West can become someone else's East by a mere change in perspective.

4.5. "The Courter"

The short story that closes the book—and this work—is perhaps the most autobiographical of all, since Rushdie and the narrator share similarities related to their upbringing, education and family relations. The narrator, now an adult, takes the readers back to the early 1960s, when he was a sixteen-year-old boy going to a boarding school in England. He is soon followed by his whole family: father, mother, three sisters, and an old Ayah—a typical Indian nanny—who has been with the family for a long time. Although it is not actually a story about his family, the narrator mentions family matters and his own teenage problems as he tells the story about the courtly relationship between his Ayah Mary and the hall porter of their Kensington apartment building.

The porter's name is Mecir, a name which is impossible to pronounce because of the "invisible accents in some Iron Curtain language" (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 179). The narrator and one of his sisters decide to rename him Mixed-Up—"Mishter Mikshed-Up Mishirsh" (ibidem, p.179)

—to simplify matters. However, names and naming are very powerful and poor old Mixed-Up is very messed up indeed. Language does not come easily to him, not just because of his native Eastern European accent but also because he suffered a stroke that left his speech impaired. So, when Mr. Mecir meets Ayah Mary he is naturally drawn to her broken English, since "English was hard for Certainly-Mary, and this was a part of what drew damaged old Mixed-Up towards her" (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 176). He is also the one who thought of a new name for her, Certainly-Mary "because she never said plain yes or no; always this O-yes-certainly or no-certainly-not" (ibidem, p. 176).

Certainly-Mary has a particular problem with the letter p, which often turns into a c or an f, as when she announces, carrying her shopping bags, that she is going "shocking" or when she responds to Mixed-Up offer to help with her groceries with a "yes, fleas." So, when she calls him "courter," she opens the possibility for him to be more than just the porter. He is now a courter, her courter, and, like an adventure, the story of their courtship begins. Mary and Mecir start spending

all their afternoons together, going shopping, walking in Kensington Park, picking out “furniture and curtains for imaginary homes” (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 188) and watching The Flintstones on TV.

This unlikely pair—the sixty-year-old Indian Ayah and the stroke-ridden hall porter—represent what Rushdie means by a “hotchpotch” of cultures, a convergence of differences towards cultural understanding. Mary and Mecir are both away from their home lands, they are foreigners with problems to express themselves in English, they are both from Eastern locations—Eastern Europe and India—and yet they found a sense of belonging in one another. Inhabiting an “in-between” space of their own when they spend time together, they are able to overcome their linguistic barriers in the most unusual way: through chess, which

> had become their private language. Old Mixed-Up, lost as he was for words, retained, on the chessboard, much of the articulacy and subtlety which had vanished from his speech. As Certainly-Mary gained in skill […] she was better able to understand, and respond to, the wit of the reduced maestro with whom she had so unexpectedly forged a bond. (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 194)

Although Mecir’s stroke deeply affected his linguistic abilities, his unbelievable chess skill remained intact because in his past Mr. Mecir was a Grand Master of chess, famous enough to appear in chess books. It is through the game of chess that he and Mary established their courtship. Chess, turned into an art of love by Rushdie, is also a metaphor for the narrator’s jealousy since the narrator tells of his failed attempts at love. In another possible reading of East vs. West, Rushdie presents the narrator’s interest in a Polish girl named Rozalia and in an Indian girl named Chandni. Once again in a reversal of concepts, Rozalia (the Polish) represents the pull of the exciting West, which is much stronger than the familiar East, represented by Chandni. Although neither provide the narrator with what he really wants—sexual experience—, metaphorically, the pull between the two girls depicts the conflict of the narrator who is trying to escape the familiar context of his family life and become a British citizen.

Part of the adult narrator’s recollections is related to his desire to get away from the conflicts in his family. The more his father and sister fought, the more he thought about his British citizenship. The sixteen-year-old longs to have his British passport so that he could forgo his Indian roots, represented by his father. The adult narrator knows more than his younger self, who “at sixteen, […] still think [he] can escape from [his] father” (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 202). Being able to look back empowers the narrator with the understanding that an individual cannot truly relinquish

their origins. For his younger self, the passport will open further possibilities in the West, driving him further away from his home land. He does not seem to be aware that he occupies a liminal position because he exists in England as much as India exists in him.

He expresses his jealousy toward the kind of relationship his ayah and the porter have developed. This jealousy is probably not directed towards the romantic aspect of their companionship, but to the fact that Mary was able to accept her liminal position by encountering in Mixed-Up someone with a similar background. The narrator's younger version did not seem able to realize the he could also occupy this in-between space, so he chose to escape from his family, imagining that this choice was his own, not a failure to perceive his own position of liminality.

Occupying these liminal spaces can bring violent consequences to immigrants and foreigners. The hall porter was the victim of this violence in two occasions. In the first one, he was hit by two thugs looking for the rich—and troublesome—Maharajas who lived in the building. Mixed-Up was found "huddled up against a wall, weeping. He had a black eye and there was dried blood on his mouth" (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 197). The second brought the courtship between Certainly-Mary and Mixed-Up to an end.

After some time in the slow development of an unconsummated love affair, Mixed-Up gets stabbed in front of the building while trying to protect Ayah Mary, the narrator's mother and his baby sister. The three "were approached by two-well-turned-out young men with Beatle haircuts" (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 203), who mistake the narrator's mother for the Maharani—, the wife of the Maharaja who lives in the same apartment building and has innumerous affairs with other women. Since the maharaja is not there to settle the score, the men mistakenly threaten to hurt the narrator's family. Mixed-Up intervenes by making the effort of speaking the longest sentence they ever heard him say: "Sirs sirs no sirs these not B— women sirs B—women upstairs on floor three sirs Maharaja of B— also sirs God's truth mother's grave swear." (ibidem, p. 205).

The men apologize and leave, but not without first stabbing Mr. Mecir on the stomach. The violence of this encounter exposes Ayah Mary to the harsh reality of an immigrant's life: not everything is like the positive impact that she has experienced in her cross-cultural and courtly encounter with Mecir. The attack changes them both: Mixed-Up becomes more introspective and Mary develops heart problems so serious that the Muslim family even puts up a Christmas tree in

order to cheer her up. However, Mary seems to know exactly what is wrong with her: she needs to go home.

> 'God knows for what-all we came over to this country,' Mary said, 'But I can no longer stay. No. Certainly not.' Her determination was absolute. […] So it was England that was breaking her heart, breaking it by not being India. London was killing her too, by not being Bombay. . . Or was it that her heart, roped by two different loves was being pulled both East and West . . . (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 209)

Differently from the narrator, Certainly-Mary longed for her home and her sense of belonging is closely attached to India. In England, she briefly found a home—an imaginary home —with Mecir: both Easterners in the West, they struggle against a sense of cultural dislocation that is only highlighted by the violent attack on Mixed-Up. Ironically, the story the older narrator is telling brings him the realization that Ayah Mary's story is also his, the story of an immigrant searching for belonging.

What prompts him to recall this period of his teenage life in 1960s London is a letter he receives from Mary years after her stay in London. As Zora Neale Hurston said, "there is no agony like bearing an untold story inside you" (2006, p. 175). The narrator knows this since it has become

> "more important than ever to set down the story I've been carrying around unwritten for so long, the story of Aya and the gentle man whom she renamed—with unintentional but prophetic undertones of romance—'the courter'. I see now that it is not just their story, but ours, mine, as well" (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 178).

"The Courter" is the story of all of those who venture across borders and inhabit worlds where cultures meet. Cultural hybridity is a central theme in East, West, and also in Rushdie's work. In a 1995 interview for *the Paris Review*, Rushdie said that "my life has given me this other subject: Worlds in collision." The collision of worlds was breaking Certainly-Mary's heart until she decided to move back home. For the narrator too, this collision is significant, because he is able to put himself in the place where his Ayah had been.

Hindsight provided the narrator with the realization that Mary's story is his own, it is also Rushdie's story: permeated with violence, broken-heartedness, longings for home and belonging. The narrator also feels the pull of his roots when he chooses to tell the story of Certainly-Mary and "her great adventure with her courter in London" (RUSHDIE, 1994, p. 177).

> I, too, have ropes around my neck, I have them to this day, pulling me this way and that, East and West, the nooses tightening, commanding, choose, choose. I buck, I snort, I whinny, I rear, I kick. Ropes, I do not choose between you. Lassoes, lariats, I choose neither of you, and both. Do you hear? I refuse to choose. (RUSHIDE, 1994, p. 211)

This story is the perfect ending for the book because it explores issues that permeate Rushdie's work: home, belonging, identity, the "tug of war" he feels as a migrant. For the sake of my analysis, however, the irony in the story is more subtle. It lies on the little things, on incongruities in the stereotypical view that the East is a place to escape from and the West a place in which everyone's dreams of belonging may come true.

CONCLUSION

In *Midnight's Children* (1981), Salman Rushdie writes that "things, even people, have a way of leaking into each other like flavors when you cook" (p. 38). This "leaking" of multiple influences enables the deconstruction of opposites like us/them or East/West, since neither is exempt from the influence of the other. Borrowing elements from traditional Eastern storytelling as well as elements of Western culture, the selected stories present ironic deconstructions of preconceived ideas regarding aspects of both East and West. Rushdie acknowledges this binary relationship—after all, it is in the title of his book—but not as grounds for a synthesis of what happens when both ends collide. Instead, Rushdie playfully transforms this binary into a dialogic relationship which allows for a transit of elements from one end of the spectrum to the other.

Rushdie uses his position as a diasporic writer to contest the boundaries contained in these dynamic categories, not only in *East, West*, but in all of his work, where he explores the fact that mixing identities and cultures is a way to expose the world as multiple and hybrid. The selected short stories provide some instances of ironic inversion which do not exhaust other reading possibilities of them. The analysis presented in this work does not intend to limit the stories to a specific reading, although it feels important to highlight the fact that some ironic inversions become evident in the way Rushdie treats certain assumptions which a Westerner reader may have about the East as well as in his insightful criticism towards the West.

Rushdie uses irony to rework boundaries created by preconceived ideas which represent the East as a backwards, exotic place that serves as counterpoint to the West, represented as a place of progress, as the cradle of a cultured society. Both are artificial constructions which reinforce the symbolic aspects of each direction rather than their geographical location. Rushdie unmasks the incongruities which may emerge from such a representation and uses them to broaden the view his readers might have of the relationship between East and West.

Rushdie actually deconstructs these ideas by providing a foreign look to familiar contexts while also stating that not everything which is foreign is bad or threatening, no matter from which angle you look at it. Nothing is sacred and no topic untouchable in his writings. It is important to highlight that his ironical twists are not mockery directed at Islam, or to Indian and Pakistani societies or to Western cultural exponents. They are reflections of Rushdie's understanding of how

these cultural aspects are not limited to a single definition, but they are part of much bigger contexts and stories. As a storyteller who occupies an interstitial position, Rushdie is able to explore how stories weave into one another like multicolored threads in a tapestry. He mentions this interweaving in his children's book, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, when the main character Haroun Khalifa saw the reflection of the moon of Kahani in the water

> and saw that [the moon] was made up of a thousand thousand thousand and one different currents, each one a different colour, weaving in and out of one another like a liquid tapestry of breathtaking complexity; [...] And because the stories were held in fluid form, they retained the ability to change, to become new versions of themselves, to join up with other stories and so become yet other stories. (RUSHDIE, 1990, p. 72)

In an interview for *the Paris Review*, Rushdie talks about his life growing up in Bombay and how this experience has brought him the understanding that

> the stories of anywhere are also the stories of everywhere else. To an extent, I already knew that because Bombay, where I grew up, was a city in which the West was totally mixed up with the East... my life [has] given me the ability to make stories in which parts of the world are brought together sometimes harmoniously, sometimes in conflict, and sometimes both—usually both." (RUSHDIE, 2005).

By telling carefully constructed stories such as the five stories selected for this analysis, where all migrants are forced to negotiate their identities and rethink their location in the world, Salman Rushdie brings to the fore of this book the fact that the collision of stories, the collisions of the East and the West, provides a tapestry of interwoven stories which coexist in the multiple forms of understanding the relations East/West.

Homi Bhabha states that the "migrant's double vision" promotes the transit between cultural and geographical borders. This transit is what Rushdie explores in *East, West*: stories that open contexts which are different from what they seem at first when a reader encounters them. Rushdie shows that his greatness as a writer lies in his ability to consistently explore the larger themes of globalization and migrancy through a sensibility that is a consequence of his interstitial position which enables him to navigate his own "in-betweenness" by using irony and humor as a compass.

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