“Falling off” the Urban Map: Cartographic Divisions and Travel in Salman Rushdie’s *The Moor’s Last Sigh*

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Employing the painterly forms of the diptych and the triptych to conceptualise the cartographic openness and dynamics of the city in Salman Rushdie’s The Moor’s Last Sigh, this article examines the tri-sected urban histories and geographies as well as the warring urban fictions which inform the image of Bombay in the novel. It traces the significance of these fictions’ clash and of the protagonist’s travels across cartographic divides.

Traditionally associated with European, and particularly Christian, culture, the diptych and triptych forms are commonly employed to stand for the interconnectedness of and dynamics between, respectively, two or three images or ideas. In Ancient Greece and Rome, diptych stood for a book or a notebook, consisting of two writing tablets hinged together as well as to a hinged pair of painted or carved panels. As artistic formats, diptychs involve the construction of meaning through the pairing of images, or the principle of duality, which invites the comparison of these juxtaposed images as each other’s reflections, inversions, or variations. Both diptychs and triptychs can be interpreted as visual books that may or may not include an outside image, painted on the reverse of the two side wings. The specificity of the triptych as a format is its inclusion of an inside central panel, which is structurally most significant and thus presupposes a position to which all other images direct the viewer’s eye.

As this article demonstrates, the image of the city in The Moor’s Last Sigh develops within a di/tri-sected cartography. In Rushdie’s novel, Bombay is situated, spatially and temporally, between the Indian port of Cochin and the Spanish village of Benengeli — landscapes that not only invite comparisons with what could be seen as the central urban panel, but also ones that reconfigure it by mirroring and reiterating its themes. Like the side panels of a pictorial triptych, Cochin and Benengeli frame Bombay: a condition which enables the expansion and contraction of urban spatialities and temporalities in the novel. The text’s di/triptych urban configurations1 — thematic, narrative, geographical and historical — intersect, interact and transform each other. Whereas in Christian iconography both diptychs and triptychs foreground unity as a structural and thematic principle, the di/triptych nature of Rushdie’s text enables the existence of mutually contradictory narratives, the unsettling of boundaries and the suspension of linear temporality. The urban cartography of the novel opens up the order of the map, which is no longer a horizontal surface, but a dynamic, folding and unfolding configuration in which the itinerant protagonist “falls” from one panel into another and the city expands and contracts across panel frames.

1. The city is understood here as an arrangement of heterogeneous, shape-shifting and open-ended configurations. The use of the term urban configurations aims to dissociate the city from theories which rely on urban typologies and from its understanding as a delimited entity, independent from other topoi in the text. For an extended discussion of the term, see Parashkevova, 6-7.
This article examines the overall dynamics of the tri-sected urban histories and geographies in the text as well as the warring urban fictions which inform the image of Bombay and which, I will argue, partition the city, producing an urban diptych. Specifically, it traces the significance of the collision of these “panels” and of the protagonist’s travels “across” panel frames.

In Rushdie’s panoramic/textual triptych, modern Bombay encounters a simulacrum of medieval Moorish Spain. This utopian/heterotopian “Mooristan/Palimpstine” is an idealised place of intercultural tolerance and “home” for the Moors, which Moraes, also known as “Moor”, and Aurora Zogoiby repeatedly attempt to re-articulate in text and painting, but the “return” to which, the text suggests, is impossible. Moor begins his story at a fortress in the Andalusian village of Benengeli, where he is imprisoned by the artist Vasco Miranda in the early 1990s. Like Scheherazade, Moor has to sustain his captor’s interest in order to stay alive. From this position in a mock-Mooristan (as we shall see, the ideal of Mooristan/Palimpstine is frustrated in the village of Benengeli), he looks back at the story of his family and the history of India and his home city, Bombay, from the beginning of the twentieth century to his captivity and subsequent escape.

The title of the novel, *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, points to a legend of the fall of Moorish Granada. Allegedly, the Moorish ruler Boabdil sighed in despair as he cast a last glance at the city he lost to the Catholic monarchs, Fernando and Isabella. In this way, the title of Rushdie’s text encapsulates the moment of Granada’s fall, which becomes the prism through which the narrator, known as Moor, articulates the violent history of post-Independence Bombay. Stilled at the scene of Moor’s last sigh for his city, the title provides an image which serves as the exterior panel of Rushdie’s fictional cartographic triptych and guides the reader’s understanding of the central urban panel inside. Rushdie’s Moorish Granada is a sentimentalised urban landscape, a place of tolerance and enlightenment that is seen to have been disrupted by the Christian re-conquest. Yet, as Richard Fletcher notes, although the interaction between Islamic and Christian civilizations in the medieval west was extremely fruitful, Moorish Spain was more often a land of turmoil than it was a land of tranquillity (Fletcher, *Moorish* 172-4).

The novel borrows a further legend from medieval Spanish history, which bears upon the tale of the protagonist: the story of El Cid Campeador, the mercenary soldier, hero of Spanish national mythology. Whereas El Cid has been extolled as a crusading warrior who waged wars of re-conquest against the Moors, in his time, there was hardly any sense of nationhood, crusade or re-conquest in the Christian kingdom of Spain. El Cid (Rodrigo Díaz) was a successful professional soldier, who was as ready to fight alongside Muslims against Christians as vice versa (Fletcher, *Quest*, 4). Rushdie’s novel thus juxtaposes an idealised Moorish Granada and an internally torn version of the Cid’s Spain to look upon Bombay and its grand-scale Hindu-Muslim antagonisms.

The protagonist and narrator, Moraes Zogoiby, embodies elements from both myths. Disowned by his mother, he is banished from his Edenic Bombay into the world of Bombay Central, where he is caught between the city’s warring Hindu
and Muslim gangs, serving both before he is forced to flee the city. He is also a Moor figure, nostalgically recreating his city in narrative. The text appropriates conflicting myths of the medieval Spanish past alongside components of their official, historically verified versions, thus problematising both the authenticity of historical accounts and the sentimental wish for return to the golden-past city. Ironically, what breathes life into the story within is a sigh, an expression of grief and desperation. *The Moor’s Last Sigh* thus parodies the nostalgic myth of a Golden Age of peaceful Christian-Muslim co-existence. It situates the story at a moment outside the longed-for city of Granada, but at the same time, fixes the gaze upon it.

The novel’s urban configurations interact in and through the form of the triptych, where the central urban panel representing Bombay is dynamically refracted through the narratives of Cochin and Benengeli, whilst all three spatio-temporal scenes of the novel point to and re-configure what we have referred to, metaphorically, as the outside panel: the moment of Moor’s last sigh for his city. The text’s triptych form can also be seen as a subversive narrative re-configuration of an Orientalist three-fold understanding of Indian history. Barbara and Thomas Metcalf note that Indian history was forged in a framework created by the British as they themselves devised a national history for their own emerging nation:

Central to their image of themselves, as well as to their image of what they came to see as a backward but incipient nation, was what the historian David Arnold has called the Orientalist ‘triptych’ of Indian history. In this vision, ancient ‘Hindus’ had once created a great civilization. With the advent of Islamic rulers in the early thirteenth century, Indian culture rigidified, political life gave way to despotism, and the gap between foreign ‘Muslim’ rulers and a native ‘Hindu’ populace of necessity made for a fragile structure. Moral arguments, particularly a focus on what became a caricature of Aurangzeb’s ‘intolerance’, were central in explaining ‘decline’. Stage three brought modern British colonial rule with its enlightened leadership, scientific progress, and – for some adherents to this vision more than others – tutelage to independence. This tripartite schema was explicit in much British writing, and it often underlay even anti-colonial Indian nationalist historiography. Even today it has been tenaciously persistent as unrecognized ‘common sense’ in historical writing; and [...] is today treated as fact in Hindu nationalist ideologies. (Metcalf, 2-3)

It is between the historiographical “layers” or “frames” of this colonial discursive triptych that Rushdie’s characters find themselves trapped. In the novel, the Hindu nationalist movement, led by Raman Fielding, taps into Bombay’s geological accretions of antagonism, articulating a fiction of an ethnically pure city. Abraham Zogoiby, the upholder of a rival claim to Bombay, engages in similar excavations, but in order to unearth the city’s profitable secrets and to play upon Hindu-Muslim animosity. As we shall see, in colliding with each other, Bombay’s warring urban fictions explode the very Orientalist triptych of history out of which they have risen. The tri-partite cartography of the novel – Cochin, Bombay, Benengeli – offers a horizontal re-envisioning of the vertical/geological/historiographical triptych articulated in Orientalist discourses. Bombay negotiates its present on the borderline
between past and future hegemonic narratives, respectively, colonial (in Cochin) and global capitalist (in Benengeli).

Moor’s story begins in the port of Cochin. Here, in the many conflicts of the day, the narrator historicises the collision between Abraham Zogoiby’s and Raman Fielding’s fictions of Bombay, developed in the central panel. Cochin’s political and religion-fuelled divisions are mirrored on the scale of the family and the self: nationalism versus anglophilia, religion versus secularism, Christian versus Jewish, pro-British versus Communist, and discourse versus praxis. The divisions of Cochin’s Christian community stand out in the celebration of Christmas – a unifying tradition that paradoxically causes segmentation. A mock-Bethlehem, Cochin is more akin to the Biblical Babylon, with its warring Christmas denominations: English Protestant, Catholic, Syrian Orthodox, and Nestorian (Rushdie, Moor 62-3). The British community of Cochin is represented by the clergyman, Reverend Oliver D’Aeth, ‘a young dog of fine Anglican pedigree’ (Moor, 92). His photophobia and his name, an anagram of death, combine to suggest that the British presence in India is out of place and near its end. In Cochin, D’Aeth’s Anglican Christianity is at odds with the Indian ‘Christianity of Uncertainty’: “the gentle reasonableness of the Church of England [is met] with great clouds of fervent incense and blasts of religious heat” (Moor, 96). The idea of the Indian heat dogging Oliver D’Aeth reflects the image of the enveloping ‘foreignness’, surrounding the English enclaves of Fort Cochin, and the Indian Ocean, encroaching on the illusion of England, created by the British on an Indian shore (Moor, 95).

Looking back at the period around Independence, the narrator thematises in the Cochin panel the origin of the grand-scale conflicts that would lead to the destruction of Bombay. Paul Brass notes several tensions, particularly relevant to The Moor’s Last Sigh, in Indian political culture shortly after Independence. Firstly, while the leadership of the country respected British political traditions, some (especially Nehru) were also influenced by the Soviet model. Secondly, while the leaders quite self-consciously maintained many features of the colonial legacy, they realised those had to be adapted to the social structure of Indian society. Thirdly, many politicians, who proclaimed their adherence to secularism, actually harboured Hindu communal sentiments. Finally, although soon after Independence the leading opposition parties were the Communists and the Socialists, these ideologies bore little relation to the social structure of Indian society (Brass, 3-17). In the novel, the nationalist/pro-British conflict between Francisco and Epifania, Moor’s great-grandparents, also divides their sons, Camoens and Aires. Rushdie shows the blind spots of both positions: Francisco announces that the British must go, while standing ‘beneath the oil-paintings of his suited-and-booted ancestors’ (Moor, 18). Epifania continues to believe in ‘the omnipotent beneficence of the British’ even after the Russian Revolution, World War One, and the Amritsar massacre (Moor, 22). In Francisco, Gandhi’s ‘insistence on the oneness of all India’s widely differing millions’ (Moor, 22) and Nehru’s internationalist modernist building project combine to produce an idealistic, Quixotic quest that is doomed to failure.
At first a follower of his father, Camoens later embraces Communism, only to find out that it is ‘not the Indian style’ (Moor, 31). Through the figure of Camoens, Rushdie critiques the emerging Indian nation’s imitation of foreign models, which results in a discrepancy between rhetoric and practice. Camoens, a veritable personification of Indian political life around Independence, tries on various roles. He is a ‘millionaire flirting with Marxism’, ‘a nationalist whose favourite poems [are] all English’, and one who is equally convinced that ‘the British imperium must end and the rule of princes along with it’ (Moor, 32-3). Finally, Camoens turns to Nehruvian ideals, business and technology, progress, modernity and the city, but wears Gandhi-style clothes.

Cochin, Bombay and Benengeli are linked through Nehru’s ideas in the figure of Moor himself. Nine months to the day before he was born, Moor’s mother had spent a night with the Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru (Moor, 177). Respectively, Moor’s life follows the history of his country and his home city, Bombay, by virtue of a tentative, illegitimate genealogical link. Thus Moor carries the misbegotten line of Nehru’s political ideas – a narrative that parallels, as we shall see, the transformation of the Edenic Malabar-Masala Bombay into Bombay Central and the adulteration of the ideal of Moorish Granada into the hellish ghost-town of Benengeli.

The narrative establishes a symptom-malaise connection between Cochin and Bombay. The tensions delineated on the Cochin panel are carried over into the central, urban panel and developed there on a grand scale. Rushdie looks for the roots of Bombay Hindu-Muslim hostility in the secular ideology existing at Independence. Historically, secular nationalists emphasised the need to remove religion and the sense of community from the centre of Indian politics and to establish the independent Indian state as a neutral force standing above these antagonistic forces (Brass, 229). In the novel, the politics of state centralization, failing to recognize religious pluralism, contributes to the persistence of Hindu-Muslim antagonistic sentiments in Bombay.

The resultant urban instability is construed by the characters as symptomatic of an urban flaw, rather than as the very condition which makes the idea of the inclusive city possible. Such diagnoses, premised on essentialist notions of place, lead to attempts at “healing” or “beautifying” the city. The mutually antagonistic fictions, which aim to beautify the city, rely on the idea of what A. K. Ramanujan terms the orthogenetic city. As opposed to the heterogenetic city, anticipating the Foucauldian notion of the heterotopia, the orthogenetic city is organised around the idea of moral order, placing an emphasis on cultural homogeneity and allowing no possibility of subversion and heresy. Cities of orthogenetic character, argues Ramanujan, were established by purposeful acts of founders (Ramanujan, 63-4). In the novel, the search for urban foundations, origins, or purity is most characteristic of the Hindu fundamentalist fiction of the city, espoused by Raman Fielding and exhuming elements from the discursive Orientalist triptych of Indian history. In modelling Bombay in his image, Abraham Zogoiby also probes into its history, but ironically, so as to excavate its weaknesses and to manipulate them in order to achieve control of the city. Thus, whereas Fielding’s Bombay is unequivocally informed by the orthogenetic idea of the city, the negation of its heterogenetic character, Zogoiby’s exploits the understanding of the orthogenetic city, without believing in it. The novel caricatures both projects.
The Bombay of *The Moor’s Last Sigh* is partitioned in this way into two mutually hostile fictions, the articulations of exclusivist urban discourses that claim the city. This Bombay dyptich is thus nestled within the narrative’s overall triptych structure. Though Bombay is central within the triptych, its centrality is problematised by the urban split. Whereas the criminal entrepreneurial da Gama-Zogoiby Axis dominates the urbanscape – Abraham Zogoiby’s skyscraper towers over Bombay – the Hindu nationalist Mumbai’s Axis inhabits the city’s underground, eroding the visibility of its rival. These competing urban fictions, the product of a continuous accretion of antagonism on the site of Bombay, are seen as plaguing its body. The idea of the ailing city is connected with the notion of the body politic, which informs Moor’s narrative of Bombay. His unnaturally rapid growth parallels that of the city – he ‘mushroom[s] into a huge urbane sprawl of a fellow’; he ‘expand[s] without time for proper planning’ (*Moor*, 161-2); and he is ‘a skyscraper freed of all legal restraints, a one-man population explosion, a megalopolis’ (*Moor*, 188). Moor’s life mirrors that of his city: like Bombay, he ages prematurely.

The text’s analogies between the concept of the body, particularly Moor’s body, and the envisaged corporeality of Bombay lead to a mind/body split in the urbanscape:

In Bombay, my old hovel’n’highrise home town, we think we’re on top of the modern age, we boast that we’re natural techno fast-trackers, but that’s only true in the high-rises of our minds. Down in the slums of our bodies, we’re still vulnerable to the most disorderly disorders, the scurviest of scurvies, the plaguest of plagues. There may be pet pussies prowling around our squeaky-clean, sky-high penthouses, but they don’t cancel out the rat-infested corruption in the sewers of the blood. (*Moor*, 145)

The metaphor of the mind’s unawareness of the existence of the plagued body participates in the larger context of the urban narratives of Rushdie’s texts – the visible/invisible or overground/underground urban split. The city’s visible landscape of the mind conceals its rotten flesh, and it is this urban duplicity that ultimately imprisons the protagonist. He finds himself caught ‘between coats of paint’ (*Moor*, 318); between the visible skyscrapers, built by Abraham Zogoiby, and Zogoiby’s invisible dealings; between his Edenic life in Malabar-Masala Bombay and his imprisonment, firstly, in Bombay Central lock-up, and later, in his service to Raman Fielding. The competing fictions of the city lead to Bombay’s Armageddon: as the art critic, Zeeny Vakil, remarks, “The followers of one fiction knock down another popular piece of make-believe, and bingo! It’s war” (351). The image of the dissected Bombay, informed by the notion of body politics, is laden with assumptions about what constitutes a better, or healthier, body (O’Connor, 406). Respectively, the resulting ‘war of the worlds’ (*Moor*, 318) is between the two main ‘Beautifiers of the City’ (*Moor*, 350), Abraham Zogoiby and Raman Fielding: “the long-awaited duel, the heavyweight unification bout to establish, once and for all, which gang (criminal entrepreneurial or political-criminal) would run the town” (*Moor*, 351-2).

The novel’s Bombay diptych carries Rushdie’s critique of the corruption in Indian politics and the ideology of religious fundamentalism. Moor is trapped between the cartographies of the competing urban fictions, produced respectively by Abraham’s ‘criminal entrepreneurial’ aspirations for a Bombay of gold and Fielding’s ‘political
criminal’ ideology of a pure Hindu Bombay (Moor, 352). It is through his invisible, underground dealings – bribery, blackmail, drug-trafficking, money laundering, flesh trade, and the smuggling of nuclear bombs – that Abraham systematically amasses a fortune and earns control of the city. He begins by studying Bombay history, disinterring the secrets of “the great houses’ networks of connections” (Moor, 181), purporting that the motivation for his excavations is merely humanitarian. He discovers that the old Parsi family at the heart of the city is “in a state of terminal decline”, “and when decay is so advanced […], then the rotten teeth, must be yanked out double-quick, or the whole body might suffer and die” (Moor, 181). The fiction of the ailing city, in which Abraham envelopes his underhand business deals, renders him a benevolent saviour of Bombay. This fiction is based on the assumption that the amputation the city allegedly needs is natural and scientifically justified. Geological accretions of antagonism are delineated in organic or physiological terms. The body of the city is seen as being traversed, manipulated and mutilated not only by the course of history, but also by the accumulation of discursive constructions of history. Abraham Zogoiby is thus engaged in mining or exploiting the urban body/text.

In his service to Fielding, Moor would later adopt the Marathi leader’s philosophy of the city, which is analogous to that of Abraham’s. The beatings administered by Fielding’s ‘crack teams’ seek to eliminate ‘union-wallah dross, activist scuff and communist scum’ (Moor, 306). Moor explains: “I use these terms not pejoratively, but, if I may so put it, technically. For all industrial processes produce waste matter that must be scraped away, discarded, purged, so that excellence may emerge” (Moor, 306-7). Fielding’s view of the city as a factory, which has its roots in the early modern understanding of the nineteenth-century industrial town, is associated with the rhetoric of cleansing the city. The hierarchical structure of his crack teams also mirrors the division-of-labour policy of the industrial urban order. On the one hand, Abraham’s ‘great metropolis […] of fortune’ relies on the essentialist analogy between biological laws and social organization, in a vision of himself as the head of the centralised urban polity. On the other hand, Fielding’s ‘beautiful goddess-named Mumbai’ (Moor, 293) is based on the symbiosis between technology and people. Thus, while Abraham’s version of Bombay rewards his own ambitions, his desire for personal gain, Fielding presents his idea of a pure Hindu Mumbai as a noble collective cause.

The name of Moor’s father ironically echoes the Old Testament Abraham, who is associated, most notably, both with the notion of fatherhood and with the readiness to sacrifice his own son. He is the anti-image of the ‘National Father’, fashioned after Mogambo (Moor, 168), the villain of the Bombay masala movie Mr India, and as such, the combination of ‘a potpourri of elements’ that is designed to appeal to the broadest range of audiences. Whereas the biblical Abraham is considered to be the patriarch of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, Abraham Zogoiby carefully chooses the nickname Mogambo, so as to avoid offending any of the country’s communities (or, in other words, to succeed in exploiting all). Despite being a Cochin Jew, he succeeds in uniting the Muslim gangs, controlling the city’s organised crime (Moor, 331). Another ironic effect of the analogy between Zogoiby and the biblical forefather is the attempt
of the former to secure a god-like position – his Cashondeliveri Tower reaches for the sky, while the initials of his name, A-Z, point to his despotic omniscience. The concept of monotheism, to which the biblical name is related, is transformed by the Cochin Jew into a doctrine of centralisation that is symbolically inscribed into the cityscape. Abraham's Bombay is thus a King Kong of a city (Moor, 185), as he proudly points out. Abraham's fiction of Bombay, like the titan of popular culture, is threatening to destroy the whole city. Yet the very existence of Abraham's architectural giant, the Cashondeliveri Tower, depends on its underground counterpart – an invisible city, built by an invisible workforce. The city authorities have decreed that any persons who have settled in Bombay subsequent to the last census are to be deemed not to exist (Moor, 186):

They continued to be classified as phantoms, to move through the city like wraiths, except that these were the wraiths that kept the city going, building its houses, hauling its goods [...] and then simply and terribly dying, each in their turn, unseen, as their spectral blood poured out of their ghostly mouths in the middle of the bitch-city's all-too-real, uncanny streets. (Moor, 212)

The breach between Abraham's over- and under-ground dealings parallels the discordance between rhetoric and reality in post-Independence Indian political culture: characterised by an all-pervasive instrumentalism which washes away party manifestos and effective implementation of policies in an unending competition for power, status, and profit (Brass, 19). Rushdie's critique of the model of the state which exists for its own sake is succinctly contained in Vasco Miranda's Indian variation upon the theme of Einstein's General Theory: “D equals mc squared, where D is for Dynasty, m is for mass of relatives, and c of course is for corruption, which is the only constant in the universe” (Moor, 272, italics in the original). Dynasty, mass of relatives and corruption function as forces of nature and combine to produce an explosive formula.

Abraham's fiction of Bombay, a tower of rhetoric built on the bodies of the ghostly inhabitants of the city, entraps Moor between its layers. His fall from Malabar-Masala Bombay into Bombay Central is presented as a descent from the sentence of his own story into an ‘other, outlandish, incomprehensible text’ that has been lying beneath it (Moor, 285). In this way, Moor is assimilated into the text of his father's fiction of the city. The warder explains: “You are in Bombay Central lock-up. It is the stomach, the intestine of the city. So naturally there is much of shit” (Moor, 287). Having fallen, in what seems to be a Bakhtinian carnivalesque inversion, from the upper to the lower half of the city, Moor becomes part of another urban fiction: Raman Fielding's Mumbai. In his essay, “A Dream of Glorious Return”, Rushdie names Bal Thackeray, the head of the Shiv Sena, as the prototype for his fictional character, Raman Fielding (Rushdie, Step 196). In the novel, the leader of the militant Hindu movement, Mumbai's Axis, is a caricaturist, rather than an artist, similar to Bal Thackeray, who is a newspaper cartoonist turned politician. In a parody of Aurora Zogoiby's pictures, Fielding signs his caricatures with a little frog that is usually shown making some snide comment in the edges of the frame. As a result, he has been nicknamed Mainduck, after the frog (Moor, 229). The name Fielding is also meaningful in its echoes of
the eighteenth-century English author, Henry Fielding (Bal Thackeray’s name echoes that of William Makepeace Thackeray). Yet, Rushdie ironically relates the etymology of his fictional Fielding’s name to the game of cricket. While, according to legend, Raman Fielding’s father used to wander round the Bombay Gymkhana, pleading to be given a chance to play – “just one fielding?” (Moor, 230) – Raman rewrote his father’s tale by telling journalists that his educated, ‘internationalist’ father had taken the name of ‘Fielding’ as a genuflection to the author of Tom Jones (Moor, 232). The two explanations of the name’s origin symbolically reflect the divergence of Raman Fielding’s cultural aspirations and political practice, while, in fact, both etymologies lead to the same country of origin: England. The fictional Fielding’s belief in cricket as an essentially Hindu game repeats the exclusivist politics of the Shiv Sena leader, who is known to have banned Pakistani cricketers from Indian territory (Ghosh 47, 68). In the novel, cricket is at the roots of Fielding’s political philosophy and his movement, Mumbai’s Axis: “Fielding insisted on grouping his dedicated cadres into ‘elevens’ and each of these little platoons had a ‘team captain’ to whom absolute allegiance had to be sworn” (Moor, 231). Thus the structure of Fielding’s hit-teams mirrors that of Shiv Sena membership, which is formed into small local groups called shakas, each led by a dada (Trousdale, 100). Rushdie caricatures Hindu nationalism by portraying it as empty politics of game-playing, as a team involved in a meaningless war game that needs to undermine the value of sportsmanship in order to win. Hindu communal politics mirrors the us-them division of sports culture, in which Fielding’s crack teams are involved in nothing more than fan hooliganism. When choosing a name for his political movement, Fielding hesitates between a Hindu cricketer – “Ranji’s Army, Mankad’s Martiners” – and a Hindu goddess – “Mumba-Ai, Mumbadevi, Mumbabai”, finally succeeding in “uniting regional and religious nationalism” through the choice of the latter (Moor, 231). The absurdity of the Mumbai’s Axis (MA) origins is in the combination of Hindu pride and the affiliation to a game introduced by the colonizer, especially since Fielding swears by a ‘beautiful goddess-named Mumbai’ as opposed to ‘this dirty Anglo-style Bombay’ (Moor, 293). Fielding’s divisive politics construct an exclusivist image of Bombay that relies on essentialist representational practices: the fiction of ethnic purity and the belief in a golden age. He is against ‘immigrants’ to the city, by which he means “all non-Marathi speakers, including all those who had been born there”, and in favour of ‘natural residents’, who include “Marathi-medium types who had just stepped off the bus” (Moor, 299).

As the city is partitioned into Mainduck’s and Mogambo’s, the protagonist loses his name, his “Moor”-ings, and is reduced to the metonymic nickname ‘Hammer’, when he becomes part of an MA crack team. The split in the Moor figure mirrors the split in the urban fabric, producing a binary city. Through this urban diptych Rushdie critiques the model of the city of international capital and corruption, on the one hand, and the city of religious fundamentalism, on the other: the model of the ‘god-and-mammon’ city (Moor, 351).

In a formal sense, the narrative of Bombay occupies a central position in the text. However, its centrality proves to be an impossible goal. Centrality is what both
Abraham’s fiction of a corporate Bombay and Fielding’s fiction of a pure Marathi Mumbai aim to achieve, thus producing, ironically, a bi-focal city. To the narrator, Bombay’s centrality is an urban ideal of inclusiveness and pluralism – as opposed to the idea of an absolute, totalising centre with which the warring fictions of the city are shown to identify. Yet this Central Bombay proves equally phantasmal. Its visibility is gradually undermined by a subterranean Bombay Central, an erosive process that culminates in a fatal urban conflict: ‘Mogambo versus Mainduck’ (Moor, 351). Both strategists’ chosen war methods are bribery and secret attacks, where each attempts to erode the ground beneath the other’s feet and each employs, to this aim, his rival’s own followers. After having continuously ground, scraped and abraded each other in this way, Bombay’s economic and political monoliths spectacularly explode: Fielding’s MA building and Abraham’s Cashondeliveri Tower are both bombed and numerous buildings in the centre of the city are destroyed, leaving the streets covered in bodies. Bombay thus “blows apart” and Moor wonders if the city is “simply murdering itself” (Moor, 371).

Bombay’s Armageddon signals the destruction of the ideal of urban tolerance, echoing the precedent of Arab Granada’s fall to Catholicism: “Just as the fanatical ‘Catholic Kings’ had besieged Granada and awaited the Alhambra’s fall, so now barbarism was standing at our gates” (Moor, 372). Though Rushdie has his narrator speak of collective guilt – “the barbarians were […] within our skins” (Moor, 372) – his attack, consistent with the politics of urban representation in his previous novels, is aimed at fundamentalist practices. Rushdie’s last sigh is for the city of mongrel joy that has been disfigured by the emergence of the increasingly violent Shiv Sena in Bombay as a politically significant movement. Rachel Trousdale notes that as a secular Muslim with Western education, Rushdie is both vehemently opposed to and unwelcome among the Hindu nationalists (Trousdale, 97). It can also be argued that in The Moor’s Last Sigh Rushdie is at pains to show that he is just as critical of Christian and Hindu fundamentalism as he is of Muslim exclusivist fictions of the city in The Satanic Verses, such as those of the Imam and Mahound. The greatest villain and betrayer of the city, however, ‘the biggest dada of them all’ (Moor, 331), and thus the main object of critique in The Moor’s Last Sigh, is Abraham Zogoiby: a Jew of Moorish origin who stands at the head of a mostly Muslim axis of capitalist self-interest. The critique of Abraham’s inter-communal league grows into a broader attack on anonymous multi-national capitalism in the vision of Benengeli.

Bombay is successively shrunk to a series of incarcerating spaces that echo the author’s condition under the fatwa – the prematurely aging body; the home, where Moor receives private tuition; and the prison, in which Moor is locked up after falling from grace with his parents. At the same time, the city invisibly and paradoxically expands with Abraham’s secrets and the nightly assaults perpetrated by Mainduck’s crack teams. Although urban space is flexible and self-rejuvenating and has the power to heal itself by diluting the spirit of adversarial intensity (Moor, 351), it is also manipulable and defenceless against ‘the rest of the country’ (Moor, 351). Bombay, the novel’s triptych structure suggests, is imprisoned within modern India, just as Moor is imprisoned in his body and in his Scheherazade-like captivity within his own tale.
Moor embarks on a Quixotic quest to find the true Mooristan/Palimpstine, thus escaping Bombay’s imprisonment, only to stumble upon an ‘anti-Jerusalem’ (*Moor*, 388) in the phantasmal Spanish village of Benengeli. Named after Cide Hamete Benengeli, the fictional author of Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, the right-wing panel of the novel’s triptych evokes the tradition of self-reflexive writing. More specifically, *The Moor’s Last Sigh* intertextually re-envisions the idea of inhabiting fictions, of reading of oneself, which is the self-imposed fate of Cervantes’ protagonist.

The name of the only taxi-driver willing to take Moor to Benengeli is ‘Vivar’, an echo of the hero of Spanish national mythology, celebrated in the popular ballad tradition for hundreds of years, Rodrigo Diaz, or El Cid Campeador, or the Cid of Vivar. In the novel, Vivar (‘Vivar’ is the birthplace of the Cid), is ironically a Mexican immigrant, whose role is reminiscent of that of Phlegyas, the boatman who rows Dante and Virgil across the Styx. The figure of Vivar is reduced from the legendary status of the Cid to the Hollywood stereotype of an incomprehensible ‘Third-World’ New York taxi driver – thus the “broken argot of dreadful American films” (*Moor*, 385) that he speaks is the only language in which Moor and he can communicate.

The text, particularly Moor’s route to Benengeli, foregrounds the idea of urban inauthenticity, but not, for instance, as the concept of culture’s or origin’s mongrel nature (celebrated in all of Rushdie’s work), but as usurpation, imposture, plagiarism. A series of stand-ins frustrate expectations. The image of Benengeli as an impostor replaces the ideal of Mooristan. Vasco Miranda’s commercial art, an empty imitation of Aurora’s paintings, is divested of their political significance. His ‘ugly, pretentious house’, the ‘Little Alhambra’ betrays the idea of a ‘New Moorisalem’ (*Moor*, 409). Benengeli’s neighbouring town of thieves, Avellaneda, shares its name with that of Cervantes’ slanderous contemporary, the author of the illegitimate sequel of the *Quixote* (the second book of Don Quixote’s adventures published before Cervantes’ own Part II). In Benengeli, Moor’s own words sound hollow and wrong: “I am a Jew from Spain, like the philosopher Maimonides”, “I am like the Catholicized Córdoba mosque […]. A piece of Eastern architecture with a baroque cathedral stuck in the middle of it” (*Moor*, 388, italics in the original). The words that the taxi-driver whispers to Moor upon arrival, “May you never find what you seek” (*Moor*, 389), point to the Quixotic nature of Moor’s route. The ‘infernal maze’ of Benengeli is symbolic of the labyrinthine self-reflexive textuality of Moor’s own tale.

Travelling to the city “whence [the Moors] have been cast out, centuries ago” (*Moor*, 376), Moor finds himself in a kind of anti-Oz, a place where his only connection with Bombay is Vasco Miranda, the plagiarist of his mother’s art, whose name is suggestive of the project of discovery and colonial exploitation, through the allusion to the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama. Ironically, Vasco Miranda inhabits the surreal, kitsch-style re-creation of Mooristan/Palimpstine that is the product of his own lunatic mind, and it is, ultimately, this mad folly that imprisons Moor. Benengeli is a fraud, a geographical and historical elapse. On his passage from Bombay to Benengeli, the protagonist metaphorically “falls” off the edge of the urban map/panel. The failure of Rushdie’s protagonist to reach/achieve the urban goal asserts the novels’ dissociation from epic fate and historic teleology, but it also points to Rushdie’s critique of the
destruction of the urban ideal through the negation of Mooristan/Palimpstine in Benengeli, a canvas/fiction which strips the notion of cultural inauthenticity of its inspiring potential.

Benengeli, like the Alhambra, which Moor reaches in the final moments of his life, is a ‘monument to a lost possibility’ (Moor, 433) – the degradation of the idealized Granada/Bombay as a place of mutually beneficial Muslim-Christian co-existence. Further, in Benengeli, the idea of the cosmopolitan city of cultural hybridity is reduced to the trope of the discourse of globalization – the global village – and seen against the effects on place of contemporary multi-national capitalism. In this way, Rushdie’s extended critique of international commercial self-interest, as embodied by the unifying figure of Abraham Zogoiby, bridges Bombay and Benengeli to transform the latter into a grotesque vision of empty, anonymous multiculturalism. Such is the vision of Benengeli’s Street of Parasites: it is full of non-Spaniards, who have no interest in the local customs and who behave more like city-dwellers rather than village people. It is flanked by a lot of expensive boutiques, bearing international brand names, and eating places that offer all the national cuisines of the Western world (Moor, 390).

The Benengeli section of the text experiments with and deliberately exaggerates a variety of narrative conventions, such as those of the genre of detective fiction so as to parody this culture of empty pastiche. Many of these conventions are interwoven in the episode of Moor’s captivity in Vasco Miranda’s fortress and are, thus, indicative of Moor’s imprisonment in the same degraded culture. Moor’s fellow-prisoner writes letters to friends, deliberately including small mistakes to alert them, and the portrait of Aurora’s murderer is dramatically revealed underneath another painting – an element of the plot that mirrors, at the same time, the nature of Moor’s tale, which is also forced to inhabit dangerous fictions. The fact that Moor himself is forced by Miranda to ‘recount the sinful saga of the Zogoibys’ combines the clichés of stories of espionage with the suspense of The Arabian Nights.

Whereas Cervantes’s novel ends with Cide Hamete Benengeli’s pen condemning any potential continuations of Don Quixote’s story as illegitimate, in Rushdie’s idea of Benengeli, Bombay and India find their counterfeit afterlife. The fictional Spanish village is the translation of Bombay into the language of multi-national capitalism. Benengeli completes the bleak triptych of Rushdie’s darkest novel. He chooses the moment of Moorish Granada’s Christian re-conquest and the legend of its last sultan as the prism through which to view the fall of Bombay. This functions as an outside panel that opens into the inside images of Cochin-Bombay-Benengeli to direct attention to the development of the ideologies existing at Independence, their expansion and ultimate explosion into the visible urban over-ground that destroys the city, and their hellish Gothicized-afterlife version seen in the local-global geography of power of multinational capitalism. By juxtaposing the Granada precedent and the destruction of Bombay, Rushdie offers a broader critique of Hindu and Christian fundamentalist fictions and the Orientalist-triptych understanding of Indian history. Bombay’s centrality in the triptych, a format that foregrounds the Christian concept of unity, ironically stands for the impossibility of a totalising goal. Bombay is a
binary city – divided into visible and invisible; rhetoric and practice; Abraham’s and Fielding’s; Malabar Masala and Bombay Central. Urban space increasingly withdraws into a series of incarcerating spaces – the body, the home, the prison, the tower, the tale – until the reflection of Moorish Granada in modern Bombay is refracted through the dystopia of Benengeli and the urban ideal is finally encapsulated only in the protagonist’s last sigh. Yet, the narrative does not suggest a closure of urban possibilities. As we have seen, the novel’s cartography unfolds like a map, thus pointing to the historical and geographical openness and multi-directionality of the urban text/map and the possibility for urban reform and renewal.

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