The Shapeless Self in Salman Rushdie’s Works

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This article builds upon the assumption that an identity is an endless construction that is difficult to fix within a frame, however large it might be. In Salman Rushdie’s works, private and collective identities are groundless and ever shifting, trapped in a world shaped by historical dialectical relations inscribed in a circular movement. What emerges from Rushdie’s investigation of human identity is the complexity of “being” in a boundary-free world. His works transcend the narrow definition of this “state of being” and establish a destabilising shapeless self whose contours are blurred and metamorphous.

Placeless, shapeless, fluid and transmutant, Rushdie’s characters challenge all the theories advocating the confinement of the “self” behind reassuring, safe boundaries, be they geographical or cultural. The constant map shifting blurs the limits of cultural belonging and compels the “self” to reconsider its defining principles. From Saleem Sinai in Midnight’s Children to Malik Solanka in Fury, Rushdie’s characters learn a great deal about the atomisation of the self engaged on a circular journey having the self at each of its ends. The individual character is strange to himself, until s/he undertakes this strenuous journey that leads to the discovery of what is already lurking inside. Globalized, digitalized and scanned, human identity has never been so codified and yet so indefinite. It is this indefiniteness that Rushdie explores in his works. The step across the line he invites his characters to make is also a step across the prescribed limits of what they might be. It is an invitation to move “beyond” one’s geographical (natural), physical and cultural borderline to venture into destabilising and forbidden territories. It is not that they prefigure what they are looking for, nor that they have a destination they just move toward. They are figures shaped by movement, perpetually metamorphic and thriving on their placelessness and timelessness. They translate and are constantly translated into other languages, other selves, enlarging their scope and entangling in their embrace the whole world, as Saleem Sinai claims.

A journey implies encounters, doubts, revisions, and transformations. The one Rushdie proposes does not recognise the laws of geography nor those of temporality. It is a journey “à la carte” as Deleuze and Guattari: put it

The map does not reproduce a conscience that is locked into itself, it builds it [conscience] up. It favours the connection of spaces, the release of organless bodies, their maximum openness on the level of consistency. It is part of the
rhizome itself. The map is open, it is connectable in all its dimensions, capable of being dismantled, reversible, given to constant modifications. (Deleuze, Guattari, 37) (my translation)

It is, thus, a journey in the realm of the beyond or « au-delà » in Kristeva’s terms, where his characters have the possibility of glimpsing their “being in progress.” They discover that they are strangers to themselves, that the “other” is an exo-endo-topia, both alien and familiar.

Rushdie’s characters are not born out of chaos. They simply reveal themselves in the course of history as a “praxis,” affected and affecting the others. It is difficult, even irrelevant, to speak about a starting point either in place or in time. They simply spiral out of the swirling movement of history as figures of the wind or “figures of air” born out of natural spores, as Rushdie puts it. For example, Saleem Sinai’s identity cannot be defined either in space or in time. It is the sum total of other jostling selves and histories caught within a perpetual movement. His genealogy is indeterminate: he is not the son of his father nor the father of his son. The Moor in The Moor’s Last Sigh is also the son of a rumour, born in the interstitial space between biology and fantasy, between his legal and illegal fathers, Abraham Zogoiby, Vasco Miranda, Prime Minister Nehru and who knows else. Freed from the determinism of genealogy, they may escape swiftly from moral and cultural commitment to be what history made of them, that is rhizomes: Deleuze and Guattari say in this respect that ‘the rhizome is an antigenealogy . The rhizome operates through variation, expansion, conquest, capture, injections.’ (Deleuze, Guattari, 62, my translation). Saleem and the Moor are not what they are supposed to be, their roots are groundless. And because they are trees without roots, they are ready to be cross-pollinated and even to adapt themselves to other soils and weathers. Bertold Brecht says in this respect

Nevertheless, we often say that one should be rooted somewhere. I am convinced that the only beings that have roots, trees, would prefer not to have them. They might then, take the plane too. (Brecht, 78, my translation)

Like Brecht’s trees, Rushdie’s characters also strive to make their journey. Saleem, who claims to be the world, travels in space as well as time, obliterating the limits of rationality. He moves from India to Pakistan, crossing borders in a hectic movement, when restrictions on people’s movement were imposed for security as well as religious reasons, Parvati the Witch altered his physical appearance, rendering him translucent and allowing him to weld his fragmented parts together. As for time, he is a time traveller embodying deities as well as contemporary political figures. The Moor, Ormus, Haroun and Solanka are also time and space travellers, for what is born out of movement cannot be satisfied by fixity. And what is born

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1 Concept used by Antonio Gramsci and quoted in Ricci, p. 598.
out of multiplicity cannot dwell in monovalence. Culturally, historically and
geographically divided, the Moor refuses to accept the others’ definition of
his identity. He dreams of escape, of leaving Bombay – despite its
heterogeneity – and to set himself in motion looking for Andalucia and its
glorious past. He dreams of Averroes and of heteroglossia. The urge to move
mounts to a crescendo until it becomes unbearable to live. The present is
unsatisfactory because life has revealed only one side of its multifarious
facets, and because other voices are crowding his head, he decides to respond
to the internal call of exile. In the Spain of his dreams, his Jewish, Christian,
Hindu and Muslim cultural fragments could be reshuffled to reveal his
“Being”. Delving into himself, he discovers many other “channels” that need
to be explored. Emmanuel Levinas says in this respect:

This experience calls for the opening and for a genuine getting out of the self.
The human being goes through another decisive step where, despite his
satisfaction, the subject fails to be self-sufficient. Every release from the self
represents the rift that establishes itself in the Same towards the Other. A desire
metamorphosed into an openness to exteriorty. Openness that is a call and a
response to otherness. (Levinas, 111, my translation)

Though it is a physical transportation from India to Spain, the journey is still
within the self. The Moor, whose father is probably not his father, whose
Indianness is as doubtful as his genealogy, whose place (India) is losing its
mongrel quality has to leave. He has seen the abyss within himself, the rift that
‘ruins our home, the time when understanding and sympathy collapse.’
(Kristeva, 9, my translation) The Moor fails to recognise Bombay, his ideal
Bombay, the one that reflects his own deformed and multiple image:

It was no longer my Bombay, no longer special, no longer the city of mixed-
up, mongrel joy. Something had ended (the world?) and what remained, I
didn’t know. I found myself looking forward to Spain – to Elsewhere. I was
going to the place whence we had been cast out, centuries ago. Might it not
turn out to by my lost home, my resting-place, my promised land? Might it not
be my Jerusalem. (Rushdie, 376)

It is the same abyss on the verge of which Malik Solanka in Fury found
himself one day knife in hand about to murder his wife and his only son. The
same unsatisfactory state of being propels him out of his geographical,
professional and social dwelling place and instead of Granada, it is Manhattan
and its promise of anonymity and multiplicity that attracts him. On the verge
of that folly, Solanka realizes that along the dark alley there is another place,
where his secret self may find expression. A place where the fury inside him
may be soothed once he melts into multiplicity, rootless, anonymous,
unfaithful and free. His sudden irresistible need to leave is quite identical to
the Moor’s when he felt alien among his “own” people. Kristeva says in this
respect, ‘A secret wound, often unknown to himself, propels the foreigner into
errance’ (Kristeva, 13, my translation). The ‘elsewhere’ they look for, is not a fixed, determined destination, it is rather a ‘nowhere.’ The Moor’s experience with Spain ends up on a gravestone, on the verge of another abyss separating life from death, here and somewhere else. As for Solanka, he too exhausts Manhattan as much as it has exhausted him after having gone through all the possibilities the city may offer (new love, with the most beautiful woman on earth, new work, the most successful toy business in the world, a new house and friends). But he is still unsatisfied. As a character of movement, he has to roll by, to go and join other fragments of the scattered “being.” It is the journey that matters, the voyage that unsettles as well as reveals.

Two major literary works had a tremendous influence on Rushdie’s artistic and philosophical development. *The Conference of Birds* by Farid Uddin Attar and Doris Lessing’s *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8*. Both of them deal with individual and self development through voyage and encounters. The birds as well as the citizens of Lessing’s planet undertake a strenuous journey and witness the metamorphosis of their Beings. They discover that they are venturing into the self, that the treasure they are hunting is lurking inside waiting to be unearthed or revealed, to use Heidegger’s concept. What really matters is the journey itself. In *The Satanic Verses*, Gibreel and Chamcha undertake that voyage, reborn in flight, floating in the air. Having been ejected out of the plane, they start to see the world differently. They see themselves as “creatures of air” ready to unveil fragments of their hidden selves. They contemplate the world from above and see no borderlines and no guards patrolling. They giggle at the new freedom they are acquiring. Franz Fanon says in this respect, ‘In the world in which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself. And it is by going beyond the historical, instrumental hypothesis that I will initiate my cycle of freedom.’ (Fanon, 187, my translation)

It is this exciting promise of freeing the self which propels Gibreel and Chamcha into a world of pain, treachery, trials, metamorphosis and doubt. Their most intimate definition of themselves is questioned. Chamcha loses his human physical characteristics and metamorphoses into a goat. The limits of the organic body are transgressed (a reminder of Kafka’s metamorphosis). He becomes a stranger to himself, contested in his own humanity, the way Saleem becomes translucent, the way Ormus’s skin starts peeling off and his eyes start seeing different things at the same moment. The Moor’s accelerated aging and his development as a freak are other manifestations of the journey’s metamorphic quality:

As roaches crawled and mosquitoes stung, so I felt my skin was indeed coming away from my body, as I had dreamed so long ago that it would. But in this version of the dream, my peeling skin took with it all elements of my personality. I was becoming nobody, nothing; or, rather, I was becoming what had been made of me. (Rushdie, 288)
In *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, Haroun grows into a large spider and is surprised at the ease with which alterations may occur. ‘He was half way up the tower when he noticed one of his hands beginning to change, becoming hairy, losing its human shape.’ (Rushdie, p.73) He finally recovers his human shape, just like Chamcha, and both accept their transformations as part of a process of “revealment.” In *Fury*, Malik Solanka, a middle-class university professor turns into a demonic creature ready to kill, because of the unidentified rift that becomes visible once the journey is initiated. India, London, Spain, Manhattan, Mexico constitute the shores of the self that imagination and literature try to bridge. The bridge is nothing but imagination. It is the vessel on which they have embarked aiming at connecting banks. A bridge, according to Heidegger:

> brings to the stream the one and the other expanse of the landscape lying behind them. It brings stream and bank and land into each other’s neighbourhood [...] The bridge gathers the earth as landscape around the stream. (Heidegger, 150-151)

“Gathering” is not a simple enterprise of establishing a conciliatory medium to pacify opposites; it goes further than that. It is about merger and creation. The sea of stories, that separates both worlds in Rushdie’s fable, is doubly threatened. On the one hand, the enemies of speech and stories want to pollute the sea, while the lovers of the sea whose heads are full of dreams and “stories that are not even true” want to keep it crystal clear: pure. Pollution on the one side versus purity on the other, a polarization Rushdie denounces because both are dogmatic and absolutist in their respective ways. Purity breeds as much intolerance as impurity. The point in Rushdie’s story is not to deny each land’s peculiarities, the point is to allow both lands to “gather” or “neighbour” and serve as mirrors. The one needs the other to express its “presencing.” By the end of this journey across the stream, Haroun and his father discover that darkness has its own beauty. That things are far from clear-cut in a manichean way. That everything has its shadow and that their enemy the Shadow Warrior who defends the land of darkness and silence, has managed to prove that “silence had its own grace and beauty (just as speech could be graceless and ugly); and that action could be as noble as words; and that creatures of darkness could be as lovely as the children of the light. (Rushdie, 125). What may render this encounter possible is not the bridge in itself, but the sea (or the river in Heidegger’s metaphor) the way banks joined in Arundhati Roy’s novel *The God of Small Things*. In Roy’s novel the Meenachal River plays that existential part allowing opposites to unite, when the Untouchable Velutha makes the “crossing” (chapter 15) to go and meet his master’s daughter Ammu and accomplish the worst of transgressions through love-making. The guards of morality, of purity, of 2 Martin Heidegger’s terminology.
segregation will later smash him to death for having dared transgress those boundaries. Haroun’s self-conscious recognition of the beauty of darkness and the love-making in Roy’s novel are emanations of the bridging process where boundaries are no longer limits, edges or brinks but a “presencing” as Heidegger puts it when saying that “a boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognised, the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing. That is why the concept is of horismos, that is, the horizon, the boundary” (Heidegger, p.152).

The focalisation of the self in Rushdie’s characters’ experience is less a narcissistic enterprise than an internal pressure leading to the expansion of the self and its atomisation. As stated above, the journey through the self, which is also a journey through “others” and other places and times, is rather existential, for most of Rushdie’s characters linger on the verge of mental and physical collapse. The journey becomes salvatory and existential un-ease a reason “to be” and to create. Solanka’s artistic creation is forged out of his existential chaos. When dealing with this aspect, Kristeva wonders:

confirmed narcissism? White psychosis under the tumult of existential conflicts? When crossing a border (... or two), the foreigner transforms his uneasiness into a platform of resistance, a life citadel. (Kristeva, 18)

Through their physical and intellectual alterations, Rushdie’s characters become others to themselves imposing an artificial distance, an internal exotopia. That is the condition for knowing oneself, for bringing forth what Heidegger calls poiesis. This poiesis occurs when the deeply hidden is revealed. In blurring the limits between the world of imagination and dreams and that of things, Gibreel, whose name is also ambivalent, manages to “reveal” both his angelic and devilish selves. He discovers the unsettling cohabitation of the Heimlich and Unheimlich. Meaning and existence lie in that interregnum which Homi Bhabha calls the interstitial.

In his definition of the interstitial or what he also calls the “Third space” Homi Bhabha argues that it is

the ‘inter’ – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging national, anti-nationalist histories of the ‘people’. And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves. (Bhabha, 38)

In Rushdie’s case it is fiction and the work of imagination that allow the artist to establish that dialectical relationship between the different fragments of the self. Gibreel, half angel, half human, finds in words the means to reveal the interregnum as a “presencing.” In that interregnum, he discovers his ambivalence, the relativity of truth and the “burden of meaning.” Setting his words against the words of God, Gibreel brings forth what was hidden and waiting for the accomplishment of the poetic experience to come to the light.
Profane, subversive words render that *revealment* possible, when they interact with other divine words and unveil other aspects of his being. The poetic experience is a permanent quest for words and meaning in the liminal territory, as Heidegger puts it, where ‘sky and earth, divinities and mortals’ gather (Heidegger, p.151). There, in that interstitial space and through language that Gibreel manages to consider “truth” from another angle, to question the authenticity of language and its authority. In doing so, he discovers the new territory of “being.” He confirms what Heidegger means by words as the dwelling place of *being*. Gibreel’s poetic and existential experience is made through and by words to come to the conclusion that “only the word can reveal and bring forth a thing, as such, the way it is. The word reveals itself to the poet as something that holds and keeps a thing in its being” (Heidegger, 152, my translation).

The interaction of antinomical discourses as a consequence of a work of imagination is both unsettling and *revealing*. Unsettling because of doubt and the replacement of monoglossia with heteroglossia, and revealing of another competing *truth*. The comforting univocal world is destabilised by another competing world brought into being by words and the poetic experience. Gibreel is aware of the power of words and imagination. He knows that such revelation inaugurates the time of trouble: ‘if I was God I’d cut the imagination right out of people and then maybe poor bastards like me could get a good night’s rest.’ (Rushdie, 122) Sleepless Gibreel is reincarnated in sleepless Haroun in *Haroun and The Sea of Stories*, who, in his turn discovers the unsettling quality of the interstitial space and its ambivalence. He will find beauty and grace in silence while he is a creature of words and speech. He too, accomplishes the poetic experience through imagination and dreams, venturing through the land of words, less to rescue Soraya than to discover his self. The end of his journey at eleven o’clock, that is at the very moment it started, is a moment of revealment, of bringing into being what was unknown to him before that journey. Iff the water genie expresses it explicitly when he states that:

> a person may mention a bird’s name even if the creature is not present and correct... To give a thing a name, a label, a handle; to rescue it from anonymity, to pluck it out of the place of namelessness, in short to identify it -, that’s the way of bringing the said thing into being. (Rushdie, *Haroun*, 58)

Iff’s statement is nothing but the echo of Heidegger’s understanding of the poetic mission when saying that:

> The poet considers that the poetic things, marvels and dreams exist of themselves within the very being ; all that is missing, is the art to find for them the word that describes and represents them. First and foremost, it works as if words have the function of grasping, capturing something that exists already as such, to give it consistency, to express it and thus reveal its beauty. (Heidegger, pp.154-155)
He also states that, ‘nothing could be, where the word fails’. (Heidegger, 154-155)

Haroun, Gibreel, Saleem, Ormus, the Moor create the appropriate space outside the material and familiar, where they project their own dreams of being differently, of changing their skin and of translating their self into selves. That space beyond and in-between, that nowhere, is the new foundland where the contours of the self are never definite. Vina Apsara in The Ground beneath Her Feet is one of those polymorphic creatures who threatens as well as fascinates people around her: “She was a rag-bag of selves, torn fragments of people she might have become. Some days she sat crumpled in a corner like a string-cut puppet, and when she jerked into life you never knew who would be there, in her skin” (122). Ormus Cama, like Orpheus, crossed the border separating the world below from that above. He crossed the line between the world of dreams and that of things. Finally, he cannot breathe unless he finds his counter-part, Vina Apsara, his Eurydice. She is a mythical figure and the charts’ superstar. They both live on the verge of different worlds, in that ‘agonistic’ twilight zone where their lives and their art could find their accomplishment. Ormus translates himself into a world language, accessible to all, to prove through his body and art that permeability is not a self-conscious choice but a state of Being. Rushdie affirms in his essay entitled ‘Step Across this line’ that the journey outside our prescribed territory, be it one’s own skin, creates us, ‘we become the frontiers we cross.’ (Rushdie, p.410) He thus celebrates the advent of the mirage space, “Mongrelland”, the fluid territory of the heterogeneous, the imaginary homeland where no guards patrol.

“The other” is no longer situated at a healthy distance from the self. The other is inside. The revealsment is made possible through art, which is the space of freedom of thought and being. The poetic space allows what the geographical forbids, that is a free access to contradictory states of being. Haroun who fought against the Shadow Warrior discovers that the latter is not an “other”, but the very shadow of himself. The frontier separating the “Heimlich” from the “unheimlich” is receding under his feet, to reveal Kristeva’s “abyss” of the self. Chamcha’s transit through the abyss is expressed through an extreme form of translation into a goat, a demon as the shadow of his newly shapeless self. He thus loses his naive understanding of his self as a pure, univocal being. Constantly reminded of his Indianness, while claiming his Englishness, he discovers that truth lies in the dialectical relation between different cultures and different human beings. In her comment on Freud’s work on otherness, Kristeva comments that

3 Homi Bhabha’s terminology.
“Recognising our threatening foreignness, we will neither suffer nor thrive on it from outside. The foreign is in me, thus we all are foreigners. If I am a foreigner, there are no foreigners” (Kristeva, 284) (my translation). Kristeva goes so far as erasing any essentialising identification of the “self” and the “other.” Neither of them can exist independently. Rushdie’s metaphor of water and its flow testifies to this impossible essentialisation. The multiple voices and selves crowding Saleem’s head constitute the innumerable possibilities lying inside of him. He is rhizomatically connected and disconnected with other people, other places and other times, breaking all the barriers at once. In *Step Across This Line*, Rushdie states that “The idea of overcoming, of breaking down boundaries that hold us in and surpassing the limits of our own natures, is central to all the stories of the quest. The Grail is a chimera. The quest for the Grail is the Grail.” (410). Saleem has spent his entire life roaming through the different channels he carries within. He finally claims that to know him one has to swallow the world.

Genealogy-free, placeless, shapeless, fluid and free, Rushdie’s conception of selfhood obliterates any fixed, narrow definition. Because his characters are figures of borderlines, they are permeable and translucent. They are figures of air, of smoke, of water, difficult to grasp and ever changing. The dialectical relation between the unique and the multiple determines their state of being. One is isolated; a stranger to oneself until one makes that journey across, stepping into the world ‘beyond’ and operating what Rushdie calls ‘an opening of the self, an increase in what it is possible for the voyager to be.’ (Rushdie, p.409) The example of the Moor is perfectly salient. A man who has always thought of himself as made of consonants discovers in the Anglo-Japanese *Aio* the lady of vowels, Madam Butterfly, the other missing fragment that may blow life into those consonants and break into a new melody of the word and of being. This is what boundaries prevent and what art renders possible.

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**Works Cited**


