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# Illusions that Resemble Reality: Salman Rushdie's "At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers"

Aloka Patel

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- 1 Towards the middle of his story "At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers" (1994) Salman Rushdie writes: "This permeation of the real world by the fictional is a symptom of the moral decay of our post-millennial culture" (78). By deliberately confusing the fictional with the real, Rushdie playfully conjures up a phantasmagoric world. This imaginary world, real and fictional at the same time, is also the centre where the dynamics of power between the ethical and the wicked are constantly at odds. This paper attempts to understand Rushdie's short story as a representation of an alternative reality that dramatizes a discourse of historical reality, which is fixed in a specific time and space, in opposition to the "real" world of an exile in today's globalized context where "home" has become a fluid concept. In addition, the story can be read in Nietzschean terms as a conflict between the "unhistorical" being who is "contained in the present," and a man who "braces himself against the great and ever greater pressure of what is past [...] so as to remind him what his existence fundamentally is—an imperfect tense that can never become a perfect one" (Nietzsche 61). For Nietzsche, a man who constantly lives in the past and tries to preserve it in his memories considers his own existence in the present as imperfect. On the other hand, the "unhistorical" being also feels incomplete because of his dissociation from the past.
- 2 In the story, Rushdie dramatizes an auction of a pair of ruby slippers apparently belonging to Dorothy in the classic 1939 movie, *The Wizard of Oz*. The auction hall, with the medley of characters present in it, resembles the contemporary [post]modern, globalized and cosmopolitan world. Removed from their fictional context of the movie, and placed in the auction hall, the narrator questions "the limits of [the magical] powers" (73) of the ruby slippers to take an exile back in space and time to her/his place of origin, or home. He suspects "that these limits may not exist" (73) and tries to prove the inadequacy of reading historical knowledge/meaning into present-day

situations. However, while writing the story, the author himself is ironically unable to detach the present from the past, and his personal experiences impinge upon the narratorial voice. This paper endeavours also to explain how personal and/or political events shape the opinions of the artist, or in Nietzsche's terms, the man of "deeds" (64).

- 3 *The Wizard of Oz*, a novel originally written by L. Frank Baum in 1900 for children, and popularized in the movie of the same name, idealized "home" as the emblem of one's 'true' identity. 'Home,' Kansas in the novel and movie, became the 'real' place, and Oz, the emerald world of plenty, became the land of fantasy or dreams. Whereas in the novel Baum makes no explicit remark about Dorothy's adventures as a dream sequence, the movie presents Dorothy's journey to Oz as a dream that allows her to escape from the dreary world of her dry and grey Kansas home. After all her exciting adventures into the colourful land of Oz with the Scarecrow, the Tin man, the Cowardly Lion, and her dog Toto, Dorothy returns to Kansas with the realization that "there's no place like home." Rushdie counters this notion of "home" as one's roots to which every exile nostalgically wishes to return, in his essay, "Out of Kansas" (1992):

Florence Ryerson and Edgar Allan Woolf were probably responsible for 'There's no place like home', which, to me, is the least convincing idea in the film (it's one thing for Dorothy to want to get home, quite another that she can only do so by eulogizing the ideal state which Kansas is so obviously not). (8)

- 4 Rushdie narrates his thoughts after a viewing of the movie in his childhood in India:

I remember (or I imagine I remember) that when I first saw this film, Dorothy's place struck me as being pretty much a dump. I was lucky, and had a good, comfortable home, and so, I reasoned to myself, if I'd been whisked off to Oz, I'd naturally want to get home again. But Dorothy? Maybe we should invite her over to stay. Anywhere looks better than *that*. (10)

- 5 Rushdie undermines the unconditional longing for home as a romantic myth. By linking the notion of home to a material reality and debunking the romantic assumption of "there's no place like home," he problematizes the notion of home and situates it in a historical context. He presents migration or exile as a vital experience of the cosmopolitan citizen of the modern "post-millennial" globalized world, a necessary condition for the modern artist. Rushdie dismisses the idea of rootedness of identity or a settled home and notes the embedded urge within humans to move out in search of freer and fertile territories as reflected in Judy Garland's song, 'Over the Rainbow' in the movie. Rushdie comments:

Anybody who has swallowed the scriptwriters' notion that this is a film about the superiority of 'home' over 'away', that the 'moral' of *The Wizard of Oz* is as sickly-sweet as an embroidered sampler—'East, West, home's best'—would do well to listen to the yearning in Judy Garland's voice, as her face tilts up towards the skies. What she expresses here, what she embodies with the purity of an archetype, is the human dream of *leaving*, a dream at least as powerful as its countervailing dream of roots. At the heart of *The Wizard of Oz* is the tension between these two dreams; but as the music swells and that big, clean voice flies into the anguished longings of the song, can anyone doubt which message is the stronger? In its most potent emotional moment this is unarguably a film about the joys of going away, of leaving the greyness and entering the colour, of making a new life in 'the place where there isn't any trouble'. 'Over the Rainbow' is, or ought to be, the anthem of all the world's migrants, all those who go in search of the place where 'the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true'. It is a celebration of Escape, a grand paen to the uprooted self, a hymn—the hymn—to Elsewhere. ("Out of Kansas" 14)

- 6 The story, "At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers" uses the film *The Wizard of Oz* as an intertext for the auction of a pair of ruby slippers with magical powers. A motley gathering of people fetishizes the slippers because they believe in "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" (77). A variety of characters, from actors to physicians, political refugees to even fictional characters from "nineteenth-century Australian paintings" (78) and mad men and orphans arrive with the hope that the slippers may perform "the impossible" (75) and "might transport them back through time and space" (77). The narrative gradually unveils itself to demystify the authority of the magic slippers by poking fun at the "suicidal act of devotion" (74) of the "memorabilia junkies" (74). It builds up an infantile world of "fancy dress party" (74) with "Wizards, Lions, Scarecrows" (74) and mocks senile people who are unable to control their dripping saliva (75). The ironical undertone of the narrative suggests that to believe in the magical powers of the slippers, in contemporary times, is as credulous as to believe in the reality of the slippers in the movie. The narrator expresses his doubts: "will the shoes, like the Grimms' ancient flatfish, lose patience with our ever-growing demands and return us to the hovels of our discontents?" (78). Just as the movie is fiction, the powers of the slippers are false. One of the women participants at the auction sports a toreador jacket bearing a representation of the great painter Picasso's "Guernica on her back" (76) while several others wear "glittering scenes from the *Disasters of War* sequence" (76) by Francisco Goya, another Spanish artist. *Guernica* is named after a small country town in northern Spain which was bombed and razed to the ground by Germans during the Spanish Civil War. The painting suggestively connects Picasso to Spain, but is an ironical reminder of his lost homeland. Again, the reference to "Children from nineteenth-century Australian paintings" (78) who come to the auction, "whining from their ornate, gilded frames" (78) remind us of Frederick McCubbin's *The Lost Child* (1886). The children, "In blue smocks and ankle socks" who "gaze into rain forests and red deserts, and tremble" (78), talk about "being lost in the immensity of the Outback" (78), saying that 'home' is too far away. All these references resonate with Rushdie's own personal history as a migrant and point out that 'home' as a concept has lost its mythopoeic power, imagination and promise to arrest our attention and wonder.
- 7 In his essay, "The Wizard of Oz" (1992), Rushdie comments about the illusory nature of the world of Oz as well as the "real" world of Kansas, both of which exist in the fictional world of the film: "If Oz is nowhere, then the studio setting of the Kansas scenes suggests that so is Kansas" (20). The idea extends to include modern man's almost impossible desire to claim a non-existent past when the narrator in "At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers" cynically contests the ideal but polarized concept of home by describing it to be the centre of the exile's anguish:
- 'Home' has become such a scattered, damaged, various concept in our present travails. There is so much to yearn for. There are so few rainbows anymore. How hard can we expect even a pair of magic shoes to work? They promised to take us *home*, but are metaphors of homeliness comprehensible to them, are abstractions permissible? Are they literalists, or will they permit us to redefine the blessed word? (78)
- 8 The narrator dismantles the notion of a static, mythical home and perpetuates the notion of home as a transformative agent fraught with ambiguity as it inheres within its frame both the real and imaginary homelands. To the everyday reality of an exile's

unambiguous alienation, the term "home" has come to refer to a pluralized notion of shared cultural space. Arjun Appadurai claims that the exile occupies "an unbounded fantasy space" (170). He speaks of "the seductiveness of plural belonging," but also points out that exiles "cannot do exactly as they please" (170). The sense of security and belonging associated with the traditional idea of home as fixed and rooted in a specific geographic location has become illusory. The exile occupies a liminal space and any expectation of a temporal or spatial return to an ideal state of the past is a myth, almost impossible. In the story and in the film the story harks back to, Rushdie's own experience as an immigrant is linked up with his interest in migration and home. He draws upon the image of the pair of ruby slippers to question the impossibility of a return to the past. Rushdie's own relationship with "home," particularly after a fundamentalist group declared death sentence against him, has become as he says, "problematic" ("Oz" 436). In a half-mocking tone he states, "I've done a good deal of thinking, these past several years, about the advantages of a good pair of ruby slippers" ("Oz" 436). But ironically he does not desire nor does he hope for some ruby slippers to take him home. For Rushdie, the journey matters more than the destination. He calls Dorothy's journey "a rite of passage" in which she is "a heroine" ("Oz" 433). By the end of her adventures Dorothy has, although accidentally, destroyed the "beautiful wickedness" of the Wicked Witch of the West and "is seen to have grown up" ("Oz" 433). This, according to Rushdie, "is a much more satisfactory reason for her new-found power over the ruby slippers than the sentimental reasons offered by the ineffably soppy Good Witch Glinda, and then by Dorothy herself" ("Oz" 433). For the narrator of the story, or Dorothy of the movie, the physical frontier of a home or the idea of it resonates differently to explain Rushdie's engagement with a multivalent reality. In the story, "At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers," the narrator is distinctly male, and an artist whose betrayal by his lover, and finally his auction-sale experience, dramatize his personal journey away from the idealized home, symbolically represented by Gale. As he states, "I moved out the same day [...] with my portrait of Gale in the guise of a tornado cradled in my arms" (79). Incidentally, Dorothy's last name in the movie is Gale, and it is a tornado which carries her across the desert to Oz. In his 2002 essay, "Step Across This Line," Rushdie discusses the advantages of crossing over frontiers and travelling to distant lands. He cites the example of C. P. Cavafy's poem "Ithaka" to suggest the primacy of the Odyssey over the destination, Ithaka: "the point of an Odyssey is the Odyssey" (SATL 410).

- 9 The ruby slippers trigger the narrator's memory towards his past lost love. The story about the narrator's enduring love for his cousin, who has betrayed him, can be seen as an illustration of Nietzsche's views on history and the role of memory. In his essay, "The Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," Nietzsche argues for a "critical" history against a "monumental" or "antiquarian" approach to history. For him a study of history *per se* is of no use, and cannot serve the purpose of life or creation. While forgetting the past is the clue to happiness, a deliberate immersion in the past, like the 'monumental' or 'antiquarian' historian, is considered to be a surrender to the illusory nature of life, and if not destructive, then injurious to the process of artistic creation. However, he also does make a distinction between the animal who does not remember and the human for whom the past is essential for a constructive kind of knowledge. Like the antiquarians who gather at the auction of the slippers as if in a "masquerade," the fundamentalists who were full of hatred and were censorious of Rushdie's works are examples of such judges of art as Nietzsche condemns:

any art which, because contemporary, is not yet monumental, seems to them unnecessary, unattractive and lacking in the authority conferred by history. On the other hand, their instincts tell them that art can be slain by art: the monumental is never to be repeated, and to make sure it is not they invoke the authority which the monumental derives from the past. They are connoisseurs of art because they would like to do away with art altogether; they pose as physicians, while their basic intent is to mix poisons; they develop their taste and tongue as they do so as to employ this spoiled taste as an explanation of why they so resolutely reject all the nourishing artistic food that is offered them. For they do not desire to see new greatness emerge: their means of preventing it is to say 'Behold, greatness already exists!' In reality, they are as little concerned about this greatness that already exists as they are about that which is emerging: their lives are evidence of this. Monumental history is the masquerade costume in which their hatred of the great and powerful of their own age is disguised as satiated admiration for the great and powerful of past ages [...] whether they are aware of it or not, they act as though their motto were: let the dead bury the living. (72)

- 10 The slippers have within them the potential of both good and evil for they had belonged, in the first place, to the Wicked Witch of the East. But it was later inherited by Dorothy. Similarly, the slippers at the auction possess the potential of transforming the narrator either into an 'antiquarian' who preserves, or a 'monumental' who reveres, or else the 'critical' being who "suffers and seeks deliverance" (Nietzsche 67). Like the "antiquarian" and the "monumental," the narrator had at first revered the memory of Gale. As he admits, "I have dedicated myself to her memory. I have made myself a candle at her temple" (80). He had resolved to buy the ruby slippers "whatever the cost" (81) and "offer the miracle-shoes to Gale in all humility [...]. Perhaps I might even click the heels together three times, and win back her heart by murmuring, in soft reminder of our wasted love, *There's no place like home*" (81). It is only at the end that he gets "detached" (84).
- 11 Preserving things that are obsolete or revering antiquated ideas in the name of tradition are detrimental to the freedom of the artist. In "Step Across this Line" Rushdie makes explicit his concern over the contemporary political and social scenario where certain bigoted groups with their archaic ideas inhibit the freedom of the artist and the intellectual:
- Even before the attacks [9/11] on America I was concerned that, in Britain and Europe as well as America, the pressures on artistic and even intellectual freedoms were growing—that cautious, conservative political and institutional forces were gaining the upper hand, and that many social groups were deliberately fostering a new, short-fuse culture of easy offendedness, so that less and less was becoming sayable all the time, and more and more kinds of speech were being categorized as transgressive. Outside the Western world—across the Arab world, in many African countries, in Iran, China, North Korea and elsewhere—writers and intellectuals are everywhere under attack, and more and more of them are being forced into exile. If it was important to resist this cultural closing-in before 9/11, it's twice as important now. (442)
- 12 Similarly, in *Imaginary Homelands*, he cites the example of a dog in Saul Bellow's novel, *The Dean's December*. The central character of the novel, Corde, imagines a dog barking in protest "against the limit of dog experience" (21). Rushdie expresses his desire in the dog's rage: "For God's sake, open the universe a little more!" (21). What to the conservative is transgression is to Rushdie freedom. He advocates not only "transgression" of speech, but also freedom to cross cultural and geographical borders in order that art may thrive. Art, for Rushdie, "is a passion of the mind. And the

imagination works best when it is most free. Western writers have always felt free to be eclectic in their selection of theme, setting, form; Western visual artists have, in this century, been happily raiding the visual storehouses of Africa, Asia, the Philippines. I am sure that we must grant ourselves an equal freedom" (*Imaginary Homelands* 20). Rushdie grants himself the freedom of borrowing from a Western movie to put across his views about "home" and the role of the artist in exile for whom "the past is a foreign country," a country "from which we have all emigrated" (*Imaginary Homelands* 12). The ruby slippers as metaphors of home and migration, are also art objects from a fictional narrative and a movie. In the context of the story they give the writer/narrator further scope for advancing the narrative art form. Nevertheless, the slippers, and by extension the agency of art, and the artist are threatened by fundamentalists who "have openly stated that they are interested in buying the magic footwear only in order to burn it" (77). Ironically, "this is not," the narrator remarks, "in the view of the liberal Auctioneers, a reprehensible programme" (77).

- 13 His present "being in a different place from his past" (*Imaginary Homelands* 12), the modern artist like Nietzsche's critical historian discovers that he must possess the strength to discard the past, although not altogether forget, in order to be able to live and create. To those present at the auction, the ruby slippers have claimed possession of their souls like the "preserving and revering soul of the antiquarian man [which] has emigrated" into the "trivial, circumscribed, decaying and obsolete" (Nietzsche 73). In opposition to these devotees around the "shrine of the ruby-sequined slippers [...] who lack restraint, who drool" (75) is the narrator for whom the same slippers serve as agents that make him realize the futility of claiming the past. The past is also, however, as already mentioned, paradoxically the means to constructive knowledge and so should not be shaken off entirely. In the context of the story, the past is for the narrator the lost "love of [his] life" (79), Gale, and for her, her lost home. It is Gale "in the guise of a tornado" (79) who had transported the narrator to despair, and it is his desire to "win back her heart" (81) that had at first brought him to the auction. Whereas his obsessive love/devotion for Gale had given us the image of an antiquarian, the entire episode of the narrator's remembrance of Gale and his ruminations over the auction of the ruby slippers becomes an enactment of the motivations of the Nietzschean man of "deeds." Gale, on the other hand, like the devotees of the ruby slippers at the auction, is immersed in the past. She is obsessed with the antiquated idea of home as rooted and fixed. The narrator remembers that Gale used to cry out during love-making, "Home, boy! Home [...] you've come home!" (79). Although he claims that "there was nothing abnormal about our love-making, nothing, if I may put it thus, *fictional*" (79), Gale's desire to bring "home" all exiles who have crossed frontiers like the "hairy escapee from a caveman movie" (79) and the Martian is an impossibility, a *fiction*. In the narrator's imagination, Gale herself may have become fictional: "The real Gale has become confused with my re-imagining of her" (80). Gale becomes transformed into a metaphor for an idealized notion of "home," an antiquarian. And although she may be unworthy, his love for her transforms the narrator into the man of deeds. His love for Gale, however, stands in contrast to his former employer, the multi-millionaire widower's materialist obsession for his wife's underwear. The widower's fetish for his dead wife's clothing is literally consuming as the narrator had noted, "My employer's late wife's stage act had included the public removal and consumption of such pairs" (83). The narrator calls this consuming passion for objects of the past, the "trivial, circumscribed, decaying and obsolete," a

sickness of the heart (73) and almost agrees with Nietzsche's statement: "I believe, indeed, that we are all suffering from a consuming fever of history" (60). The attitude of the three characters--the widower, Gale and the narrator--illustrate the three different Nietzschean attitudes to history and art, respectively those of the monumental, the antiquarian, and the unhistorical. Nietzsche illustrates his idea of the unhistorical as an "atmosphere within which alone life can germinate" (63) by the example of "a man seized by a vehement passion, for a woman or for a great idea" (64). He elaborates:

how different the world has become to him! Looking behind him he seems to himself as though blind, listening around him he hears only a dull, meaningless noise; whatever he does perceive, however, he perceives as he has never perceived before—all is so palpable, close, highly coloured, resounding, as though he apprehended it with all his senses at once. All his valuations are altered and disvalued; there are so many things he is no longer capable of evaluating at all because he can hardly feel them anymore: he asks himself why he was for so long the fool of the phrases and opinions of others; he is amazed that his memory revolves unwearyingly in a circle and yet is too weak and weary to take even a single leap out of this circle. It is the condition in which one is the least capable of being just; narrow-minded, ungrateful to the past, blind to dangers, deaf to warnings, one is a little vortex of life in a dead sea of darkness and oblivion: and yet this condition—unhistorical, anti-historical through and through—is the womb not only of the unjust but of every just deed too; and no painter will paint his picture, no general achieve his victory, no people attain its freedom without having first desired and striven for it in an unhistorical condition such as that described. (64)

- 14 The narrator, like the lover in Nietzsche's example, begins to wonder "at the mysteries of love" (74). He chooses not to be immersed in the past, rather through the agency of the slippers, paradoxically uses his experience of the past to transcend it and achieve his artistic destination. The narrator's recollection of his past engaged him in a mental discourse involving "thinking, reflecting, comparing, distinguishing" which can be said to be the "imposing" of "limits on [the] unhistorical element" (Nietzsche 64). This leads him to realize and come to the ironical conclusion: "It is to the Auctioneer we go to establish the value of our pasts, of our futures, of our lives" (83). Again, like the Nietzschean lover who on recollection of the past realizes "All his valuations are altered and disvalued; there are so many things he is no longer capable of evaluating at all because he can hardly feel them anymore" (64), the narrator's love for Gale puts him in an unhistorical condition. He forgets most things and begins to bid "literally—for [him]self" (84). Again, like the Nietzschean hero, "ungrateful to the past, blind to dangers, deaf to warnings [...], a little vortex of life" (64), he narrates the experience of this artist in exile who has left behind his past, his home:

At the height of an auction, when the money has become no more than a way of keeping score, a thing happens which I am reluctant to admit: one becomes detached from the earth.

There is a loss of gravity, a reduction in weight, a floating in the capsule of the struggle. The ultimate goal crosses a delirious frontier. Its achievement and our own survival become—yes!—fictions.

And fictions, as I have come close to suggesting before, are dangerous.

In fiction's grip [...] we may simply float away from our desires, and see them anew, from a distance, so that they seem weightless, *trivial* [my emphasis]. We let them go. (84-85)

- 15 However, this "detachment from the earth" is not like that of the Martian. The astronaut is stranded on Mars "without hope of rescue, and with diminishing supply of

food and breathable air" and has no scope of return because of the cancellation of the space exploration budget. Televised images and sentimental renditions of songs from *The Wizard of Oz* project pictures "of his slow descent into despair, his low gravity, weight-reduced death" (80). The narrator, on the other hand, avoids "despair" by gazing backwards. He realizes that what is happening outside the auction hall is as fictional as what is happening inside; and both of them are considered forms of "drama." That is why, being "absorbed by [the] higher drama" (84) of veneration of the past we forget the importance of the present lived existence where "There's an explosion in the street outside" (84). Like his author who says "that the facts of my faraway life were illusions, that this continuity was the reality" (*Imaginary Homelands* 9), the narrator understands that the past was "an invisible world of demons and ghosts" (84) with which one had to "battle," "struggle" to survive. The achievement of the "ultimate goal" of this struggle, the ruby slippers, which become emblematic of the past, "and our own survival," are, however, "fictions" (84). In "Out of Kansas" Rushdie had noted that both the real world of Kansas and the fantasy world of Oz were fictional: "It's hard for a migrant like myself not to see in these shifting destinies a parable of the migrant condition" (30). A writer for whom "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: except, of course, for the home we make, or the homes that are made for us, in Oz, which is anywhere, and everywhere, except the place from which we began" (33). The slippers are not meant to take any of the characters to their past "homes." Rather they dramatize Rushdie's idea of the "broken glass" which, as he says, "is not merely a mirror of nostalgia. It is also, I believe, a useful tool with which to work in the present" (*Imaginary Homelands* 12). However, particularly for the man in exile, an engagement with the present does not necessarily involve a forgetting of the past. The present is only a continuity of the past, and it is not entirely possible to break away from the chain of this past.

- 16 The movie, *The Wizard of Oz*, which has become the intertext for this narrative about the exile's desire to return home and the reality of the place where he is located now is a confirmation, albeit a "metaphor for the narrative's movement through time towards the present" (*Imaginary Homelands* 13). The illusion that the movie creates, that 'there's no place like home,' itself becomes the reality when Rushdie chooses to "redefine" the meaning of the word "home" when he says that "there is no longer any such place as home" for a person like himself in exile. Frank Soren, in his *Migration and Literature*, trying to define the position of the migrant, quotes Ian Chambers and says that "migrancy involves a movement in which neither the points of departure nor those of arrival are immutable or certain. It calls for a dwelling in language, in histories, in identities that are subject to constant mutation. Always in transit, the promise of a homecoming—completing the story, domesticating the detour—becomes an impossibility" (16). For "those of us" as Rushdie states, "who have been forced by cultural displacement to accept the provisional nature of all truths, all certainties, have perhaps had modernism forced upon us" (*Imaginary Homelands* 12). Home is no longer rooted in any specific geographical location. In "Step Across this Line" Rushdie narrates from Doris Lessing's science-fiction, *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8*, a quest story of a group of migrants who are forced by circumstances to leave home and cross the frontiers of their ice-destroyed land. As they cross the frontier to make the difficult journey, they learn that "in order to survive, they would need to change" (409). It is no longer the place of origin or "the points of departure" or "those of

arrival" which give the migrant his/her identity. For Rushdie, "The journey creates us. We become the frontiers we cross" ("SATL" 410). The narrator of our story recognizes this truth when he decides to "drop out of the bidding, go home, and fall asleep" (85). Since people "become the frontiers [they] cross," Gale's tears for the Martian are, in fact, meaningless.

- 17 In today's [post]colonial, [post]modern world, the migrant, already a cultural hybrid, is "the man without frontiers [...], the archetypal figure of our age" (SATL 415). Immigrants no longer feel compelled to return home; and the frontier has become "an elusive line, visible and invisible, physical and metaphorical, amoral and moral" (SATL 411). Throughout recorded history human beings from almost every region of the world have travelled and crossed borders, sometimes in pursuit of trade, and sometimes for knowledge, and even to build empires. Kwame Anthony Appiah calls human beings "a travelling species" (215). But today's migrants with their sense of being rootless and living between "a lost past and a non-integrated present" are seen by Ian Chambers as "the most fitting metaphors of [the]... (post) modern condition" (27). If modernity as defined by Paul de Man, "exists in the form of a desire to wipe out whatever came earlier, in the hope of reaching at last a point that could be called a true present, a point of origin that marks a new departure," the idea of [post]modernity would advocate the cosmopolitan as the ideal. Rushdie's postmodern man as a "cosmopolitan" can be understood through Appiah's definition of a cosmopolitan, as "someone who thinks that the world is, so to speak, our shared hometown, reproducing something very like the self-conscious oxymoron of the 'global village'" (217). Instead of a cynical rejection of, to borrow a phrase from Appiah, "local loyalties" (218) and a general hostility towards custom and tradition, Rushdie's call is for universal human solidarity, which is absent in the case of the Martian: "influential voices complained of the sentimentality of the images of the dying spaceman" (80). He makes this amply clear in *Imaginary Homelands* when he says, "the largest and most dangerous pitfall would be the adoption of a ghetto mentality. To forget that there is a world beyond the community to which we belong, to confine ourselves within narrowly defined cultural frontiers, would be, I believe, to go voluntarily into that form of internal exile which in South Africa is called the 'homeland'" (19).
- 18 The choice of *The Wizard of Oz* as the backdrop in which the story of "At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers" is set is of huge significance as it demonstrates a liberal world where freedom of expression is of utmost importance for a writer threatened by fundamentalist groups. As already mentioned, in the story the narrator questions the philosophy of the liberal world. He ironically notes the double standards of self-acclaimed liberals in a world of increasing intolerance and terrorism: "What price tolerance if the intolerant are not tolerated also? 'Money insists on democracy,' the liberal Auctioneers insist 'Anyone's cash is as good as anyone else's'" (77). Rushdie's personal opinion of the film is significant:
- one of the most striking aspects of the worldview of *The Wizard of Oz* is its joyful and almost complete secularism. Religion is mentioned only once in the film [...]. Apart from this [...] the film is breezily godless. There is not a trace of religion in Oz itself; bad witches are feared, good ones liked, but none are sanctified; and while the Wizard of Oz is thought to be something very close to all-powerful, nobody thinks to worship him. This absence of higher values greatly increases the film's charm, and is an important aspect of its success in creating a world in which nothing is deemed more important than loves, cares and needs of human beings (and, of course, tin beings, straw beings, lions and dogs). ("The Wizard of Oz" 434)

- 19 Just as for Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, displacement from "home" becomes a liberating experience for all migrants and writers/artists in exile. The plurality of the identities of such writers who straddle at least two cultures dismantle myths of homogeneous identity and national cultures. According to Rushdie, their geographical displacement provides them the fertile ground of ambiguity and multiple perspectives for writing fiction. Like in his novels, even in this story Rushdie explores the anxieties of a culturally displaced migrant and the strategies adopted for survival between cultures. Survival was possible when "Oz finally *became* home; the imagined world became the actual world" (Rushdie, "The Wizard of Oz" 447). Frank Baum had written thirteen other Oz novels after *The Wizard of Oz* keeping in view readers' interest. In the sixth book of the series Dorothy takes Aunt Em and Uncle Henry away from the grey world of Kansas to settle down in Oz. In a persuasive demand for freedom and tolerance for people who cross frontiers, Rushdie raises issues such as:

Will we give the enemy the satisfaction of changing ourselves into something like the hate-filled, illiberal mirror-image, or will we, as the guardians of the modern world, as the custodians of freedom and the occupants of the privileged lands of plenty, go on trying to increase freedom and decrease injustice? Will we become the suits of armour our fear makes us put on, or will we continue to be ourselves? The frontier both shapes our character and tests our mettle. I hope we pass the test. (SATL 442)

- 20 Like the Wizard who does not provide a real heart, or brain, or courage, to those who go to seek it from him, but creates illusions that provide insights to readers of the existence of such things already within the characters who demand it of him, Rushdie believes in the illusion of "home" as a necessary condition for the survival of the immigrant. The solution to the problem of the exile who looks to the past but lost home of her/his childhood days, lies not in miracles, not in the hope of clicking the heels of some "miracle-shoes" (81) to take her/him home, but in the use of the same loss to her/his artistic advantage. As Rushdie declares, "loss of the East—is my artistic country now" (SATL 266). So also Gale loses her hold on the narrator of "At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers." He decides to "drop out of the bidding, go home, and fall asleep" (85). When he wakes up, he feels "refreshed and free" (85). Like Dorothy who wakes up from her dream at the end of the movie, the reader is left in doubt whether the entire episode of the auction was a dream, an illusion. Illusion, of the past ideal world, or reality, of the present ambiguous state, this revisiting of the past ("Next week there is another auction" [85]) and return continues the chain of linking the past to the present and fostering the exile's identity of being "somebody" (85).

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## ABSTRACTS

Dans sa nouvelle « At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers », Salman Rushdie s'amuse à mêler une perception alternative de la réalité à l'approche que nous en avons habituellement. Nous nous donnons donc ici pour tâche de voir comment l'auteur y déploie le discours de la réalité historique en opposition à cette autre réalité que constitue la mondialisation pour un exilé.

En ne distinguant pas ce qui est fictionnel du réel, Rushdie veut mettre en évidence un monde où la dynamique des forces qui relient ce qui est éthique et ce qui ne l'est pas est en constante contradiction.

Notre article propose donc une lecture nietzschéenne de la nouvelle, y voyant un conflit entre l'être « non-historique » contenu dans le présent et un homme qui, selon Nietzsche, use de ses forces pour combattre la pression toujours grandissante du passé afin de lui rappeler que son existence est fondamentalement un temps imparfait à jamais imperfectible.

## AUTHORS

### ALOKA PATEL

Aloka Patel teaches in the Department of English, Sambalpur University, Odisha, India. Her research areas include Postcolonial studies, Women's writings in English and other Regional languages of India. At present she is working on a project on Early prose writings on Women's Education in Odisha, India.