

The Novel Today: Recent British Fiction

Lecture 4:

What's the Use of Stories that Aren't Even True? Salman Rushdie as a Test Case for Writing Fiction Today

1) Fusions, Translations, Conjoinings

2) The Ground Beneath Our Feet

The Novels of Salman Rushdie:

Grimus (1975)

Midnight's Children (1981)

Shame (1983)

The Satanic Verses (1988)

Haroun and the Sea of Stories (1990)

The Moor's Last Sigh (1995)

The Ground Beneath Her Feet (1999)

Fury (2001)

Shalimar the Clown (2005)

Then Enchantress of Florence (2008)

Luka and the Fire of Life (2011)

Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights (2015)

The Golden House (2017)

Quichotte (2019)

Essays:

The Jaguar Smile: A Nicaraguan Journey (1987)

Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991 (1991)

Step Across This Line: Collected Non-Fiction 1992-2002 (2002)

Autobiography:

Joseph Anton: A Memoir (2012)

1) Fusions, Translations, Conjoinings

How does newness come into the world? How is it born? Of what fusions, translations, conjoinings is it made?

(*The Satanic Verses* 8)

What's the use of stories that aren't even true?

(*Haroun and the Sea of Stories* 20/22/27)

[U]nnaturalism, the only real ism of these back-to-front and jabberwocky days

(*The Moor's Last Sigh* 5)

***Midnight's Children* (1981)**

[“I must peel of history, the prison of the past.” MLS 136]

- Booker Prize 1981, Booker of Bookers 1993, Best of the Booker 2008
- best-selling historiographic metafiction about post-independence Indian history, narrator-protagonist is “mysteriously handcuffed to history” (9) and the plot transgresses the boundary between fiction and reality
- successful combination of reader-friendliness and aesthetic ambition:
 - fictional autobiography, parody of *Bildungsroman*
 - +
 - playful digressiveness of alternative tradition of Western fiction (*Don Quixote*, *Tristram Shandy*) and Indian traditions of oral narrative
- encyclopedic narrative technique combining
 - a) first-person and third-person narration
 - b) retrospective/magical omniscience and immediacy
 - c) narrative thrust and metafictional inquiry

Who what am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone everything whose-being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. I'm everything that happens after I've gone which would not have happened if I had not come. Nor am I particularly exceptional in this matter; each ‘I’ [...] contains a similar multitude [...] to understand me, you'll have to swallow the world. (383)

Shame (1983)

[“The sheer strangeness of the activity of art made her a questionable figure; as it does everywhere; as it always has and perhaps always will.” MLS 130]

- historiographic metafiction about Pakistani history
- new narrative technique: ‘postmodern’ authorial narration

Outsider! Trespasser! You have no right to this subject! [...] Poacher! Pirate! We reject your authority. We know you with your foreign language wrapped around you like a flag: speaking about us in your forked tongue, what can you tell but lies? I reply with more questions: is history to be considered the property of the participants solely? In what courts are such claims staked, what boundary commissions map out the territories?

Can only the dead speak?

I tell myself this will be a novel of leavetaking, my last words on the East from which, many years ago, I began to come loose. I do not always believe myself when I say this. It is part of the world to which, whether I like it or not, I am still joined, if only by elastic bands. [...]

The country in this story is not Pakistan, or not quite. [...] My story, my fictional country, exist, like myself, at a slight angle to reality. I have found this off-centring to be necessary; but its value is, of course, open to debate. [...]

I [...] am a translated man. I have been *borne across*. It is generally believed that something is always lost in translation; I cling to the notion [...] that something can also be gained. (28f., original emphasis)

But suppose this were a realistic novel! [...]

By now, if I had been writing a book of this nature, it would have done me no good to protest that I was writing universally [...] The book would have been banned, dumped in the rubbish bin, burned. All that effort for nothing! Realism can break a writer’s heart.

Fortunately, however, I am only telling a sort of modern fairytale [...] [N]obody need get upset, or take anything I say too seriously. No drastic action need be taken, either.

What a relief! (69/70)

***The Satanic Verses* (1988)**

[“In the end, stories are what’s left of us, we are no more than the few tales that persist.” MLS 110]

- an extension of the narrative mode developed in *Shame* to a ‘global’ sujet
- combination of a contemporary main plot (the plight of migrants in late-20th century England) with a historically and geographically far-reaching inquiry into the nature of religious beliefs
- a plea for hybridity, for ‘taking a stand while lacking a centre’

Main Plot:

Gibreel Farishta vs. Saladin Chamcha

part	title
I	The Angel Gibreel
III	Ellowen Deeowen
V	A City Visible but Unseen
VII	The Angel Azraeel
IX	A Wonderful Lamp

Sub-plots:

Mahound in Jahilia (parts II and VII)

the exiled Imam in London/Ayesha’s pilgrimage (parts IV and VIII)

part	title
I	The Angel Gibreel
II	<i>Mahound</i>
III	Ellowen Deeowen
IV	<i>Ayesha</i>
V	A City Visible but Unseen
VI	<i>Return to Jahilia</i>
VII	The Angel Azraeel
VIII	<i>The Parting of the Arabian Sea</i>
IX	A Wonderful Lamp

'To be born again.' sang Gibreel Farishta tumbling from the heavens, 'first you have to die. Ho ji! HO ji! To land upon the bosomy earth, first one needs to fly. Tat-taa! Taka-thun! How to ever smile again, if first you won't cry? How to win the darling's love, mister, without a sigh? Baba, if you want to get born again...' Just before dawn one winter's morning, New Year's Day or thereabouts, two real, full-grown, living men fell from a great height, twenty-nine thousand and two feet, towards the English Channel, without benefit of parachutes or wings, out of a clear sky.

[...]

'Proper London, bhai! Here we come! Those bastards down there won't know what hit them. Meteor or lightning or vengeance of God. Out of thin air, baby. *Dharraaamm!* Wham, na? What an entrance, yaar. I swear: splat.' (3)

Out of thin air: a big bang, followed by falling stars. A universal beginning, a miniature echo of the birth of time . . . the jumbo jet *Bostan*, Flight AI-420, blew apart without any warning, high above the great, rotting, beautiful, snow-white, illuminated city, Mahagonny, Babylon, Alphaville. But Gibreel has already named it, I mustn't interfere: Proper London, capital of Vilayet, winked, blinked, nodded in the night. While at Himalayan height a brief and premature sun burst into the powdery January air, a blip vanished from radar screens, and the thin air was full of bodies, descending from the Everest of the catastrophe to the milky paleness of the sea.

Who am I?

Who else is there? (4)

I know the truth, obviously. I watched the whole thing. As to omnipresence and – potency, I'm making no claims at present, but I can manage this much, I hope. Chamcha willed it and Farishta did what was willed.

Which was the miracle worker?

Of what type – angelic, satanic – was Farishta's song?

Who am I?

Let's put it this way: who has the best tunes? (10)

[I]t was then, at the precise moment of [Gibreel's] greatest wrath, that the boundaries of the earth broke, he heard a noise like the bursting of a dam, and as the spirits of the world of dreams flooded through the breach into the universe of the quotidian, Gibreel Farishta saw God.

For Blake's Isaiah, God had simply been an immanence, an incorporeal indignation; but Gibreel's vision of the Supreme Being was not abstract in the least. He saw, sitting on the bed, a man of about the same age as himself, of medium height, fairly heavily built, with salt and pepper beard cropped close to the line of jaw. What struck him most was that the apparition was balding, seemed to suffer from dandruff and wore glasses. This was not the Almighty he had expected. 'Who are you?' he asked with interest. (318)

Questions in *The Satanic Verses*:

- How does newness come into the world?
- What kind of idea are you?
- What happens when you win?

“Question: What is the opposite of faith? Not disbelief. Too final, certain, closed. Itself a kind of belief. Doubt.” (92)

(for an extended reading of the novel cf. Gonzalez 2017)

Salman Rushdie, “In Good Faith” (1990) [IH 393-414]

At the centre of the storm stands a novel, a work of fiction, one that aspires to the condition of literature [...] It felt impossible, amid such hubbub, to insist on the fictionality of fiction [...] Fiction uses facts as a starting-place and then spirals away to explore its real concerns, which are only tangentially historical. Not to see this, to treat fiction as if it were fact, is to make a serious mistake of categories. The case of *The Satanic Verses* may be one of the biggest category mistakes in literary history.

(393/409)

Salman Rushdie, “Is Nothing Sacred?” (1990) [IH 415-429]

Do I, perhaps, find something sacred after all? Am I prepared to set aside as holy the idea of the absolute freedom of the imagination and alongside it my own notions of the World, the Text, the Good? Does this add up to what the apologists of religion have started calling 'secular fundamentalism'? And if so, must I accept that this 'secular fundamentalism' is as likely to lead to excesses, abuses and oppressions as the canons of religious faith? (418)

Literature is an interim report from the consciousness of the artist, and so it can never be 'finished' or 'perfect'. [...] Nothing so inexact, so easily and frequently misconceived, deserves the protection of being declared sacrosanct. [...] The only privilege literature deserves [...] is the privilege of being the arena of discourse, the place where the struggle of languages can be acted out. (427)

2) The Ground Beneath Our Feet

***The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995)**

- an elegiac retreat from transgression into the first-person mode of *Midnight's Children*
- linguistic and narrative exuberance seems strangely out of place
- generally well-received, but reviewer showed signs of unease, complaining about 'garrulousness', 'melodrama', 'hyperbole', 'explanation', 'lack of central logic'

Aurora had apparently decided that the ideas of impurity, cultural admixture and mélange which had been, for most of her creative life, the closest things she had found to a notion of the Good, were in fact capable of distortion, and contained a potential for darkness as well as for light. (303)

See: *here is my flask. I'll drink some wine; and then, like a latter day Van Winkle, I'll lay me down upon this graven stone, lay my head beneath these letters R I P, and close my eyes, according to our family's old practice of falling asleep in times of trouble, and hope to awaken, renewed and joyful, into a better time.* (433f., original emphasis)

***The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999)**

- confidence restored, but first-person narrator Rai still severe case of character usurpation by authorial voice
- retreat from the particularities of history into the mythical realm of popular culture/rock music and its history (cf. Stefan Glomb, "The Birth of Rock 'n' Roll out of the Spirit of Myth: Salman Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*." ZAA 54.1 (2006): 65-77)

But what about *outsideness*? What about all that which is beyond the pale, above the fray, beneath notice? [...] The only people who see the whole picture [...] are the ones who step out of the frame. (42f.)

What if the whole deal – orientation, knowing where you are, and so on – what if it's all a scam? What if all of it [...] is just the biggest, most truly global, and centuries-oldest piece of brainwashing? Suppose that it's only when you dare to let go that your real life begins? [...] But just imagine you did it. You stepped off the edge of the earth [...] and there it was: the magic valley [...] It feels better than "belonging" [...] (176f.)

Fury (2001) / Shalimar the Clown (2005)

That Rushdie now prefers the pursuit of a signature style to tragedy is itself a kind of tragedy. *Shalimar the Clown* is nearly that much needed thing: a tragic novel about the growth of a terrorist's mind in one of those rogue regions of the world [...] Instead, the novel is by turns satire, old-fashioned revenge romance and Hollywood action movie, and it seems to flaunt its determination to put as much padding as possible between readers and feelings [...] The deliberate campiness and flight from character into archetype, which were so prominent in Rushdie's turn away from politics to beauty and talent in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999) and *Fury* (2001), have intensified, as has his pursuit of that elusive beast, the great global novel.

Marco Roth, "Give the People What They Want: Salman Rushdie's Many-Ringed Circus." *TLS* Sep 9 (2005): 19f.

Quichotte (2019)

This rambunctious reworking of Cervantes's *Don Quixote* judders between inland America and downturn Britain, euphoria and grief, picaresque and satire, postcolonial melancholia and posthuman futurism – often on the same page. It's a novel less to be read than to be scrolled through, a seemingly endless feed of gags, thought spasms and larger-than-life happenings... Bombastic and busy, always in control even when his story is meant to be spiralling out of control, in this novel Rushdie resembles a highbrow Robin Williams. Rarely does he give readers time to breathe. Often he spells out things that don't need to be spelled out... This is lazy writing for lazy readers, eyeball-grabbing anti-prose for distracted device-users. It makes his attempts to craft more contemplative or lyrical passages particularly jarring.

Sukhdev Sandhu, "Quichotte by Salman Rushdie." *Guardian* (31 August, 2019).

Quichotte largely follows the romantic reading of the knight as idealist, whose madness consists of his nobility of spirit and his refusal to believe that the pragmatically possible is an acceptable limit to human behaviour. Rushdie is both mocking and celebrating this posture, and his *Quichotte* is genuinely ridiculous as well as heroic... There are two storylines in *Quichotte*, located in different layers of fictional reality, although since Rushdie is so good at what we might call the profusion effect, it feels as if there are more than two... Rushdie's Sancho is not an example of the power of fiction to turn fantasy into reality, even within the story, although that is how we have to see him at first. He is an instance of fiction telling truths we can't get at otherwise. Novels do this all the time, of course, and *Quichotte* expertly does it again. But it does it strangely, for a strange time.

Michael Wood, "The Profusion Effect." *LRB* 41.17 (2019): 31-32.

Salman Rushdie, Joseph Anton (2012)

Afterwards, when the world was exploding around him and the lethal blackbirds were massing on the climbing frame in the school playground, he felt annoyed with himself for forgetting the name of the BBC reporter, a woman, who had told him that his old life was over and a new, darker experience was about to begin. She had called him at home on his private line without explaining how she got the number. ‘How does it feel,’ she asked him, ‘to know that you have just been sentenced to death by the Ayatollah Khomeini?’ It was a sunny Tuesday in London but the question shut out the light. This is what he said, without really knowing what he was saying: ‘It doesn’t feel good.’ This is what he thought: *I’m a dead man*. He wondered how many days he had left to live and thought the answer was probably a single-digit number. He put down the phone and ran down the stairs from his workroom at the top of the narrow Islington terraced house where he lived. The living-room windows had wooden shutters and, absurdly, he closed and barred them. Then he locked the front door. (3)

A Map of (Post-)Modern Fiction

Modes:	Documentary Fiction	Realist Fiction	Revisionist Fiction	Implicit Metafiction	Explicit Metafiction
Scales:	external/environmental reference illusion 'real' comm./ character comm.			internal/systemic ref. anti-illusion lit. comm./ narr. comm.	auto-referentiality
'Programs':	(Avantgarde) ↑	Realism	Romanticism →	Modernism	← Aestheticism ↑
Orientations of Meaning:	obj. (subj.) [(lit.)]	obj. subj. (lit.)	(obj.) subj. lit.	(obj.) subj. lit.→lit.	[(obj.)] (subj.) lit.

(cf. Reinfandt 1997, 240)

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