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► To cite this version:

Geetha Ganapathy-Doré. Rewriting the Political, Social and Cultural History of India, England and America by Rewriting the History of the Novel in Salman Rushdie's Quichotte. International Journal of South Asian Studies, 2020, pp.41-53. hal-03196532

HAL Id: hal-03196532

<https://hal.science/hal-03196532>

Submitted on 13 Apr 2021

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**Rewriting the Political, Social and Cultural History of India, England and
America by Rewriting the History of the Novel in Salman Rushdie's
*Quichotte***

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**Author version of a paper published in the
International Journal of South Asian Studies,
Vol.13, January-July 2020, special issue on Rewriting History edited by Corinne
Alexandre-Garner & Geetha Ganapathy-Doré, pp. 41-53**

<https://pondiuni.edu.in/files/publications/IJSAS/IJSASJan-Jun201913I.pdf>

Abstract

While at Eton, Rushdie plunged into futuristic science fiction to find an escape route from bullying by classmates in his boarding school. Later, he studied history in Cambridge. After trying to write the postcolonial history of India and Pakistan, and contemporary America at different and crucial moments, in his latest novel *Quichotte*, Rushdie attempts to take on Cervantes, the very pioneer of the genre of the novel in whose lineage the migrant author wants to be placed by the reader. Situated in post-2001 America with trips to England, the narrative unfolds in an era where “anything can happen,” an augmented version of Orwellian reversals. This fictional canvas allows Rushdie to rewrite the history of India, the UK and more significantly, Trump's America, while a glorified nationalist narrative of history is being officially spun in these countries. Indian and American histories are intertwined through the Indo-American diaspora to give the reader a global perspective. The author identifies his ageing self with the dwindling planet and reinvents the fictional pair of Quichotte and Sancho and their quest for love as a potent remedy to the inexorable end of History. My paper attempts to decipher Rushdie's novel with the help of Milan Kundera's theoretical work on the art of the novel and argues that fiction becomes the language in which truth could be told, when lies masquerade as truth.

Key words: Rushdie, History, rewriting, 21st century novel, nationalism, truth

What is history? As a general rule, we take history to mean a factual record and dispassionate account of the past. But, history is said to be “written by the victors and framed according to the prejudices and bias existing on their side” (Vest, 1891). In that sense, any history is always already rewritten. That is perhaps one of the reasons why T.S. Eliot (1934, p.51) expressed his distrust of history in “Gerontion”:

*History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors
And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,
Guides us by vanities.*

It was the philosopher Hegel who argued for history with a capital H. History, i.e., the history of humanity. According to him, is a progressive process that helps humanity achieve absolute freedom and during which the “spirit discovers itself and its own concept.” (Hegel, 1857, p. 62). His disciple Karl Marx held that “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (Marx, 1848). The conservative American scholar Francis Fukuyama (1992) went to the extent of postulating the end of History when the Communist Soviet Empire fell and liberal democracy became the predominant model of government in many parts of the world. Milan Kundera, who hails from the former Eastern bloc country of Czechoslovakia, qualifies History as “the suprahuman force of an omnipotent society” (Kundera, 1986, p. 23). When we speak about History with a capital H, we take for granted that there exists a grand narrative of human experience and that by studying the past, we can discern the future orientations of this ongoing narrative. Historians were tempted to rewrite history when new evidence emerged or new facts uncovered, and the need was felt for a new perspective to be outlined (Salmon, 1912). However, after the Second World War, revisionist rewritings of the Holocaust that denied the atrocious crimes of Hitler, shocked humanity. For postcolonial writers, colonial history had rather been “a nightmare from which they were trying to awake” (Joyce, 2008, p.32). Postcolonial scholars contested what they perceived to be a Eurocentric master narrative that went in the name of universal history by proposing plural and alternative histories such as subaltern studies, feminist histories, and Dalit reclamations to cite just the Indian example. Rewriting History was thus seen as a way to right the wrongs done in the past (Rajan, 2000).

Postcolonial novelists were drawn into the politics of rewriting History while performing the act of decentring the canon. In 1983, after his literary career had been launched, Rushdie met a Cambridge literature don who pointed out to him that as a Commonwealth Writer he occupied “a position on the periphery.” Rushdie afterwards published an essay affirming that “Commonwealth literature does not exist” given the diversity of contexts that inspired writers coming from the various corners of the Commonwealth (Rushdie, 1992, p.61). Even after winning the Booker of Bookers and being knighted, Rushdie is not viewed as a canonical writer. When he realizes that “he would never be canonical,” (Rushdie, 2019, p.215)¹ it is easy for a writer to play with history, corrupt it with myth, epic and legend, colour it with memory, alter it with story and warp its frontiers in such a way as to make it a mirror of literature. The writer's licence gives Rushdie the liberty to make light of his own knighthood, impersonate himself in the role of Don Quixote and turn the genre of chivalric romance on its head. In Rushdie's view, Cervantes's hero, “the marginal man, the man laughably out of touch and doggedly out of step and also unarguably out of mind,” (281), a predecessor of the modern day immigrant writer, is truly an embodiment of humanity. To rewrite *Don Quixote* is, therefore, to rewrite History.

The Novel as an anti-dote to the End of History

This article takes up for scrutiny Rushdie's fourteenth and latest novel, *Quichotte*, which was short listed for the Booker Prize in 2019. It first discusses the reasons for Rushdie's attempt to take on Cervantes, the very pioneer of the genre of the novel in whose lineage the migrant author wants to be placed by the reader (Rushdie, 1992, p. 21). It then reviews the many strategies adopted by Rushdie to rewrite the canonical *Don Quixote*, i.e., hybridization of the European quest narrative by Farid-ud-Din Attar's mystic quest narrative, Herman Melville's whale hunt and the American road novel; recourse to Nabokovian parallel universes in which the Quichotte-Sancho-Human Trampoline trio is mirrored in the Brother-Sister-Son trio; Marcel Du Champ-inspired surrealistic scenes; a generational clash thanks to a Pinocchio-like character who challenges the author who has fathered him; the device of a speaking cricket that combines the magic of Alladin's genie with the cuteness of a Pixar animated figure, and Andersen's fairytale-like escape into a transhistoric ever after. Finally, the article tries to argue that this fictional canvas allows Rushdie to rewrite the political, social and cultural history of contemporary India, England and more significantly, Trump's America from a transplanted person's point of view.² Diagnosing the younger generation's lack of memory as the root cause of their loss of sense of history, Rushdie revives the memories of a

multicultural Bombay before it became Mumbai, interprets Brexit as a sign of nostalgia for an imperial past and writes all the truth about the erasure of Native American history, slavery, racism, the Muslim ban, gun violence, the opioid crisis and the obsession with the media and new frontiers in America, while a glorified and patriotic narrative of American history is being officially spun. Indian and American histories are intertwined through the Indo-American diaspora to give the reader a global perspective. “L'univers, c'est moi” feels the omniscient author (357). Indeed he identifies his ageing self with the dwindling planet and reinvents the fictional pair of Quichotte and Sancho to propose the quest for love as an antidote to the inexorable end of History.

The one common characteristic that Rushdie's *Quichotte* has with reference to his fictional double is that he is tall and skinny. His total disconnection from worldly reality, obsession with love and use of ornate language are other common features. Rushdie's Sancho too gets beaten up like his predecessor. The horse Rocinante has been replaced by a grey metal Chevy Cruise. But for the rest, Rushdie's “updating of Don Quixote for the digital age” (Winterson, 2019) is one among the multiple versions of *Don Quixote*. Rushdie has thrown in references to Jules Massenet's 1910 opera *Don Quichotte* and Akira Kurosawa's 1980 film *Kagemusha* (Shadow Warrior) to indicate that these are his novel's intertexts. The Dulcinea of Massenet was a more sophisticated character compared to the original and was modeled on Lucy Arbell, the young singer with whom the sixty-seven year old composer was in love. As the older Rushdie fell in love with and married the much younger Indo-American actress and television host Padma Lakshmi,³ he was inspired by Massenet in retelling the quest for his lady love. Kagemusha is one of the names of the secret agent Lance Makioka in Rushdie's novel who comes to warn the writer about his son's activism as a member of a group called Legion. The Brother/writer's son signs his name as Quix 97 and wears a mask from the Broadway 2002 revival of the musical, *Man of La Mancha* (221). The canonical text thus becomes a hypotext that lies buried beneath the layers of multicultural rewritings in both classical and popular registers.

While he was a student at Eton, Rushdie plunged into futuristic science fiction to find an escape route from bullying classmates in his boarding school. Later, he took up history in Cambridge. Though he turned to science fiction in his initial attempt at novel writing (Rushdie, 1975), Rushdie shot into fame after fictionalizing the history of postcolonial India in *Midnight's Children* (1981), which was followed by a political satire of the history of postcolonial Pakistan, *Shame* (1983). Apart from these works of historiographic metafiction, Rushdie rewrote the history of modern Indian art in *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995). The

postcolonial predicament of being “handcuffed to history,” (Rushdie, 1982, p. 9) and the acceleration of time in the modern world and the meaning of History have been at the very heart of his writing and craft. Tales from *The Arabian Nights*, which played a formative role in the shaping of his imagination during his childhood in Bombay, are basically about how human life is a race against death and how time must be used for survival through creativity. The fatwa pronounced against Rushdie pronounced by Ayatollah Khomeini in February 1989, after the publication of *The Satanic Verses* in which Rushdie tried to engage with the early history of Islam, only intensified his awareness of the preciousness of life and the necessity to contend with time. *Two Years, Eight Months and Twenty Eight Nights* (which is another way of saying 1001 nights), Rushdie's novel published in 2015 and narrated by a voice from a future millennium, pictures strange jinn princesses from the imaginary world of Peristan. It is clear that Rushdie associates America with the future and India with the irretrievable landscape of his lost childhood. As for *The Golden House*, Rushdie's rather unconvincing effort to compete with Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, published in 2017, it chronicles Trump's America where “Suddenly lying was funny, and hatred was funny, and bigotry was funny” (Garner, 2017). *Quichotte* comes as a more forceful sequel to it.

In an interview accorded to *The Hindu*, Rushdie notes that “the great tradition of the realist novel is based on an agreement between the writer and the reader about the nature of the world. When *reality* becomes contested, the foundation of the realist novel is eroded” (Lunn, 2019). Hence the need to humorously stage the renegotiation of this pact between the author and the reader in the form of a conversation between a father and his son. *Quichotte* is a satire of the 21st century man whose brain is addled by binge watching television. He is the very epitome of modern mobility: “He no longer had a fixed abode. The road was his home, the car his living room” (9). Rushdie uses the technique of *mise en abyme*, a sleight of hand used by Cervantes himself, who introduced a metanarrative dimension to his novel by presenting his own story as the translation of an Arabic manuscript by Cid[e] Hemet[e] Benengeli, Melville who had introduced *Moby Dick* as “the draught of a draught,” (Melville, 1851, p. 159) and Nabokov whose Sebastian Knight writes his autobiography as his brother's life story. The author disguises the Ismail/Quichotte quest as the plot of another novel written by Sam DuChamp, a low brow spy fiction writer. His name is mispronounced as Sam the Sham (25), making him a fake, a pale imitation of the conceptual artist Marcel Duchamp. Later in the novel his son is shown to claim his father's legacy by taking on Marcel Duchamp's and Picabia's names as his pseudonyms which are indeed attempted rewritings of his identity (Ganapathy-Doré, 2013). “Everyone is someone else now” remarks a

disenchanted Quichotte (25).⁴ In his 2020 *America* interview with François Busnel (Rushdie, 2020, p. 25), Rushdie has identified change of identity as

one of the big themes of American literature, especially literature from New York. It is at the heart of what one calls “the Great American Novel”. But I have the feeling that even if the subject fascinates me, I am not capable of writing the great American novel of identity.⁵

Rushdie does not leave any space for the informed critic to explicate his text. He himself hands out the key to the reader about what he set out to do by rewriting *Don Quixote*:

Cervantes had gone to war with the junk culture of his own age. He [the writer] said that he was trying also to write about the impossible, obsessional love, father-son relationships, sibling quarrels, and yes unforgivable things; about Indian immigrants, racism toward them, crooks among them; about cyber-spies, science fiction, the intertwining of fictional and “real” realities, the death of the author, the end of the world. He told her he wanted to incorporate elements of the parodic, and of satire and pastiche. (289)

The blue fairy in the Sancho subplot lays bare the relationship between individuals and history:

All of us are in two stories at the same time... Life and Times. There is our own personal story, and the bigger story of what is happening around us. When both are in trouble simultaneously, when the crisis inside you intersects with the crisis outside you, things get a little crazy. (351)

The end of his marriage with Padma Laskhmi and the pursuit of his career as a writer in a world that was falling apart were the two problems that beset Rushdie. *Quichotte* is not a historical novel, but a novel about the history of the novel which is called upon to come to terms with the twists and turns of contemporary history. “If the work of every novelist contains an implicit vision of the history of the novel, an idea of what the novel is,” as Milan Kundera has sustained (Kundera, 1986, p. 9), Rushdie's novel is more than a metanarrative, a metanarratological *récit*. Quichotte embodies authorhood and Sancho, characterhood. Fiction happens when characters rebel against the control of the author and break into freedom and live a life of their own. In *Quichotte*, Sancho, the character gets frustrated because he does not have access to the certain parts of the omniscient author's mind (130). Brother, the writer who narrates the tale of Quichotte, suggests that his story was a “metamorphosed version of his own” (22). He goes on to suggest further that the tale in its capacity as the individual life history of Quichotte was “more authentic” (ibid.) than as the narrator's fiction about his family. To make matters worse, the narrator confesses that his yarn is unreliable because “Brother on some days had difficulty remembering which history was his own and which

Quichotte's" (216). At another point in the novel, the character teaches the author about the nature of true love (356). This parody of the critical concepts of narratology shows that Rushdie's rewriting of Cervantes is not without forethought. As Milan Kundera has earlier pointed out, *Don Quixote* imparts to the reader "the wisdom of uncertainty." (Kundera, 1986, p. 21) Rushdie had earlier drawn our attention to the postmodernist predicament of tentativeness by stating that "Meaning is a shaky edifice" (Rushdie, 1992, p. 12). The same idea that was also the subject of another Rushdie novel, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* is repeated in *Quichotte*: "we all live on shaky ground" (332). The novelistic genre allows for the incorporation of heterogeneous time thanks to flash-backs and fast-forwarding flights of fancy. However, the rather anachronistic recasting of Pinocchio as Sancho and the Arabian Nights genie as the speaking insect Grillo parlante, which can magically produce bank notes, ID and credit cards to help the imaginary young boy come of age in the consumer paradise of America destabilizes the reader's world of literary references.

The Quixotic note on pronunciation, a frame text, that tells the reader about the various ways in which the name of Quichotte is pronounced (in French, German and Spanish), and the "key shot" in the crosscultural cinema to come, immediately plunge us into the typically Rushdian universe of interlingual pun and transnational space. Situated in post-2001 America, the narrative unfolds in an age where "Anything-Can-Happen," an augmented version of Orwellian reversals. One understands why Rushdie renames his own novel in his novel *Reverse Rendition* (227) in a playful manner.⁶ Since the days of Columbus, America has been a shadow of India. These days India has become an echo of America not only because of the comings and goings of the diaspora but also because of the nationalist ideas of the heads of these countries that resonate across space. Muslims from some countries are thus put on "the no-entry list" in America (126) and Muslims suspected of eating beef-meat are lynched by cow-vigilantes in India (54).

From time immemorial, philosophers have tried to understand the temporal dimension of the universe. From H.G. Wells to Arthur C. Clarke, time travels have remained a literary fantasy. Nevertheless, Rushdie seems to have read extensively about Einstein's general theory of relativity which does not exclude the possibility of time travel, even though it is difficult to put it into practice. The quantum paradox of Erwin Schrödinger is mentioned in the novel (270) by an Indian character called Evel Cent, a prophet of the future (loosely modelled after Elon Musk. The name itself is a deformation of the Hindi name Awwal Sant, meaning first saint). Evel Cent first pretends that his dog named Schrödinger travelled through interdimensional space and came back alive and unchanged (271) before admitting that it was

a lie later on (385). He has pursued Kennedy's dream of New Frontiers and conceived a postreality continuum. His Neighbour Earth Exchange Technology would whisk human beings away from the end of the world to a home in a parallel and alternative universe (204). What Rushdie tries to distillate is not only the passage of personal time (symbolized in the novel by Quichotte's heart condition which serves as a contraption to drive the plot) as in Proust's memories, but also time as a physical phenomenon. Rushdie's metaphor for time is "fabric" (169) in which a hole could be burned into. A traumatic "Interior Event" (10 & 273), i.e., a stroke, provokes gashes in the writer's memory. Similarly, Salma R.,⁷ an American TV host of Indian origin with whom he has fallen desperately in love, has recourse to OxyCotin because it is a "time-release drug" (112). Later she undergoes electro convulsive therapy to preserve her from her dark moods bordering on folly and does not remember certain names and incidents. Like Lewis Carroll's Alice who falls into the hole of the white rabbit to wake up in Wonderland, it is possible for human beings to dive into the black hole of oblivion to emerge in another place and another time, i.e., in another reality. Another instance where the notion of time gets disoriented is when there is a "location dislocation" (137). Sancho goes to sleep in the Drury inn in Amarillo and wakes up in Double Tree by Hilton in Tulsa and thinks he is in New York. The question of time, therefore, is inevitably connected to the question of different forms of reality in Rushdie. Fiction allows the reader to imaginatively experience time travel and perceive multiple realities (naturally real, magically real, surreal, hyperreal). In the novel, high definition reality as represented in the TV sometimes prevails over reality as lived by the characters. Salma's sense of time as a television host is absolute. Even the clocks bend to please her so that her staff could get their work done on time. Indeed the Author/Quichotte subscribes to the Hindu notion of *maya* (reality as illusion), considers reality as "a trick of the light" (96) and aims to look beyond the surface for other dimensions of meaning.

What gives Quichotte the key to decipher reality is the poetic metaphors of Farid-ud-Din Attar in his *Conference of Birds*. The several metaphorical valleys (search, love, knowledge, unity, contentment, wonderment and poverty/absolute nothingness) referred to in his quest narrative are deliberately transposed in Rushdie's self-referential and postmodern text which plays with the traditional elements of the quest narrative (a hero, a villain who challenges him, a friend who helps the hero, a call that stirs the hero into action, the journey, the arrival and challenges, the final ordeal and the achievement of the goal) and the American novel, especially American Road novel. The real name of the character called Quichotte is Ismail. This first name is an echo of Ishmael, the lead character in Herman Melville's *Moby*

Dick. While his Ismail's double, Quichotte, is besotted by Salma R. like Melville's Ahab, who is obsessed with the whale, Ismail is able to maintain a critical distance like Ishmael and be aware that "obsession destroys the obsessed" (129). As regards the American road novel which is part and parcel of the American literary tradition in search of discovery and self-discovery through adventure, it is also a quest narrative like the picaresque novel. But most often, the outcome is one of disappointment. Initially, what Rushdie intended was to redo Alexis de Tocqueville's journey in reverse, i.e., from New York to the West. With his son Milan, he wanted to take the mythical Route 66 which was one of his fantasies. But, having been invited to contribute a comparative literature essay on Cervantes and Shakespeare who both died in 1616, he decided to write instead an imaginary version of Quixote's journey (Rushdie, 2020, p. 27). Rushdie's narrative ends with a sense of disillusionment about the art of the novel. "One-had no story anymore. Character, narrative, history were all dead" (236). The clue to the intimation that the universe is disintegrating is the uncertain present which functions as a sure sign of the unpredictable dystopia to come. The chronology of this period is counted in terms of Before Google and After Google (258). Democratic regimes have been replaced by the mob rule and the kangaroo court of social media.

Reverse Rendition of the New World's History

Rushdie starts with a rather recent wave of migration to America. The history of Indo-American diaspora narrated by Quichotte's double the writer Brother is quite linear and didactic. He reviews (26-27) the condition of the Indian diaspora from the Migration Act of 1790, which allowed only free white persons to become American citizens, to the suspicious atmosphere of post September 11, 2001 attacks through the Immigration Act of 1917 which excluded the Hindoos, the landmark Supreme Court case *United States v Bhagat Singh Thind* 1923 in which the court ruled out the possibility of Americans assimilating with Indians, the 1946 Luce Celler Act which permitted hundred Indians per year to come to the US, and the Immigration Act 1965 which opened the doors more fully to Indians. The only gap in Rushdie's account of the Indo-American history is the reference to the Indians expelled by Idi Amin from Uganda who came to the US and thrived thanks to the motel business (Turkel, 2007). Contrary to African Americans, Indian immigrants were spared of racial abuse until 1987 when the Dotbustergang attacked Indian families in Jersey City.

The historical recalling of these facts prepares the ground for the racist attack that Ismail Smile alias Quichotte the hero and his imaginary son Sancho suffer at Lake Capote and the maneuver of intimidation in Tulsa, Oklahoma, when Quichotte drives from Atlanta to New

York in search of the love of Salma R. with whom he shares a common point: both of them had spent their childhood in Bombay. Indeed the father and the son witness the shooting of two Indians by an Islamophobic American in Kansas. This true incident which occurred⁸ in 2017 is so deftly interwoven into the fabric of the narrative that the borderline between fact and fiction is blurred. Sancho himself gets beaten up by three racists in New York because he sees them wearing “collars with the broken leashes,” which are visual metaphors for their animal-like anger and unfettered hatred. Rushdie is at his best when depicting immigrant bashing, whether literal or phantasmagorical, in America. He feels that as an American citizen, he is entitled to write the novel of the New York immigrant (Rushdie, 2020, p.26). Just as he wrote back to the British Empire, he writes back against violence towards immigrants by conjuring up a scene in which the Brother's son executes a karate gesture and turns the gunman in Kansas into a victim begging for his life (364). Only the novelistic genre offers the potential for this “reverse rendition” in an alternate reality.

Rushdie handles the historically older abominations of slavery and racism against African Americans in an oblique manner. Though he never ever mentions the name of Donald Trump, he mentions Obama (375) and Oprah (47) by name. The dependent father son relationship between Quichotte and Sancho modelled on the master servant relationship in *Don Quixote* certainly brings to mind the bond of slavery: “I was imported. I got put on a ship and sailed away and crossed the mighty ocean into Charleston Bay.” (93). The enduring legacy of slavery in the form of racism in its contemporary manifestation is witnessed through the testimonies of African Americans who come to talk in the “While Black”⁹ segment of Salma's Show (11). Salma performs the role of Lady Liberty, who implements the humanitarian vision expressed in Emma Lazarus's sonnet. Rushdie recalls in his *America* interview that Auguste Bartholdi's statue of liberty was intended to enlighten thought before it became a symbol of the welcoming of migrants (Rushdie, 2020, p.31).

The name Sancho is not only that of Don Quixote's sidekick but also that of Ignatius Sancho, “the extraordinary negro” (234). Thanks to the name of a Jamaican restaurant in London named after him, the writer is able to unpack the history of slavery in the British Empire. Born on a slaveship in 1729, Sancho was a runaway slave who was freed in England. He did work for English aristocrats but not as an accompanying servant for an adventurous knight but as “composer, playwright, polemicist, prolific writer of essay-letters to the newspapers, author of *Theory of Music*, greengrocer, the first person of African origin to vote in a British election.” (Ibid.). Rushdie puts him on par with Ottobah Cugoano, the first black man to dictate his account to his white friends and publish an autobiographical narrative

called *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* in 1787 and Olaudah Equiano, the first black writer (from Biafra) of an autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African, written by himself*, which was published in 1789. Like them, Ignatius Sancho was a chronicler of slavery and campaigned against it. Thomas Gainsborough painted his portrait and he was admired by Laurence Sterne who wrote letters to him. This passage in the novel says as much about the dignity of freed slaves and their talents as about the liberal minds of English artists and intellectuals who were open-minded and did not manifest racist prejudice in those times. The revival of the memories of anti-slavery movement restores faith in humanity and raises hopes about overcoming racism and bringing about change. The passing mention of Mandela's name (375) also has the same effect.

Similarly, the claims to the history of the American nation of the Native Indian minority are established by recourse to etymology. Etymology of place names helps Quichotte re-establish the connection between history and geography. He connects the linguistic parochialism of some racist Americans who want everyone to speak only English with the act of possession. The names of Spanish saints on the West Coast and old English place names on the East Coast have “buried the past beneath them” (153). Native Indian words have lost their power. Sometimes, the meaning remains as in Chicago, the onion field and Mississippi, the Great River but nobody remembers the original meaning. Indeed the fictive town of Beautiful depicted in the novel is the translation of a Native American word: Olathe, the real name of the town where the Kansas shooting occurred (Lunn, 2019). It is Rushdie's way of reviving Native American history.

The most striking stories of contemporary American history have been rewritten as surrealistic episodes by Salman Rushdie: trumpism as a masquerade of mastodons that afflict (183-191) the imaginary town of Berenger and the opioid scandal as an immoral commercial scheme invented by Dr. R. K. Smile, the cousin of Ismail Smile. A Trump like character is featured in a TV series called Five Eyes in which Salma plays the CIA Chief. The imaginary TV president “was obsessed by cable news, pandered to a whole supremacist base, and [...] played golf” (46). Later the readers are witnesses to a hallucinatory scene: well meaning American citizens becoming mastodons over night and going on a rampage against migrants. Quichotte refers to them as *m. americanum*, a monstrous creature belonging to pre-history, in other words, a descendant of the physically sturdy early WASP settlers. who do not want to recognize the transformation of America as a country of immigrants. They are patriots and white supremacists who have been emboldened by Trump and turned hostile and aggressive

towards immigrants. But not all of them are four legged monsters. Some stand erect and try to discuss with ordinary human beings. What distinguishes the mastodons is their enormous size and the sound and fury that they vent. The green suit they wear recalls the suit that Sylvester Stallone wore in the movie *Rocky*. This is Rushdie's satirical way of translating Trump's "Make America great again" discourse and the uninhibited right wing populism that is gaining ground in America. However, Quichotte and Sancho see this episode as a passing scene in the larger spectacle of history. The reversibility or irreversibility of this aberrational metamorphosis of American identity, which the Romanian immigrant motel owner Ionesco calls "mastodontis" is what is at stake. The intertextual reference to and the transposition of Ionesco's *Rhinocéros* (1974) is obvious in this episode, Berenger being the one uncapitulating human being in this absurd play which tells the tale of mass conversion to totalitarianism.

The Indian American physician Dr. R.K. Smile, a relative of Ismail Smile or Smile Smile, has patented InSmile™ a sublingual opioid (fentanyl which is ten times more powerful than morphine) and is shamelessly marketing it by manipulating other doctors who defraud Medicare by prescribing this dangerous drug to celebrities who do not need painkillers for any terminal disease but for quelling their personal and existential angst. In order to convince doctors, the company uses pretty women. R.K. Smile's wife, named "Happy" to match her husband's name, is involved in charitable activities and convinces art galleries to accept donations from her husband as a means to enhance his reputation. She cites the example of OxyContin family. Readers familiar with the scandal of oxycontin and the Purdue Pharma founded by the Sackler family can easily discern the fact behind the fiction as the allusion to patronage of art gives the clue to real history.¹⁰ Using real names would have exposed Rushdie to libel suits. By fictionally metamorphosing the Jewish American entrepreneur into Indian one of uncertain ancestry helps him portray the immigrant as a trickster who tests the host society. Historically, the American dream is to pursue happiness. If Smile is the first degree of happiness, the ultimate degree would be ecstasy. Materialistically oriented Americans seem to be resorting to uninhibited sex and illegal and life-threatening drugs to feel the thrill and fill the spiritual void (49). In so doing, they have compromised the dream of democracy which has become an illiberal one.

The irony is that Dr. R.K. Smile tells the truth of his method to people as if it were a lie told in jest. This episode helps Rushdie tackle the role of falsehoods in the Trump era and the need to fact-check those claims by members of the press or the justice department who have reliable knowledge. Quichotte dubs it "errorism" (327) which is as bad as terrorism. Alongside these front page stories, the narrator recounts the marginal story of the hospice

children whom Salma R. makes visible by filming it just as she films racial prejudice in the Republican majority states.

Rushdie's rewriting of history by relativizing the univocal truth of official history with alternative stories should not be confused with the post-truth and fake news of the Trump era.

Former president Barack Obama designated it by another name:

What we've seen is what some people call truth decay, something that's been accelerated by outgoing President Trump, the sense that not only do we not have to tell the truth, but the truth doesn't even matter (Obama, 2020).

The Cambridge Dictionary defines post-truth as “relating to a situation in which people are more likely to accept an argument based on their emotions and beliefs, rather than one based on facts.” Rushdie's novel depicts media fuelled situations of post-truth for the reader unfamiliar with such a process to know what it is. It does mention fake names of secret agents. While fake news pollutes the real by brainwashing the viewers, the writer believes that imaginative fiction has “the power to enter and transform and even improve the real world” (32). When lies masquerade as truth, fiction becomes the language in which truth could be told. In his *America* interview (Rushdie, 2020, p. 40), Rushdie explains this in simple but unforgettable terms:

The purpose of a lie is to obscure the truth; the purpose of fiction is to reveal the truth. This is the big difference between art and lie. It does not matter whether the novel is a fairy story or science fiction, whether it is related to magic realism or surrealism: the goal of literature is the unveiling of truth. The goal of falsehood is untruth.

Farewell to the Old World – End of Empire, Brexit and Bombay

The unexpected turn that history has taken in England is evoked by a family story in chapters four, fifteen and seventeen. The Writer/Brother's Sister elopes to England as the wife of an older painter because her parents refuse to invest in her education abroad. Her awareness of gender discrimination leads her to becoming a human rights lawyer. She helps many an immigrant and especially immigrant woman to find their way in England. However, when she defends residents against a noisy West London Jamaican restaurant, she loses the capital of sympathy she had accumulated over the years and is accused of racism. She, on her own, withdraws her candidacy for membership in the House of Lords as a life peeress and a prospective position as Lord Speaker. The Conservatives initially back her because she is a meritorious person and members of the Labour party support her because she represents a double minority – ethnic and gender. But unfortunately there is no depth in their conviction. The pragmatic and commonsensical English people have fallen prey to skepticism and fight

over whether affirmative action is merely positive discrimination (62). If the anecdote of the missed opportunity helps the writer picture the legislative branch, he is able to touch upon the sense of tolerance and fairness in the judiciary through the character of the cross dressing English judge who marries Sister, despite the fact that she is a divorced Muslim woman whose body has been mutilated by breast cancer. In chapter 7, Rushdie alludes to Brexit, again without naming it, as “a wild nostalgic decision,” (53) which “broke the country in half” (54). Rushdie briefly evokes the malaise of the Windrush generation and compares Brexit to the religious divide that plagues the subcontinent and the racial divide that splinters the US. London's clubby atmosphere has been replaced by the empty apartments of rich Chinese, Russian and Arab investors. The writer's sister speaks Queen's English and wears floral patterned dresses like the queen (294). The staging of her death by cancer and the simultaneous suicide of her decent husband is an allegory of the decline of old English culture. Like in the US, the xenophobic discourse of white populism, England-for-the English, is on the rise. Britain has become a “fractured, second-class nation” (278) like its former colonies. The chess move (Kasparov, 2008) communicated to Brother by his niece, which sets in motion “The Grand (family) Reconciliation” (34) drama, is a subtle allusion to Satyajit Ray's movie *Chantranj ke Kilari*. But this time, the British do not take over and change the rules of the game. The game ends in a tragedy at both the family and national levels. Rushdie's treatment of the Brexit issue tries thus to strike a balance between constructivist and game theories of international relations (Oliver, 2019). He situates Brexit in a larger theory of world disintegration rather than the much debated hypothesis of European disintegration.

The Bohemian Bombay painted by Rushdie is largely a memorial one. The three major lines that could be discerned are the reworked history of Bollywood legends such as Raj Kapoor, Nargis and Vijayanti Mala, including the playback singers Lata Mangeshkar and Asha Bhonsle, the history of modern Indian painters Husain, Raza, Gaitonde and Khanna and the hidden and unsavoury aspects of Indian patriarchy. Along with real painters, Rushdie's artist character from *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Aurora Zagoiby, who reminds us of Amrita Sher Ghil, is mentioned blurring the borders between reality and fiction. Indeed Amrita Sher Ghil's “Village Scene” of seated women reappears in an altered form: “four women with shorn hair wearing white saris, sitting in a room with an ornately patterned rug” (251) in the Human Trampoline's house as a commissioned piece, making the imaginary world seep into the real one. The writer's Sister as well as Salma recount a tale of sexual abuse, by the father in the former case and the grandfather in the latter. Another legacy of the family that crosses borders is genetics. Salma. R inherits her grandmother's and her mother's mental illness. This is one of

the reasons why she has recourse to the fatal drug that nearly kills her. The only legacy that the Ulysses-like-author hands down to his Telemachus of a son is the colourful street language of Bambaiyya (152). When the son hurls the words he has learnt from his father like weapons at the perpetrators of the racist aggression in New York (210), the reader realizes that it is the immigrants' mother tongue that frightens the natives.

Conclusion

In this multistranded narrative, the history of colour symbolism that Quichotte expounds to his son Sancho in a professoral tone at Billy Diner, after telling him that they should skirt the red Republican states and drive through a Democratic blue state to avoid hostile encounters, is almost poetic and falsely naïve:

In Europe, the colours of political affiliation are reversed, so blue is the colour of conservatism, reactionaries and capitalists, while red stand for communism, socialism, democratic socialism, and social democracy. I ask myself sometimes: what is the colour of love? It's hard to find one that isn't used up already. Saffron is the colour of Hindu nationalism, green the color of Islam, except for two places where they prefer red, and black is the preferred color of Islamic fanatics. Pink is associated with women's protests and the whole rainbow is the sign of gay pride. White, I don't think of as a color, except in the racial context. So maybe brown. Brown, like us. That must be the color of love. (142)

This passage sums up the History of humanity by translating it into the chromatic register as if it were a haze of colour powders thrown during a Holi festival. The writer turns painter to plead for hybridity and tolerance. Unfortunately this “carnival of relativity” (Kundera, 1993, 39) is interrupted in the novel by gun-totting Americans.

There is a striking image in the novel about a history essay that the writer composes in Eton. One of his vengeful classmates tears it into pieces. Another writes “Wogs go home” on his door. Rushdie catches hold of the culprit and beats him up. This is one act of uncontrollable violence he remembers. Tearing the essay into pieces at least symbolically destroys the history that was narrated therein. How to destroy a troubled history? Quichotte, the unwilling accomplice in Dr. Smile's stratagems, points a gun at his beloved, not to kill her but save her from drug dependence and forces her to consent to travel to Evel Cent's portal to Next, the other Earth, wanting to put an end to their terrestrial history. The novel ends with a freeze frame: Salma R. and Quichotte standing on the threshold of a gate, a Rushdian remake of “the instant made eternity” in Browning's “Last Ride Together”. Their transhistoric life after death, if there was one, is a story that cannot be logically told. The naming of the portal as “Mayflower” stamps it as a typical American Dream, a repetition of History. Luckily the

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author is not dead, but only asleep and sees his microscopic characters steal their way into his office. The realistic novel is no more. Real history as fake novel is the new normal.

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¹ Hereafter all the quotations from this novel will be indicated by just its page number within brackets.

² The protagonist is a migrant and travelling salesman.

³ Rushdie married Padma Lakshmi in 2004. The couple divorced in 2007.

⁴ In *Joseph Anton*, Rushdie describes how he was asked to choose aliases by the British secret service in order to protect him.

⁵ The translation of all the quotations from this interview published in French is mine.

⁶ Rushdie had proposed alternative titles to Shakespeare's plays. See Carol Blue's "The Folger Perambulation" in the *New Yorker Magazine* dated May 6, 1996.

⁷ Salma R. could be a fictional guise for Padma Rushdie or Salman Rushdie himself embodied in a female identity.

⁸ On 22nd February 2017, in a Kansas bar, Adam Purinton, a 51-year-old US Navy veteran, shot two Indian engineers aged 32, Srinivas Kuchibhotla and Alok Madasani, taking them to be "two middle Eastern men." The former died and the later survived. Purinton also wounded another American, Ian Grillot, 24, who tried to intervene. This hate crime was said to have been prompted by President Trump's Muslim Ban and his anti-immigrant rhetoric, which he denied.

⁹ A word play on "driving while intoxicated" used by African Americans to refer to racial profiling by the police.

¹⁰ Indeed the Sackler Center for Arts Education at the Guggenheim Museum, the Sackler Institute for Comparative Genomics at the American Museum of Natural History, the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery at the Smithsonian Institution, the Sackler Wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art still give the Sackler family an honourable position while the Louvre Museum has removed the name from its Wing of Oriental Antiquities.