

**ACROSS THE OCEAN SEA:
HETEROTOPIC RECONFIGURATIONS OF SPACE
IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S RECENT FICTION**

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***Abstract:** Salman Rushdie's more recent fiction goes beyond the exploration of East and West that characterised his early work. If his pre-2000 novels focus on the clash and commingling of the two worlds, the texts Rushdie wrote following his move to the US show his interest in exploring a different third space, which escapes a traditional postcolonial understanding. This paper will discuss the way in which Salman Rushdie constructs the New World, this alternative space, in the "American phase" of his fiction, with a particular focus on his 2015 novel, *Two Years, Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights*.*

***Keywords:** American space, intertextuality, heterotopia, Salman Rushdie*

1. Introduction

The recent tragic events that Salman Rushdie was a victim of have brought to the fore again the controversy surrounding *The Satanic Verses* (1988). Although he had been living in relative freedom in recent years, the writer was never able to fully shake off the shadow of this book. Inevitably, the attack last August not only sent a maimed Rushdie back into hiding, but brought back into the limelight what is, perhaps, one of the greatest misreadings of the past century. This is not to say that *The Satanic Verses* is not a book that challenges established canons, nor is this a suggestion that Rushdie's fiction is not militant. However, what I would like to argue is that his more recent narratives, which, for various reasons, have not been given the close attention they deserve, are even more undermining of orthodoxies, if in a different way. Held prisoner for a long time in the dichotomies of East-West, religion-secularism, democracy-dictatorship, etc., in what I will call the "American phase" of his writing Rushdie has tried more intensely than in his earlier fiction to transcend these binaries. By exploring the American space through politicised intertextual lenses, Salman Rushdie complicates his critique of the foundational pillars of Western civilisation in some of his recent novels, such as *Two Years, Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* (2015), *The Golden House* (2017), and *Quichotte* (2019).

The three novels share several elements, among which an attempt to rethink the means for critiquing our contemporary world, heavy intertextuality, and an American setting that Rushdie constructs in innovative ways, by reconfiguring space. They also share a favoured triad of spatial coordinates, namely the Bombay-

London-New York axis, and still foreground migrant characters, although their arrival is of a different nature now. The political dimension is just as present as in previous works, but it is both more nuanced at first sight and more subversive, an element that recent readings of Rushdie have not always picked on. It is the intention of this paper to examine the way in which reconfigurations of space, viewed in relation to Michel Foucault's (1986) notion of heterotopia, enable Rushdie to mount an ever more subversive critique of the contemporary context. *Two Years, Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* (2015) is the first in a series of what, building on Foucault, I will call *hysterotopic* fiction, a form of construction of space that forces a (violent at times) coexistence of drastically different features.

2. Of space and intertextuality

By and large, space has been an uneasy interest in Rushdie scholarship. Attention has been paid to the cities featured in his work as postcolonial spaces, where staple postcolonial concepts such as hybridity, third space, liminality, etc. can be applied to untangle some of the intricate narrative threads of this most prolific writer. Mostly these readings have stayed within the confines of the East-West dichotomy. Part of the generation who did a lot of "writing back" (ironically his own pun-coinage, made famous then by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin's seminal *The Empire Writes Back*, 1989), Rushdie has consistently explored the way in which the two worlds clash, coexist, intermingle, and overlap, forming palimpsest structures.

The "spatial turn" in cultural studies, a development advanced by such thinkers as Michel Foucault, Henri Lefebvre, Edward Soja or Arjun Appadurai, opened new avenues of interdisciplinary exploration and readings of literary texts. Several such readings have been done on some of Rushdie's early work, for e.g., *Midnight's Children* (Röder 2018) or *The Satanic Verses* (Gane 2002), and on the trope of the city in several novels, for e.g., in *Roy and Roy* (2015) or Parashkevova (2012). (A review of scholarship on the topic of space in Salman Rushdie's work can be found in "The Spatial Imperative: The Need to Read Space in Salman Rushdie's Novels", by Yuying Liang, 2020). Less attention has been paid, however, to the way in which Rushdie uses the American space/geography following his move to the US. Taking my cues from Michel Foucault and Edward Soja, but also incorporating some of the postcolonial terminology put forth by Homi Bhabha, I will investigate the possible changes in Rushdie's treatment of space and what this might suggest in terms of the politically subversive intentions of his more recent novels.

Given Rushdie's compelling and constant connection with the network of world literature, I will also employ the additional lens of intertextuality. Famously defined by Julia Kristeva (1980: 85) as "a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another", intertextuality soon became a favourite concept for the poststructuralists of the last decades of the twentieth century. For Roland Barthes (1977: 146), "a text is (...) a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture", from which, however, the author disappears. For the purpose of this analysis, I will draw on Rushdie's own view on "in-flowings" (2002: 70), or the influence exerted on a writer by the body of work s/he emerges from and works in. As different from Barthes, for whom the author is dead, Rushdie sees the writer as much strengthened by this

influx of influence, which becomes an important strategy for renewal (2002: 72-73) and, I would add, for resituating texts in highly globalised contexts.

As Andrew Teverson (2013: 54) observes, “Rushdie’s concept of intertextuality (...) is intimately bound up with the concept of hybridity”. Allowing texts to flow freely into one another, without establishing a hierarchy of any kind, is “a paradigm for (or a product of) the mixing of cultures in society” (ibid.). In this respect, it is both informed by postcolonial understanding of hybridity (cf. Bhabha 1994) and different from it, as it transcends contiguous (post)colonial spaces.

In the way in which, like his famous alter-ego, the “Shah of Blah” (Rushdie 1990), Rushdie allows the streams of the Sea of Stories to mingle, he is never far from political involvement and even commentary. The politics in his texts (as different from, as Johannes Wally (2018: 67) also clarifies, “the politics of a novel”) has always provided readers with a network of connection to contemporary contexts. It is “the politics of a novel (...) a reception oriented category dealing with the socio-political effect the publication of a given novel might have” (ibid.), the novel being *The Satanic Verses* in this case, that has landed Rushdie into significant amounts of trouble; the politics *in* his recent texts, the territory where substantial subversion is taking place, has fallen under the radar upon occasion. One of the reasons for this relative neglect might be the way in which the reader’s attention is distracted by Rushdie’s shift towards America. However, it is precisely this shift and the way in which he uses the American space that enables us to investigate just how controversial Rushdie’s critical intentions can be.

3. The American third space: a new world

At the end of the 1990s, following a political thaw in and with Iran, Rushdie slowly emerges from hiding and eventually decides to relocate to the US permanently. The move reflects not only the author’s understandable desire to put the *fatwa* years more firmly behind him, but also his continuous drive to find means through which to renew his writing. In an interview for *The New York Times* (republished in *The Guardian*) soon after his move, he confesses falling in love with New York, “where a lot of people had a lot of stories not unlike mine. Everybody comes from somewhere else. Everyone’s got a Polish grandmother, some kind of metamorphosis in their family circumstances.” (Max 2000) This already makes clear Rushdie’s need for a kind of third space to transcend the previous spaces of his personal and writerly experience.

I will run the risk of terminological confusion and stick, at least provisionally, with the concept of third space. In the context of the present analysis, by third space I will understand a hybrid between Homi Bhabha’s (1994: 217) understanding of Third Space as “the interstitial passages and processes of cultural difference that are inscribed in the ‘in-between’, a “precondition for the articulation of cultural difference” (idem: 38), and Edward Soja’s (1996: 57) Thirdspace, a “real and imagined space”, where “everything comes together... subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history”). I find this combination necessary for any attempt to name and operate with a spatiality that is “almost but not quite” (Bhabha 1994:91) what emerges from established postcolonial discourse.

Soja claims Foucault as a Thirdspace fellow-traveller. In the chapter “In Thirdspace with Michel Foucault”, he argues that Foucault describes his “new approach to space and spatial thinking that he called *heterotopology* (...) in ways that resemble what is described here as Thirdspace” (1996: 154). However, it seems to me too quick a claim and for the purpose of the current analysis, it is important to keep Foucault’s distinctions separate. In “Of Other Spaces” (an essay based on a lecture delivered in 1967), Foucault (1986: 24) focuses on spaces “that have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invent the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect”. There are two main types of such spaces: utopias and heterotopias. The latter, Foucault says, are places “outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality” (ibid.). An extension of this view of space as heterotopia enables a reading of Rushdie’s recent fiction that can both reconcile critics with what they have perceived as a baffling course Rushdie’s work has taken and shed a different kind of light on the political intentions of these texts.

Although when he writes *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999) Rushdie is already spending time in the US, and *Fury* (2001) puts New York centre stage, it is starting with *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008) that one can begin to detect a change in Rushdie’s treatment of the American space. What I call Rushdie’s “American phase” begins with *The Enchantress...* and contains the three novels I mentioned above: *Two Years, Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* (2015), *The Golden House* (2017), and *Quichotte* (2019). It is in this corpus that I think a different reading of space through each novel’s specific intertextual entanglements can help with a new understanding of the political dimensions of the texts.

The reception of these latest novels has been tepid, to put it mildly, many faulting Rushdie for his “narrative sprawls” and the way in which his “digressions and minor characters multiply” (Theroux 2015), for being “wide and shallow” (Garner 2017), or for “suffering from a kind of internetitis”, and being “swollen with the junk culture he intended to critique” (Thomas-Corr 2019). Looking for the “old Rushdie” in the new work, most critics fail to pay the right kind of attention to the shift I alluded to above. I would argue that there seems to be a turn – a spatial turn accompanied by a differently politicised tone – in Salman Rushdie’s writing in his “American phase”. Arguably, the 9/11 events may have influenced this turn, yet it does not seem to necessarily hinge on the terrorist attacks against the World Trade Centre, although there has been speculation about a possible change in Rushdie’s political tone and positioning (see, for e.g., Sawhney and Sawhney, 2001, for a useful review of this speculation). Rather, it is a shift that reflects an attempt to use the cultural and political geography of the United States both to look for a utopian synthesis transcending the contraries of his previous work and, its polar opposite, to explode all certainties.

Rushdie’s actual arrival in the US following his decision to start living a more normal kind of life is accompanied by an attempt to “arrive” fictionally as well. Surprising as this suggestion may seem, it is *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008) that provides the key to this arrival in the way in which it reimagines the discovery of the New World. This *Mundus Novus* is described as a world in which

the ordinary laws of space and time did not apply. As to space, it was capable of expanding violently one day and then shrinking the next, so that the size of the earth seemed either to double or to halve. Different explorers brought back radically

different accounts of the proportions of the new world, the nature of its inhabitants, and the way in which this new quadrant of the cosmos was prone to behave.(...) The locals, those few who mastered European languages, confirmed that theirs was a world without change, a place of stasis, *outside time*, they said, and that was the way they preferred it to be. (Rushdie 2008: 328)

This place which is both real and imaginary, both in time and timeless, will enable previous identities and cultural assumptions to blur and disintegrate. The way in which the New World is represented in *The Enchantress of Florence* makes America analogous to what Foucault (1986: 24) calls heterotopia, a “counter-site”, in which the “other real sites that can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted”. *The Enchantress* introduces us to that other space in terms that echo what Foucault calls a “heterotopia of compensation”. While one could also look at it as a “heterotopia of illusion”, in that it “exposes every real place” previously known as “still more illusory” (idem: 27), another passage in *The Enchantress* could give us a clue to a different possible reading of the American space that Rushdie is going to construct. Musing on the Western world, Akbar the Great says that: “In those fabulous Western climes people seemed prone to hysterias (...) that swept through their countries like diseases and transformed things utterly without warning” (idem: 329). We can thus see emerging something that, developing Foucault’s categories, could be called a *hysterotopia*, a place that simultaneously allows for a form of return to the womb (a utopian version of home or of conflict resolution) and for a hysterical unleashing of forces that defy all forms of space and time constraints. This concurrent pulling in various directions is the main vehicle of political commentary in Rushdie’s recent novel, *Two Years, Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights*.

3.1. The transplanted Scheherazade

Published in 2015, the novel is Rushdie’s nod to the *One Thousand and One Nights*, for reasons that become immediately obvious in the text, namely the power of storytelling. This, however, ends up being subverted not in its life-affirming potential but in the way in which its imaginative impetus can be thwarted. Told from the future, the story takes us to a moment “now more than a thousand years ago”, when “a storm fell upon our ancestors’ city like a bomb” (Rushdie 2015: 19). The ancestors’ city is New York, but the wider stage is that of the United States in the early 2000s, as well as, over the course of the narrative, India and parts of Europe at various points in time. The early description of the city echoes closely the account of the New World that Akbar receives in *The Enchantress of Florence*. It is a world unhinged, thrown off kilter, whose metaphorical portrayal emphasises the way in which the established rules of space and time no longer apply:

Their childhoods slipped into the water and were lost, the piers built of memories on which they once ate candy and pizza, the boardwalks of desire under which they hid from the summer sun and kissed their first lips. The roofs of houses flew through the night sky like disoriented bats, and the attics where they stored their past stood exposed to the elements until it seemed that everything they once were had been devoured by the predatory sky. (...) Their power failed them. Darkness fell. (Rushdie 2015: 19)

Thus begin the “strangenesses”, which will continue for two years, eight months and twenty-eight days, in a hysterotopic setting, which will engender both narratives searching for a sort of return to origins and narratives foregrounding hyperbolically the “hysterical” dimension of the contemporary context. The novel offers us an illustration of the way in which Rushdie uses this hysterotopia to make a compelling point regarding the possible outcome of an age long battle between religion and secularism, between irrationality and reason.

At first sight, we have a familiar cocktail of magic realist ingredients. These strangenesses, we find out soon, are caused by the return of four evil jinn through the slits separating the human world from Peristan, or Fairyland: “the slits in the world had reopened, the seals had been broken and there were laughing sorcerers in the sky, satanic horsemen riding the galloping clouds” (ibid.). These slits had been sealed about a thousand years before, in the aftermath of a passionate love affair that the most powerful jinnia princess, Dunia, had with Ibn Rushd. The result of this love affair was a great number of descendants, spread all over the known world and recognisable after their lobeless ears and supernatural powers (of which, though, they are not aware and which they resist as the new strange reality begins to dawn on them).

The sealing of the passageways between the “real” and the “magic” world is presumably meant to help settle the human world into knowable spatial and temporal coordinates. It is also meant to put an end – at least a provisional one – to the quarrel that actually lies at the heart of the book, the quarrel between Ghazali, the pious theologian of Iran, also known as Renewer of the Faith and Proof of Islam, and the rationalist Ibn Rushd, also known as Averroes, and between their respective texts, *The Incoherence of Philosophers* and *The Incoherence of the Incoherence*. Although both dead a long time, now that “the barriers of distance and time no longer pose a problem” (idem: 57), they can resume their conversation about reason and faith, about the possibility of a benevolent God rejoicing “like a proud parent” (ibid.) in his children’s growing independence from him. Ghazali retorts by asserting the supremacy of faith and dismissing reliance on reason. “Faith”, he says, “is our gift from God and reason is our adolescent rebellion against it.” (idem: 58) This is the crux of the book’s ambitions and Rushdie pursues it through a spatial derangement meant to disorient.

The act of sealing off worlds – and, by extension, any act of drawing boundaries – creates a tension that has the potential to unleash chaos. Such artificial separation, Rushdie seems to suggest, even when the reason appears justified, will not cancel the conflictual dimension. Dichotomies leading to clearly delimited camps are dangerous, and showdowns between “good” and “evil” don’t always work out in fairy-tale fashion. The book traces alternative routes of exploring this conflict and seems to want a conclusion as well as a meditation on this conclusion. These routes are potentially more controversial than Rushdie’s earlier work not only because of the dark notes they strike but also because of where they lead.

The New York of this novel is both a real place and a place “outside of all places” (Foucault 1986: 24). It is itself, but it also mirrors and at times inverts the other spaces of the novel: contemporary Bombay (or a “Mumbai” always between inverted commas, which can never become “real”) and London, or the twelfth century Spain of Arab-Christian-Jewish texture. It has the “property of being in relation with all the other sites” (ibid.). It spreads in all directions and has the ability to morph. It shrinks and expands, and also twists itself in destructive

vortexes. It is no accident, then, that Mr. Geronimo, one of Dunia's lobeless descendants and one of the protagonists of the book, begins to levitate just as the "strangenesses" begin. The ground is literally taken from beneath his feet to suggest a broader kind of disconnect between people and the world they live in, a separateness that has become a way of life. Rushdie takes issue not just with the old dispute between reason and lack thereof, but also – or rather – with the fragmentariness this dispute leads to. To be grounded again, to regain spatial bearings and escape the turmoil of disconnectedness will become not only Geronimo's quest, but the quest of humanity as well.

The climax of these strangenesses opens up two possible hysterotopic paths. On the one hand, there is the going back, the search for a way to retrieve or resuscitate what has been lost. This can be metaphorically equivalent to a return to a point of origin (Bombay or Wombay, as Rushdie calls the city in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, the tomb of the two philosophers, Peristan, Mount Qaf, etc.), or it can be a return to a point in time and a reflection of the self in that time and place, which could be the nostalgic version of Foucault's heterotopic mirror. On the other hand, there is the temptation of blowing it all up, of the fire and smoke of the jinn, a conflagration meant to result in fear and submission. The two are, of course, simultaneous in the text, and the hysterotopic stage of this cataclysmic showdown is, necessarily, La Incoerenza, the estate of a Lady Philosopher this time, whose garden Mr. Geronimo has been tending to and which has also seemed to be a favourite target or landing pad for mysterious lightning. The accumulation verges on too-muchness towards the end of the novel, but it is an intensity meant to encourage – or even force – (self)scrutiny and repositioning in relation to the core issue of the text as well as of the turn of the millennium, namely faith vs. reason.

If one is willing to look at Rushdie's excesses in this novel not as a sign of his not caring for the fruits of his imagination, as a review in *The New Republic* claims (Hendrix 2015), but as an attempt to explore different ways of settling old tensions, this recasting of the *Thousand and One Nights* reaches disturbing conclusions. As we know from Rushdie's previous fiction (and non-fiction), going back is not truly possible, because with the passage of time not only the past but space as well are rewritten. Going forward in this novel offers an apparently non-Rushdiean clear-cut resolution: the evil jinn are defeated ("which was unreason itself, unreason which was the name of the dark jinn within people" and this "irrational in man as well as jinn had to be defeated, so that an age of reason could begin" (Rushdie 2015: 274)) and order is restored. Geronimo's neatly arranged garden at La Incoerenza becomes "a well-looked-after place of secular pilgrimage and reverence" (idem: 271), a final metamorphosis of place, falling into the mould of recognizable reason.

The conclusion of the novel, offered by the detached plural narrator from the distance of a thousand years, may look promising, a kind of much-needed utopian resolution to a big clash of worlds:

It seems to us self-evident, however, that the use of religion as a justification for repression, horror, tyranny, and even barbarism (...), led in the end to the terminal disillusion of the human race with the idea of faith. (...) [F]or at least five hundred years, such places of worship as survived the Dissolution have taken on new functions, as hotels, casinos, apartment blocks, transportation termini, exhibition halls, and shopping malls. (269)

These “converted” places seem to reinforce the idea of a purging of religion and irrationality from the human world. They also become “other spaces”, where, possibly, Foucault’s functions of “illusion” and “compensation” overlap. However, there is one more disturbing turn in store:

We take pride in saying that we have become reasonable people. We are aware that conflict was for a long time the defining narrative of our species, but we have shown that the narrative can be changed. (...) But something befell us when the worlds were sealed off from each other. (...) [S]omething that once happened to us all every night, every one of us, every member of the greater “we” which we have all become, stopped happening. We no longer dreamt. (...) This is the price we pay for peace, prosperity, understanding, wisdom, goodness, and truth: that the wildness in us, which sleep unleashed, has been tamed, and the darkness in us, which drove the theatre of the night, is soothed. (285-286)

Had they bothered to read this book (not that they read the one they condemned either), the ayatollahs of the world may have been dismayed by Rushdie’s treatment of Ghazali and of the whole idea of faith. However, the secular rationalists can be even more dismayed by the way in which Rushdie stops the rationalist argument in its tracks. A more attentive reading of this text reveals the way in which Rushdie subverts not the idea of faith as much as that of settling controversy at all cost. In a world where, as he himself says in an interview occasioned by the publication of *Joseph Anton*, his memoir of the fatwa years (2012: online), a book like *The Satanic Verses* would probably no longer be published, we condemn ourselves to dreamlessness in the name of moral high grounds of various kinds. Scheherazade may have survived again but what stories will she be able to tell in such a world?

4. Conclusion

Salman Rushdie’s recent fiction, texts that belong to what I call his “American phase”, plays with reconfigurations of space in order to cast political reflection and subversion into new forms. *Two Years, Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Days* revisits one of Rushdie’s most controversial topics, namely the clash between faith and reason. If the highly imaginative and playful at times way in which he dealt with this in *The Satanic Verses* had catastrophic consequences on the writer’s life, the more subtle way in which this is addressed in *Two Years...* has not drawn a lot of critical attention. This is not because Rushdie’s critical intentions have become more subdued but, perhaps, because his vehicle for rendering them has changed. However, a close reading of the hysterotopic construction of the novel reveals a clear departure from a typical postcolonial treatment in tones that are darker and more disturbing than what readers might be used to.

The investigation of the American hysterotopias needs to continue with the other two novels, *The Golden House* and *Quichotte*. With different intertextual anchors, they touch on other controversial issues in the US and globally, such as gender, for e.g. in *The Golden House*, or opioid and TV addiction in *Quichotte*. The shared element remains the American space, which, whether it shrinks or expands, closes or opens, facilitates a critical exploration of a different nature.

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