

STORYTELLING IN *THE ENCHANTRESS OF FLORENCE*

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Abstract

The paper will deal with the theme of the construction of identity through storytelling in Salman Rushdie's novel, The Enchantress of Florence. Rushdie's latest novel (2008) is a truly enthralling book. There are not many books written by contemporary authors (in English or any other language) proving such a talent (despite being worn out through overuse, the term talent cannot be avoided here) for telling tales. Almost thirty years after Midnight's Children, Rushdie writes a book which, while containing all the elements habitually pervading his novels (interest in encompassing, in the space of a novel, both the East and the West and dramatizing their encounter, discussion of religion and its connection with power, an obsession with history) manages to remain so 'light' in the best sense of the word, and to transmit, more than any other novel written so far by Rushdie, a sense of unadulterated joy, coming purely from the pleasure of following the tale.

Key-words: storytelling, cultural hybridization, magical realism, free speech, construction of identity

Introduction

Rushdie's latest novel, *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008) is a truly enthralling book. There are not many books written by contemporary authors (in English or any other language) proving such a talent (despite being worn out through overuse, the term *talent* cannot be avoided here) for *telling tales*. Rushdie's most acclaimed novel (*Midnight's Children*) was definitely impressive in this respect. Its professed love for telling stories was probably one of the key elements in the subsequent popularity of the novel, and the main reason why the book was so loved (not only admired for stylistic or other achievements). However, one cannot help closing the covers of *Midnight's Children* with a heavy feeling – the weight of the important matters that form the object of the book (such as the discussion of national identity and its

obvious political involvement) could not be taken in without consequences for the reader. Despite its exuberant style and its perspective – the novel is written from the point of view of a child – *Midnight's Children* is a serious book. It comes then as a total surprise that, almost thirty years later, Rushdie writes a book which, while containing all the elements habitually pervading his novels (interest in encompassing, in the space of a novel, both the East and the West and dramatizing their encounter, discussion of religion and its connection with power, an obsession with history) manages to remain so 'light' in the best sense of the word, and to transmit, more than any other novel written so far by Rushdie, a sense of unadulterated joy, coming purely from the pleasure of following the tale.

Free speech versus power politics

In *The Enchantress of Florence*, there is an episode that takes place in *The Tent of New Worship*, which seems to tackle precisely the idea of free speech versus power politics. The emperor Akbar says at some point 'Only when we accept the truths of death... can we begin to learn the truths of being alive' (*Enchantress* 80). To this, his guest, going by the name of *Mogor dell'Amore* – meaning 'a Mughal born out of wedlock', as we shall soon learn (*Enchantress* 93) – replies:

'Paradox, sire,' Mogor dell'Amore answered cheekily, 'is a knot that allows a man to seem intelligent even as it is trussing his brain like a hen bound for the pot. ...And so violence may become gentleness, and ugliness beauty, and any blessed thing its opposite. This is indeed a hall of mirrors, full of illusions and inversions. A man may wallow in the bogs of paradox until his last day without ever thinking a clear thought worthy of the name.' (*Enchantress* 80-81)

In plain terms, the stranger to Akbar's court did no less than question the emperor's intelligence, a fact that could easily cause his death. The emperor was furious at first and considered the most obvious option at hand – killing the offensive stranger. However, it is not an apology that saves the stranger – on the contrary, he continues by saying that: 'If I can die for such a thing in this city...then it's not a city worth living in. And besides, I understood that in this tent it was reason, not the king, that ruled.' (*Enchantress* 81)

The emperor laughs and, staying true to his initial plan – to create a place where one can speak his mind – pardons the stranger for his boldness. It is doubtful that such a thing could actually happen in a true king's world – but let us give Rushdie full powers over his

fictional world, and allow his utopia its proper space. To use Rushdie's words, Mogor dell'Amore plays high-stakes poker in the book and, up to this point, wins. The question that arises is, what does he have to offer, what is the stake, the currency, giving him the upper-hand in the game with the emperor? The answer to this question sends us back to one of the central topics of the book: *storytelling*.

Storytelling in *The Enchantress of Florence*

In *The Enchantress of Florence*, the need for the story is dramatized in a more poignant way than in any of Rushdie's previous books. One of the central characters in the novel, known by various names – Uccello di Firenze, Mogor dell'Amore and, finally, Niccolò Vespucci – travels half way across the world with a single purpose in mind: to tell his story.

Following a Scheherazade-like pattern, the story is what keeps the hero alive. However, each time he tries to tell the story, he is interrupted, so it is towards the second half of the book, and after many adventures, that he finally manages to tell the tale to his intended listener – Emperor Akbar. We should note that there are differences from the initial pattern to be found in Scheherazade. This time, the storyteller is not a woman, but a man. However, as we shall see, the trio Scheherazade-her sister Dinazade-the King finds its replica in the book. The king's counterpart would be the Emperor Akbar. As far as the two women are concerned, they can be identified in the pair the Enchantress-the Mirror (her very similar servant and maybe her true love in the book). Much later in the novel, the Enchantress will replace Jodha as the emperor's love interest (being another imaginary – or maybe magical – lover).

Let us see what the story of Mogor dell'Amore was. To put it in a nutshell, he had come to the court of Akbar to claim an unbelievable thing: he came to say that he was actually the blood-heir of the king, one of the Mughals, by bloodline, as son to the emperor's great-aunt. Of course, this is something extremely difficult to believe, especially due to the fact that there is a mistake in chronology in the Mogor's story: if his tale were true, he should have been much older, so there is a gap in time that he has to account for – a difficulty that adds to the first, more obvious, one: the storyteller is a blond, fair-skinned European come from Florence to claim that he is the heir of the Mughal Empire! A tall tale indeed. One would probably wonder by now what it was that stopped the king from beheading the liar to begin with. In this respect, the stories of Scheherazade and of Mogor dell'Amore coincide. What saved them both was a very simple skill: their talent for telling stories. The connection with the *Arabian Nights* is acknowledged by Rushdie in an interview. He says:

I think it's certainly the case that if you come out of that tradition of the wonder tale, you know, not just the *Arabian Nights* but the other anthologies of that sort, the *Hazar Afsana*, ..., the many different compendiums of fantastic tales that there are of these, I mean, it's a wonderful gift as a writer to have that as your heritage because it allows you to start from the position that stories are not true, you know. This is a simple thing we all forget all the time. These people did not exist, these things never happened, everything I'm telling you is a lie – wonderful starting point for a book. Instead of having to persuade everybody of the opposite of that, when you are in fact doing something called fiction. That's a kind of insanity, but this felt sanity, to know that stories were fabrications. And when you look at the fifteenth, sixteenth century literature of Europe, it's not at all dissimilar to that. If you look at the great romantic narrative poems written in the Renaissance, the you know, Boiardo's poem *Orlando innamorato*, Orlando in love, and followed by Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, these are poems which are full of ogres and witches and you know, fabulous elements, and it was what the European reader of the fifteenth and sixteenth century wanted as much as his or her Indian counterpart, you know. So I thought that I would take that as a starting point, the kind of book that people in the fifteenth and sixteenth century would have enjoyed reading, and then give that kind of a modern take, you know, because I can't avoid the fact that I'm writing from now, rather than from then. (*Rushdie – Eugenides* 32-33)

To start by saying 'everything I'm telling you is a lie' is indeed a wonderful starting point for a book. To try to convince people of the validity of the lie, to get them to 'suspend their disbelief' – this is a different story. What does Rushdie – through the Mogor's tale – use as a justification for the chronological mistake we have mentioned? The motivation he uses is seductively simple: the Mogor's mother, Qara Köz ('Lady Black Eyes') is an enchantress – in more direct terms, a witch. As such, she has the power to freeze time, and to keep her youth: this is how come she has a son who is so young 'at the wrong time'.

The Enchantress

The figure of the *enchantress*, or the witch, has not been chosen by accident. Starting from an explanation of the power magic had in people's lives in the late 15th - early 16th century, Rushdie goes on to argue his choice of the enchantress as a central figure in the novel:

What was very liberating imaginatively is that one of the real things about the world at this time, both in the East and the West, was a passionate belief in magic. People believed in magic in the way that we believe in doctors or scientists. And they believed in it not as something separate from their daily life, but as very much a part of it. If you fell in love with a girl, you went and got a love potion. If you wanted to do somebody down in business, you went and got a hex. People were using magic in an everyday way – it was an enormous part of the way in which they understood the world. They saw the world as a place permeated by magic, and therefore they believed that magic could give them power they might not have otherwise.

Also, there was a belief, quite widespread, that magic resided in women – the idea of the Witch. And here's another liberating discovery I made: it was more or less exactly at this moment that the image of the Witch stops being an ugly old hag, and turns into a beautiful young woman. If you look at the paintings and the drawings in the European tradition, you'll see in this period - the late 15th- early 16th century – the rather sudden transformation from imagery of the Witch as a crone, with boils and warts and all that, to the image of the Witch as the enchantress. She becomes a seductress, a temptress. In the Renaissance, artists return to the theme over and over again, and the enchantress is always painted as beautiful – naked, loose-haired, beautiful. So this idea of joining the erotic power of women with the occult power of women is something I found at the heart of the Renaissance imagination, and I thought I could use that. (*Rushdie – Mustich 6-7*)

The question here might be the following: would something that appealed to a 15th-early 16th century type of sensibility work – in novelistic terms – in the 21st century, the century of disbelief, virtually devoid of magic? Back then, people believed in magic. It was not such a long distance to travel from belief in magic and in the supernatural to belief in a story, however strange, a story like this one. Yet, we see, from the success of the novel we are discussing, that the taste for magic – if not the actual belief in it – seems to be alive and well in our allegedly cynical, dystopic century.

Magical realism

The taste for magic we have mentioned may be linked with the spread of *magical realism*. From Gabriel García Márquez's masterpiece – *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) – to more recent examples, such as Toni Morrison's moving novel, *Beloved*, magical

realism seems to be a source of extremely valuable novels. Do Rushdie's novels belong to this category? The widespread belief is that yes, this is one of their defining features. We tend to agree with the above-mentioned opinion. There are episodes in *The Enchantress of Florence* which remind one of events that might have happened in Márquez's Macondo. To give just an example, the edict given by the emperor (that everyone should be silent while the emperor is in town, so as not to disturb his rest) gives rise to situations whose wonderfully depicted hidden humor, combined with a healthy dose of the absurd, would not be out of place in one of the Colombian master's novels:

The mud city loved its emperor, it insisted that it did, insisted without words, for words were made of that forbidden fabric, sound. When the emperor set forth once more on his campaigns – his never-ending (though always victorious) battles against the armies of Gujarat and Rajasthan, of Kabul and Kashmir – then the prison of silence was unlocked, and trumpets burst out, and cheers, and people were finally able to tell each other everything they had been obliged to keep unsaid for months on end. *I love you. My mother is dead. Your soup tastes good. If you do not pay me the money you owe me I will break your arms at the elbows. My darling, I love you too. Everything.* (*Enchantress* 29)

It is the emperor's favorite wife, Jodha, who draws his attention to the injustice that is happening. By taking her advice, the emperor releases the city from its 'prison of silence' and helps it to return to normality.

Jodha

Jodha itself is one of the characters created in the magical realist vein. She is the emperor's favorite wife, as we have mentioned, despite the fact that (or maybe because of the fact that) she is the product of the emperor's imagination. An emperor, Rushdie claims, is a 'bewitcher of the real'. (*Enchantress* 43) This particular emperor's powers are so great that he can make a woman appear out of thin air. 'The creation of real life from a dream was a superhuman act' (*Enchantress* 47), Jodha thinks, and she is 'proof of how strong the magic was in him.' (*Enchantress* 47)

The emperor created her out of features borrowed from his other wives, and added some traits of his own. This had unexpected consequences: his 'real' wives 'hated her for the theft of their histories' (*Enchantress* 46). Thus, Rushdie stages a fight between the real and

the imaginary, disguised as a feud between the real wives of the emperor and the imaginary one – Jodha. This could be interpreted as follows: it is a way of saying that the imaginary ‘borrows’ characteristics of the real, as it relies on History for its existence, but is of a different ontological order. Is the real stronger than the imaginary? This is a matter open to debate. According to another character in the book (Birbal, Akbar’s Prime Minister and friend), the imaginary is indeed stronger, as it passes the test of time:

The first minister advised the emperor, ‘*Jahanpanah*, you must say to her that it is precisely *in the end* that her victory will be apparent to everyone, for in the end none of the queens will exit any more than she does, while she will have enjoyed a lifetime of your love, and her fame will echo down the ages.’ (*Enchantress* 45)

How strong is the imaginary in the fictional world created by Rushdie in *The Enchantress of Florence*? This time, there is no room for debate: the imaginary is given here the center-stage position.

There is another aspect that needs to be briefly discussed: Jodha may easily vanish into thin air when the emperor is not around to make her real; the implications of such a male-centered approach could be the subject of extended comments, especially if we notice the fact that this is not a singular situation: all the creators in the book are men, while their creations are women (the enchantress herself is no exception). This has been widely noticed, and seen as indicative of one of Rushdie’s weaknesses.

The power of the story

To return to the issue of the imaginary, and its strength as perceived in the novel: this is one of the many instances in which Rushdie stresses *the need for the story*. The story is viewed as the thing that literally makes a man. The characters in the book— just as Jodha when the emperor is away – feel that they disappear when they cannot tell their story.

There is a wonderful passage in *The Enchantress* in which Machiavelli’s friend Argalia, having been sent off in a boat from Andrea Doria’s ship, finds himself at sea in the midst of a raging battle. It is so foggy, no one can see anything. Here is the description of his predicament:

Land and sky began to feel like ancient fables. This blind floating was the universe entire. . . . He tried to tell himself stories to keep his spirits up but could only think of

frightening ones, a leviathan rising from the deep to crunch a boat in its gigantic jaws, the uncoiling of deep-sea worms, the breathing of underwater dragonfire. Then after a further time all the stories faded away as well and he was left without defenses or recourse, a lonely human soul drifting vaguely into the white. This was what was left of a human individual when you took away his home, his family, his friends, his city, his country, his world: a being without context, whose past had faded, whose future was bleak, an entity stripped of name, of meaning, of the whole of life except a temporarily beating heart. (*Enchantress* 175)

This being ‘without context’ (by context meaning his home, his family, his friends, his city, his country, his world) is absurd. What makes the being meaningful, what gathers all the elements of the context into a significant whole, is *the story*. We shall take as evidence for this statement one of the best-written passages in the book: Mogor dell’Amore is imprisoned for one of the dubious actions of his past. He recounts his imprisonment thus:

In the dark of the dungeon his chains weighed on him like his unfinished story... Movement was impossible. Light was a fantasy... He would die without telling his story. He found this thought intolerable and so it refused to leave him... All men needed to hear their stories told... The dungeon did not understand the idea of a story. The dungeon was static, eternal, black, and a story needed motion and time and light. He felt his story slipping away from him, becoming inconsequential, ceasing to be. He had no story. There was no story. He was not a man. There was no man here. There was only the dungeon, and the slithering dark. (*Enchantress* 91)

The absolute worst thing that can happen to a man (hell in the vision of a storyteller) is, therefore, to die without having been able to tell his story. You would die, Rushdie seems to say, an incomplete being, one whose meaning has not been clarified in the eyes of the others, and – more importantly, maybe – in your own eyes. Why is this so? One would assume that your story is best known to yourself, that your life is known to you, so why is there the need for more recounting?

This happens for the following reason: the telling of the story is not just a repetition, a revision of the past. You recount your past – your private history – not as it was, but as you remember it – selectively. You recompose it out of bits and pieces, so the process of storytelling is a creative process in itself: since you (willingly or not, this might be open to

debate) are the one who chooses the bits to remember and the ones to throw away, you become a substitute for the creator, and literally create your own story.

Rushdie says:

I am interested in joining things together. If you can create a kind of synthesis at the level of aesthetics – in *The Enchantress*, for instance, combining the picaresque and the Swiftian and the vaudevillian, the carnival-esque and the this and the that - it also helps to create, if you like, a kind of artistic echo of what the story is trying to do, which is to bring together different parts of the world. Showing that the world is no longer composed of little boxes is something that I try to do in my books ... Now, it seems to me, in the world in which we currently live, all the boxes open into other boxes, and here is connected to there, whether we like it or not. And to understand the story of over here, we also have to know something about the story of over there, otherwise our world makes no sense.

So I find myself trying to construct stories which do that... And isn't it interesting to see that the world actually goes together, that the world is not just made up separate and unconnected narratives?... And that what is revealed by joining things is often a similarity. You start off believing the world to be full of different things, and the discovery is how alike we all are. When you start looking at how people wearing different clothes, speaking different languages, believing different things, etc. – when you start looking at how they actually behave, you realize the similarities outweigh the differences. Even across time: we behave the same way now as we did then. We just have different tools. Human nature is the great constant. As someone says in the novel, 'It may be the curse of the human race, not that we're so unlike each other, but that we are so alike.' For me, story is the thing that ties all these strands together. (*Rushdie – Mustich* 11-12)

The lengthy passage quoted proves the central role of the story in the novel: it is the one thing that brings all the separate parts of the book together.

In the end of the paper, we shall take a look at one final element, connected to the idea of the story: the way *meaning* is constructed in the book. Rushdie says, 'I wanted to show that we live inside contexts and meanings, and that those contexts and meanings are what construct us and give us the ability to get through our lives' (*Rushdie – Mustich* 8-9). In the

book there is the constant question of how we come to mean something. There are two kinds of characters in the novel. He says:

First, there are characters who think that your life acquires meaning as the consequence of a journey - that you go somewhere, do something, conquer something or realize some achievement. That's how you become somebody: by leaving home, traveling. The Mughals came from what is now Kyrgyzstan to India and established an empire, and that's what they *meant*. On the other hand, there are characters in the book who think that's kind of absurd. They think, "Why would you leave home?" - because for them, home is the place where you mean something. In the Indian part of the book, you have the imaginary queen Jodha, who lives inside the palace and seems not to exist outside it. When she looks out in the courtyard and sees these travelers from various places, she thinks they're dumb. "Why would you do that?" she wonders. "Why would you leave the place where people know who you are and speak your language, the place where you have family and where you mean something, and come all the way across the world?" In the Italian part of the book, Ago Vespucci wonders the same thing. He believes everything he needs in the world is inside the walls of the city of Florence, so why would he ever leave? Everything he cares about is right there. I wanted the book to contain, if you like, this kind of dialogue about how human beings believe themselves to mean something, the idea that there are these two different ways that we think that we can achieve significance as human beings - the journey and the anti-journey, staying put. (*Rushdie – Mustich 9*)

This kind of dialogue is actually central to all of Rushdie's writings. We think that it is easy to see which side of the divide Rushdie belongs to: he is defined, as a writer, by the journey undertaken, by his traveling from the East to the West. This question about self-hood, identity, and meaning is also dramatized in the scenes featuring Akbar's court painter, Dashwanth, one of the most beguiling characters in the novel. When he and his fellow artists are working on the *Hamzanama*, the enormous series of paintings, commissioned by Akbar, of the legends detailing the adventures of Amir Hamza and his friends, Rushdie writes: 'As he was painting these, Mughal Hindustan was literally being invented. The union of the artists prefigured the unity of the empire, and perhaps brought it into being.' (*Rushdie – Mustich 9*) He seems to be saying that what works for individuals in finding meaning for themselves might also work for cultures at large. The painter then ends up, marvelously, painting himself

into his own picture. This is what Rushdie did by ‘painting himself’ (describing himself) when creating most of the characters in the book: the storyteller’s figure is transparent beneath the pages of the story.

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