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Hybrid Identities in the Novels of Salman Rushdie

In Salman Rushdie's latest novel *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999) the first-person narrator makes the following statement about the identity of one of the protagonists:

To her last day, I could always see in her the skittish, disintegrated creature she'd been when she first came to us, looking as if she might run away again at any moment. What a piece of jetsam she was then, what a casualty! Literally selfless, her personality smashed, like a mirror, by the fist of her life. Her name, her mother and family, her sense of place and home and safety and belonging and being loved, her belief in the future, all these things had been pulled out from under her, like a rug. She was floating in a void, denatured, dehistoricized, clawing at the shapelessness, trying to make some sort of mark. [...] She was a rag-bag of selves, torn fragments of people she might have become. Some days she sat crumpled in a corner like a string-cut puppet, and when she jerked into life you never knew who would be there, in her skin. (Rushdie 1999: 121-2)

From this statement it immediately becomes clear that "the old stable ego of the character" (D.H.Lawrence, qtd. in Richett 1994: 655) and therefore also the traditional approach of the self as being developed out of family or place is to be dismissed when analyzing Rushdie's novels. In order to show how Rushdie perceives identity, a closer look at an approach to identity by the social sciences seems to be particularly rewarding as it differentiates between personal and social identity.

Personal identity, according to the psycho-sociologist Erik Erikson, is an individual's "subjective sense of a continuous existence and a coherent memory" (Erikson 1968: 61). According to the sociologist Peter Wagner, who elaborates on Erikson's theory, this definition communicates several messages. Firstly, this means that identity is highly subjective and can only be gained through a self-reflexive process (cf. also Kamm/Schaffeld/Spies 1994: 12), secondly, that this process tries to develop a continuous existence, although there might have been breaks and faults in one's life, and thirdly, that the individual's mind tries to generate a coherent view of itself, i.e.

tries to identify past events as part of its own identity (Wagner 1998: 45). Social identity, by contrast, is the identification of one individual with the other, be it a smaller group, a religious community, or a nation (Wagner 1998: 45). What is important, however, is the dialectical relationship between these two aspects of the term identity. Social identity, on the one hand, necessitates the existence of several people's personal identities targeting the same objective. On the other hand, personal identity can often only be comprehended in terms of denial or acceptance of collective or cultural values, indicating that there is a gap, or call it *différance* in the Derridean sense, between society or parts of society and the individual self (Wagner 1998: 46). This difference means that in order to keep one's identity one will have to interpret oneself constantly, and by doing so one is constructing one's own identity. If identity is regarded as a construct (cf. Assmann/Friese 1998: 12-3; Motz 1999; Wagner 1998: 63-5), then the notion of easy coherence in life and continuity of the self is deceptive as there will always be ruptures and discontinuities. This means that in the postmodern or poststructuralist sense identity is to be regarded as an adaptable and thus unstable and fluid entity, and that identity is the product of continuing exchange and endless negotiations (Assmann/Friese 1998: 12).

1. Deconstruction of Identity in the Traditional Sense

1.1 Parents and Family/ Family Name

The family and especially the parents are traditionally seen as central to a person's identity. What can be found in most of Rushdie's novels, however, is that protagonists do not really know who their parents are, or if they do, they deliberately choose not to accept this insight.

Saleem Sinai in *Midnight's Children* makes the reader believe that his parents are Ahmed and Amina Sinai, a wealthy Indian couple, and in great detail he also describes their life and experiences. In the middle of the novel it becomes clear, though, that after the delivery the nurse Mary Pereira swapped two babies, so that Saleem is actually not the midnight's child Saleem Sinai, but the baby he was swapped for, i.e. Shiva. This means that Saleem would be the child of the poor busker Wee Willie Winkie and his wife Vanita. But nine months before the delivery Vanita had sexual intercourse with the Englishman William Methwold, so that Saleem turns out to be of Anglo-Indian descent (Rushdie 1982: 118). But this is something he constantly denies and he rather chooses to believe that Ahmed and Amina still are his parents (Rushdie 1982: 118). Thus Saleem deliberately makes up, or constructs, his parents and his descent, later also naming other potential parents: the nurse Mary Pereira and Nadir Khan (Rushdie 1982: 127), Mr Schaapsteeker (Rushdie 1982: 148-9) or Picture Singh (Rushdie 1982: 378).

More or less the same holds true for *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* where the protagonist and rockstar Vina Apsara can be seen as having five different parents. She is the American-born child of a Greek-American mother and an Indian father. After the divorce her mother marries again, this time an American by origin, but this marriage drives the mother mad and being utterly desperate she kills herself and the rest of the family, sparing only her daughter, who is then transferred to other American relatives at the West Coast. But they, having run out of money, contact the girl's Indian relatives who promise to take her as their daughter. As a result of having

been treated badly there she flees and finally arrives at the house of the I-narrator, whose parents Ameer and Vivvy are the last parents to accept her as their child.

This multiplication of parentage in *Midnight's Children*, as well as in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, is seemingly nonsensical but works in the way of a reverse pattern: by naming too many parents none seem to be plausible so that both protagonists can be viewed as being in a state of orphanhood and displacement. Accordingly, Juan-Navarro contends that the protagonists lack a symbolic centre (Juan-Navarro 1993: 269), which is also underlined by the fact that Saleem is constantly referring to a "hole in the centre of me" (e.g. Rushdie 1982: 192). Nevertheless both protagonists state that they can maintain their identity and they do so by constructing a coherent view of themselves.¹

This is also true for Moraes Zogoiby, the protagonist of *The Moor's Last Sigh* who is disinherited by his parents and who is finally also kicked out of the parental home:

I stumbled through them [the gates], giddy, disoriented, lost. I was nobody, nothing. Nothing I had ever known was of use, nor could I any longer say that I knew it. I had been emptied, invalidated; I was, to use a hoary but suddenly fitting epithet, *ruined*. I had fallen from grace, and the horror of it shattered the universe, like a mirror. I felt as though I, too, had shattered; as if I were falling to earth, not as myself, but as a thousand and one fragmented images of myself, trapped in shards of glass. (MLS, 278-279)

But despite this shattered vision Moraes has of himself at this moment he later is able to collect himself and accordingly claims to have found his true self without needing his parents any more: "I need no longer be what ancestry, breeding and misfortune had decreed, but could enter, at long last, into myself - my true self." (Rushdie 1995: 295)

The Ground Beneath Her Feet offers yet another aspect to the point that identity may also be seen as independent of one's family background. Apart from calling five different couples her parents, Vina Apsara, behaving according to the traditions of the music business, makes up her own name: "Vina" for an Indian musical instrument and also for being morphologically close to 'Divina', and "Apsara" who, according to a Hindu myth, is a beautiful nymph who is consorting with other mythical beings skilled in music and who is constantly tempting men (cf. Knappert 1991, 52). In the course of the novel it turns out that both parts of her chosen name will prove right for her behaviour: She is not only skilled in all music matters but also in seducing and consuming men. From this it seems possible that by constructing one's name one can also construct one's identity.

1.2 Place and Home

Another element of the traditional view of identity is that a person's character is determined by the environment she or he grew up or lives in. This is questioned in Rushdie's novels because most of the protagonists are migrants who do not see place as a feature by which a person's

character is moulded.

In *Grimus* the orphaned protagonist Flapping Eagle is forced to leave his tribe and wanders aimlessly around the world, and in *Midnight's Children* Saleem travels the whole Indian subcontinent physically as well as by his telepathic powers. *The Satanic Verses* offers another angle when the Indian protagonists Saladin Chamcha and Gibreel Farishta immigrate to England, go back to India in the end, and in between dream themselves into different times and places. Moraes Zogoiby in *The Moor's Last Sigh* travels India as well as Spain, and his father changes his appearance and character according to whether he deals with the world overneath or underneath, i.e. with the underworld (Rushdie 1995: 179-80).

What all these novels also have in common regarding the notion of place is firstly, that one can put one's roots in any culture, and secondly, that the respective culture one was brought up in cannot be easily pinned down either. For example, Cochin-born Moraes is of Jewish-Christian-Muslim descent and Vina Apsara is of Greek-Indian-American origin. This means that the notion of a single, fixed identity cannot easily be ascribed to place and cultural roots because these in themselves already are the product of diversity and intermingling (Bhabha 1994: 35).

2. Identity and Hybridity

Most of Rushdie's protagonists are migrants out of their own will, migrants who have to construct their personal identity in relation to the often entirely different social identity around them. They have chosen a specific country and culture, and then have the possibility to make themselves at home there and to put down roots. This is something Umeed Merchant, the Indian-born first-person narrator of *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, senses when he looks at his new house in New York:

So this is what they feel like, I thought: roots. Not the ones we're born with, can't help having, but the ones we put down in our own chosen soil, the you could say radical selections we make for ourselves. (Rushdie 1999: 414)

The question is, however, whether the migrant chooses, or selects to put down roots after all. This may not be the case, taking into account that his or her sense of personal identity might deviate considerably from the cultural identity of the appointed destination. What the migrant, usually being a member of a minority, senses is the difference and the tension between him- or herself and the Other, and it is up to the migrant how to deal with it. The two extremes possible are either identification with or denial of cultural values.

This theme is developed in *The Satanic Verses*. Whereas the Indian Gibreel Farishta tries to hold on to a consistent idea of selfhood deciding not to adapt to English society, his fellow countryman Saladin Chamcha chooses to do just that. In the course of the novel Gibreel is rewarded, represented by his obtaining a halo (Rushdie 1992: 142) and passing his bad breath on to Saladin (Rushdie 1992: 133), who is being punished for having selected adaptation: He grows horns (Rushdie 1992: 141) and finally also a hoof. The narrator comments on the migrant status of Gibreel and Saladin:

Should we even say that these are two fundamentally different *types* of self? Might we not agree that Gibreel, [...] - has wished to remain, to a large degree, *continuous* - that is, joined to and arising from his past; - [...] - so that his is still a self which, for our present purposes, we may describe as true... whereas Saladin Chamcha is a creature of *selected* discontinuities, a *willing* re-invention; his *preferred* revolt against history being what makes him, in our chosen idiom, 'false'? [...] - While Gibreel, to follow the logic of our established terminology, is to be considered 'good' by virtue of *wishing to remain*, for all his vicissitudes, at bottom an untranslated man. - But, and again but: this sounds, does it not, dangerously like an intentionalist fallacy? - Such distinctions, resting as they must on an idea of the self as being (ideally) homogeneous, non-hybrid, 'pure', - an utterly fantastic notion! - cannot, must not, suffice. (Rushdie 1992: 427)

This differentiation between good and evil with regard to the migrant's position towards adaptability is not only verbally deconstructed by the narrator. Later, back in India, Gibreel's problem of sulphurous halitosis returns with a vengeance on him, and he loses his girl-friend and his job before finally committing suicide (Rushdie 1992: 546), whereas Saladin becomes reconciled with his father, inherits his wealth and reunites with his girl-friend Zeeny Vakil (Rushdie 1992: 547).

Migrants on their quest for identity in their chosen new home can compare their identity with that of the other, and some of the migrants (like Saladin, for example) might be able to translate themselves culturally. If they choose to do so, they will have to form their identity in the tension between the already known and the new culture. Thus their identities become hybrid, meaning that their selves will be "composed of different or incongruous elements of heterogeneous sources" (OED qtd. in Fludernik 1998: 10). The term hybridity has its origins in 19th-century biological theory, denoting the crossing of two different species (Young 1995: 12). Later, especially in colonial times, the term was used pejoratively for half-breeds, but in the broader sense the term nowadays alludes to the contact between two or more cultures, between the self and the Other (Bhabha 1994: 35; Fludernik 1998: 11-2). The relationship between these two is dialectical, it is an irreconcilable contradiction and a difference that can never be solved, but one cannot be without the other either. This tension is what Bhabha terms "the third space" (Bhabha in an interview with Rutherford 1990: 211; Bhabha 1994: 37) and he uses this notion to "deconstruct the boundary between the self and other" (Fludernik 1998: 51). This space between cultures is the one in which migrants move and out of which they will have to develop their personal identity. This idea of migrants' identities is exactly what most of Rushdie's novels elaborate (cf. also Goetsch 1997: 143). In his essay "Imaginary Homelands" - the term itself being an alternative image for the third space - Rushdie subsequently talks about migrants' identities:

Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times that we fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for the writer to

occupy. (Rushdie 1991: 15)

What the migrant can gain from his oscillation between the two (or more) cultures is a newness which can only be achieved by bringing together two seemingly incompatible positions. And this is also the answer to one of the narrator's central questions in *The Satanic Verses*: "How does newness come into the world?" (e.g.: Rushdie 1992, 1992: 8). By breaking up dichotomies, by bringing together two dissimilar views, by joining the self with the Other.

It has to be stated, however, that migrants may also face serious problems and eventually even the loss of parts of their identity. Problems will inevitably arise if the majority puts pressure on the migrant, and the results of oppression are vividly depicted in Saladin's brutal arrest by several immigration officers (Rushdie 1992: 157-164). And by gaining something new, undoubtedly something old has to be left behind. This, for example, is powerfully outlined by the frequent references to incidents taking place in airplanes, a metaphor for crossing Bhabha's third space, in Rushdie's novels:

In *The Satanic Verses* Saladin and Gibreel fall out of an exploding aircraft towards England, the fall symbolizing their fall from grace as well as the fall of Lucifer², and some of their transformations already start during their fall.

In *The Moor's Last Sigh* Moraes boards an aircraft and notices that his old understanding of his personal identity will probably not work any more: You will see that I entered an unfamiliar state of mind. The place, language, people and customs I knew had all been removed from me by the simple act of boarding this flying vehicle; and these, for most of us, are the four anchors of the soul. (Rushdie 1995: 383)³

And finally in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* Ormus, the lover and future husband of Vina Apsara, "sheds his old skin [...] like a snake" (Rushdie 1999: 250) when flying from India towards London. Strikingly, the whole chapter dedicated to the flight is termed "Membrane", suggesting that all migrant travellers, by having to penetrate this membrane, can only save some parts of their identity and thus have to leave back some other parts:

[...] detached from the indifferent earth, he feels a certain resistance in the air. Something fighting back against the aircraft's forward movement. As if there's a stretchy translucent membrane across the sky, an ectoplasmic barrier, a Wall. [...]. But it's so springy, this invisible restriction, it keeps pushing the airplane back, boeing!, boeing!, until at last the *Mayflower* breaks through, it's through! Sunlight bounces off the wing into his bleary eye. And as he passes that unseen frontier he sees the tear in the sky, [...]. He intuits that every bone in his body is being irradiated by something pouring through the sky-rip, a mutation is occurring at the level of the cell, of the gene, of the particle. The person who arrives won't be the one who left, or not quite.

(Rushdie 1999: 253)⁴

This also compares with the notion of the migrant's (cultural) translation. The term translation, as Rushdie states, etymologically comes from the Latin word for 'bearing across':

Having been borne across the world, we [migrants] are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained.
(Rushdie 1991: 17).

3. Conclusion

It has become clear that almost all of Rushdie's novels suggest that an individual can never restrain from being influenced by cultural identity. Accordingly, it is not surprising that Moraes speaks about "a self without walls" (Rushdie 1995: 288) and finally even draws the parallel between 14th century multi-ethnic Granada and its Alhambra and the "need for flowing together, for putting an end to frontiers, for the dropping of the boundaries of the self" (Rushdie 1995: 433). Saleem Sinai, too, alludes to the notion of hybrid identity when he speaks of the following:

O eternal opposition of inside and outside! Because, a human being, inside himself, is anything but a whole, anything but homogeneous; all kinds of everywhichting are jumbled up inside him, and he is one person one minute and another person the next. (Rushdie 1982: 236-7)

His later approach towards defining his personal identity can also only succeed by relating the self to the environment:

Who what am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I have gone which would not have happened if I had not come. [...]. I repeat for the last time: to understand me, you'll have to swallow a world. (Rushdie 1982: 383)

Other terms that frequently come up in Rushdie's novels are impurity, intermingling, transformation, mongrelization, mélange, hotchpotch, pastiche and finally palimpsest: What Rushdie has to say about *The Satanic Verses* thus certainly holds true for most of his novels.

The Satanic Verses celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the

transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. *Mélange*, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is *how newness enters the world*. (Rushdie 1991: 394)

All these terms show that in Rushdie's novels identity is not a unitary entity but rather a fragment, not stable but fluid, not single but multiple, not coherent or continuous but hybrid. This does not mean that an individual cannot think him- or herself coherent, one has to accept, however, certain discontinuities and ruptures in one's biography. Thus, personal identity has to be seen as a never-ending process of negotiations with oneself and one's environment. Here Salman Rushdie goes beyond the theoretical approach outlined in the beginning: today identity can certainly be the product of cross-border or even cross-continental exchange.

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Notes

¹ In the case of Saleem Sinai, this coherence is mainly achieved by the act of writing: "I must work fast, faster than Scheherazade, if I am to end up meaning - yes, meaning - something" (Rushdie 1982: 9) whereas Vina Apsara achieves this goal by singing. Thus they both construct their identity by means of creating pieces of art, i.e. cultural constructs, and they thus enhance the constructedness of their identity.

² The carrier is named *Bostan* (Rushdie 1992:4) after one of the Gardens of Eden.

³ In this context Schülting's view of Moraes as being "the most hybrid of characters" in the novel holds true as he "possesses not two, but multiple identities, or, as he says, none at all" (Schülting 1998: 248-9).

⁴ In the context of that chapter it would also be possible to speak of 'cultural osmosis', denoting that the contact between cultures is based on negotiation and the process of mutual give and take within the third space.

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