

## THE REALITY OF THE ALIEN: AN EXPLORATION OF SALMAN RUSHDIE'S NOVELS

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Saleem Sinai betrays his fear and his reason for writing an account of his life when he says, «I must work fast, faster than Scheherezade, if I am to end up meaning —yes , meaning— something.»<sup>1</sup> This urgent need to mean something springs from his consciousness of being an alien, of being in some way different from those that surround him. A similar sense of «alienness» and necessity to find meaning are found in all three of Salman Rushdie's novels, *Grimus*, *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*.<sup>2</sup> In these novels Rushdie attempts more than just to tell a story or to comment on the problems of fiction. There is an evident preoccupation with reality, history and truth, and meaning, which in fact amount to a questioning of man's rôle in this world. In *Grimus* we find the juxtaposition of an authoritarian figure and a saviour figure, Flapping Eagle. In *Midnight's Children* Saleem aspires to becoming the saviour of his people, believing that this commitment will give meaning to his life. And in *Shame*, the protagonist Omar Khayam is intricately involved with the creators of Pakistani history. The necessity to create meaning is of course characteristic of fiction today: «To write, then, is to produce meaning, and not reproduce a pre-existing meaning.»<sup>3</sup> And meaning can only come from words. It is words that enable the protagonist of *Grimus* to create Calf Island. And it is words which permit Rushdie to create a marvellous sub-continent which even a mind intent on realism can accept.

I wish in this paper to approach Rushdie's creation and to examine its inhabitants and their lives, their reality and their alienation. I hope to avoid comparisons with Gabriel García Márquez and with Gunter Grass, for this has been done before<sup>4</sup> and it does not seem to me that further analysis in that direction will deepen our understanding of Rushdie's world. Tariq Ali's statement «Danzig/Gdansk and Macondo are not Bombay» conveys my personal attitude very nicely, though I must admit it is extremely tempting to compare Oscar to Saleem Sinai: neither is the son

of his father and both attempt to cope with physical deformities by elevating themselves to the rank of unacknowledged saviours of their people.

There is of course also the Shandyan tale of noses, but whether we will discover the meaning of Saleem's nose by probing that comparison is doubtful, as is the utility of comparing Saleem's silver spitoon to Oscar's tin drum. Rushdie has himself admitted that similarities do exist between his novels and others, but since he appears to attach no importance to these comparisons, I will limit myself to the novels themselves.

Rushdie's first novel, *Grimus*, was published in 1977, and the author affects a superior indifference when talking of it.<sup>6</sup> It did not receive the best of reviews. The Times Literature Supplement was not quite as caustic as it sometimes is, and David Wilson writing on this «ambitious, strikingly confident first novel» asks only «whether (Salman Rushdie's) dryly entertaining intellectual conceit is anything more than an elaborate statement of the obvious...»<sup>7</sup> This intellectual conceit gives rise to a science fiction novel in which a utopian island is constructed, and then, once it has become apparent that the toll on the inhabitant's intellectual dignity and on their happiness exerted by the maintenance of the fiction is too high, «deconstructed». This deconstruction is brought about by the protagonist Flapping Eagle who recreates the Island, but without the Rose that had linked it to other dimensions. The Rose though, was «not a rose at all».<sup>8</sup> It was called a Stone Rose but consisted of a few slabs of interlocking stones which formed something resembling a wheel. To draw attention to the literary connotations attending the rose and the wheel would be to insult the reader and would probably not lead to exciting discoveries. However, I find it impossible to refrain from just mentioning that Umberto Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose* is not about a rose, and that its treasures are held in a secret labyrinth to which access is very carefully guarded. The Stone Rose in *Grimus* is kept «at the heart of the house» which was of a «crazy shape». The narrator tells us that, «Its labyrinthine excesses fogged the brain to such an extent that this small room went completely unnoticed».<sup>9</sup> William of Baskerville and his young assistant Adso had trouble finding the secret room in the Library labyrinth. Perhaps the intellectual conceit of *Grimus* goes further than it would seem.

When Mr. Grib realizes his wife has been unfaithful, the whole structure of his universe topples and he is stricken by dimension fever. His collapse under the burden of a reality he had failed to allow for and his subsequent death prove to the inhabitants of K. that their immortality is but an illusion. Thus begins the desconstruction of Calf Isand. *Grimus*

shows how important faith, or the readiness to believe in our own constructs is, but also questions the reality of the myths we create, and the rationality of our cowardly submission to them. (And yet we should not forget that in *Shame* myth is validated. The Russian china tea-set considered a family myth in chapter one is seen to exist when in the last chapter Omar Khayam returns home.<sup>10</sup>)

The content of *Grimus* poses interesting —and unanswered— questions on myth and reality. Also of interest is the question posed by the narrative technique of this novel. The story is told by an unknown omniscient narrator. It is precisely the fact that he is unknown that is troubling, since we assume that when «The Mountain of Grimus danced the Weakdance to the end»<sup>11</sup> all its inhabitants disappeared with it. Or perhaps Flapping Eagle survived? This hypothesis would account for his first person appropriations of the narrative at the beginning and the end of the novel which are not too satisfactory from the reader's point of view. There seems to be no intrinsic reason for the switches from third to first person narrative, though at times the first person narrator, Flapping Eagle, is used for direct comment on the action, as in : «Hot on the heels of this thought came the notion that *he* didn't mind. *I* was an adaptable sort of man.»<sup>12</sup> (my underlining) However, this is not true of all his intrusions—he is also used to narrate his own actions:«I saw automobiles and launderettes and juke-boxes and all kinds of machines and peoples dressed in dusty clothes with a kind of despair in their eyes.»<sup>13</sup>

This fragmentation of the narrating persona does not add to our understanding of the characters or of their actions, but should not create undue difficulties for the reader. If we compare this technique to that used by Mario Vargas Llosa in *Historia de Mayta* we will see how constant changes of narrator may in fact confuse the inattentive reader, since the Spanish gives no clues as easy to spot as the English personal pronouns, and the reader has to rely on tense and on attitude. The frequently contradictory views expressed by the different narrators serve to underline the multiplicity of possible interpretations of history and reality.

The use of a foreign dimension and of an unknown time sphere in *Grimus* distance the reader from the happenings, and the use of two narrators possibly enhances this distancing, making it virtually impossible for the reader to identify with the protagonist who is presented as a divided person, unsure of himself and uncertain as to his aims and goals in life. He is shown as an alien in his own tribe, and having drunk the elixir of life, wanders the earth in search of nothing in particular. It is only gradually that he realizes he is in fact searching for a means of outwitting his unwanted immortality. We are told that, «Flapping Eagle was an empty

man, a shell without a form». <sup>14</sup> Such an aimless protagonist is hardly worth identifying with, and yet he reveals himself to be a humane person prepared to sacrifice his own existence —albeit worthless— to save the inhabitants of Calf Island from the power of Grimus. His split personality takes on yet other tones in the last moments of his fight for the destruction of the island, when Grimus exposes him to the Subsumer. As a result, Grimus and Flapping Eagle become one, though they maintain their physical individuality. From this moment on we have to deal with I-Grimus and with I-Eagle. But again this is carefully marked in the text and the reader should have no problems in accepting the new device which appears in the final pages and adds suspense to Flapping Eagle's dilemma whether to destroy the Island or attempt to reconstruct it, but without the rose.

The tone of *Grimus* also merits a brief mention. It is undoubtedly the voice of a speaker, a teller of tales, and contrast is made between the speech of the two main characters, Mr. Virgil Jones and Flapping Eagle. The pomposity of the first is offset by the conversational, colloquial tone of the «younger» man. Such a juxtaposition of idiosyncratic speech modes can be found at many points in the novel, and the following can serve as an example:

«'As far as I know' he (Virgil Jones) said, 'the answer to both your questions is that there are no such certain ways and means of achieving either of your aims'.  
'O hell', he (Flapping Eagle) said. 'I'll do it anyway. Why not?'<sup>15</sup>

The humour here is not only in the register used by the speakers but also in the attitude towards the task to be performed. For Virgil Jones the task is a moral necessity; for Flapping Eagle it is an escape from the immortality which he no longer desires —if ever he did. This difference in values and attitudes to life is reflected in the speech habits of the two and the pomposity of Virgil Jones, since it borders on the comic, leads the reader to suspect that the author's sympathies lie more with Flapping Eagle, the displaced, lonely, aimless wanderer who is born to bring salvation in the form of death-or-release-from-existence.

A first reading of *Midnight's Children*, Salman Rushdie's second novel and winner of the 1981 Booker Prize, gives the impression that the author, seeing no possibilities in the technique and content of *Grimus*, decided to make a fresh start. Instead of the imaginary, reduced world of the island, we have the real world of India and Pakistan and instead of a practically immortal Flapping Eagle for protagonist, we have the sadly human Saleem Sinai. *Midnight's Children* has been fitted into the neat slot

of «magical realism». To a European reader though, it does not seem to deal with realities at all, but with a world of fantasy and dream, and yet, Rushdie has said that Indian readers consider it to be a novel portraying the life they know. This was his intention in writing *Midnight's Children*. He wanted to portray India and give expression to the teeming multitudes that populate that vast sub-continent since he felt that so far, nobody had written a novel which revealed the true spirit of India. All the novels published had been «delicate»; a comment we can understand better if we think of R. K. Narayan or Ruth Praver Jhabvala's novels, which deal with small, limited sections of the Indian community. Rushdie felt the need to encompass everything and everyone, the different religions, races, colours... He decided that to do this, he would tell thousands of stories, which the narrator would juggle with, like a magician throwing the balls into the air skilfully catching them again. Thus in *Midnight's Children* all the creeds and colours of India and Pakistan, all the social classes, are incorporated, from the privileged Mustapha Aziz and Major Zulfikar to the slums and squalor of the magician's ghetto. The narrator is tireless in his desire to include everything, until, when the cracks in his body show him there is very little time left, he decides to be more selective, to leave out the story of the man defecating outside his window:

«Once, when I was more energetic, I would have wanted to tell his life-story; the hour and his possession of an umbrella, would have been all the conditions needed to being the process of weaving him into my life, and I have no doubt that I'd have finished by proving his indispensability to anyone who wishes to understand my life and benighted times».<sup>16</sup>

The narrator chooses to forget about this one man, but even so, he has mentioned him, has given him a place in this picture of India, in which he includes those infected by the disease of optimism and those infected by the reality of pessimism.

Both reality and pessimism are key in the novel. Salman Rushdie denies the charge of pessimism, but I feel that the very fact of writing about as if it were a disease is significant in itself. No one is immune. Salem's grandfather contracted «a highly dangerous form of optimism»<sup>17</sup> when a still a young man, and the whole story of *Midnight's Children* is in some way a result of that «lingering disease».<sup>18</sup> Rushdie's attitude towards our age can be defined by his praise of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, when he says,

«In an age when it often appears that we have all agreed to believe in entropy, in the proposition that things fall apart, that history is the irreversible process by which everything gradually gets worse,

the unrelieved pessimism of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* goes some way towards explaining the book's status as a true myth of our times.<sup>19</sup>

In *Midnight's Children* we do indeed find that things are falling apart. The protagonist Saleem is literally disintegrating, cracking, just as his grandfather had before him. His family, his ambitions, his country are all caught up in what certainly seems an «irreversible process by which everything gradually gets worse». Progress and tradition are at war in *Midnight's Children* and there is no possible victory. Whichever side wins, something of value will be lost.

There is still more pessimism in *Midnight's Children* - in Salman Rushdie's treatment of the family. Since Indian life revolves around the family, in order to give expression to the teeming multitudes of his homeland, he has made the family the main unit of the novel. But for other, more literary reasons, he destroys this family and mocks its very essence.<sup>20</sup> When the protagonist finally gets himself born on page 116, the reader learns that the family he/she has been reading about is not the protagonist's family after all. Saleem is not the child of this parents, comparatively well-to-do, educated Indian citizens, but the child of the wife of a street singer - the bastard of a departing English gentleman in fact. We echo Padma's horrified reaction, «Your name is not your own?»<sup>21</sup> Also, to ridicule even further the concept of the family, Saleem's son is not his own, but the son of his «not-parents» son... So though we may feel that the novel ends on an optimistic note in that young elephant-eared Aadam, (the son of Shiva who was named after the god of procreation and destruction) will continue the family fortunes and traditions, there is no solid family unit to back him. In fact, there is no family left. As if not content with ruining the integrity of the family by means of Mary's interference, the author bombs its members and kills them all, except for Saleem. If the family is Salman Rushdie's image of India, the optimism inherent in the figure of the son is definitely diseased.

Rushdie counters the charge of pessimism in the following terms: «The form (of the novel) —multitudinous, hinting at the infinite possibilities of the country— is the optimistic counterweight to Saleem's personal tragedy.»<sup>22</sup> But the narrator, as I have already pointed out, feels exhausted and unable, by the end, to incorporate new material into his novel, thus if the process of inclusion is to «echo the Indian talent for non-stop regeneration»<sup>23</sup> it appears that this talent is wearing thin. Tariq Ali, in his review of *Midnight's Children* is not convinced by Rushdie's denial of the charge of pessimism and believes that each new story tends to reinforce the pessimism rather than disperse it.<sup>24</sup>

The destruction of the family in *Midnight's Children* has another effect. No only does it destroy the concept of the stable family and the possibility of continuity, and not only does it mock the conventions of the novel, it also destroys the concept of reality, the validity of truth and names. Saleem is not Saleem Sinai, strictly speaking he is Shiva and should bear the name of that knock-kneed monster. When Padma, horrified, cries out that his name is not his own, Saleem is most distressed and replies, «What do you mean, not my own?»<sup>25</sup> We of course, could add, «a rose by any other name...» However even more important than this exchange on names, is Saleem's comment on his family's reaction when they learn of the baby-switch. His parents (and remember that his father had thrown him out of the house when it was suspected that Amina had borne him a son by another man) continued to think of themselves as his parents and «we simply could not think our way out of our pasts.»<sup>26</sup> Truth, in this case, gives way to an accepted untruth.

When talking about *Midnight's Children*, Salman Rushdie makes it very clear that his vision of India is but an imaginative reconstruction. Though he is a historian, or perhaps precisely because he is a historian, he does not attempt to write history, or even a historical reconstruction of India and Independence and Partition. His vision of truth is ambiguous, influenced by his own experience and he is aware that all truth is subject to personal interpretation. He says,

«Writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by an urge to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge -which gives rise to profound uncertainties-that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost: that we will in short create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.»<sup>27</sup>

In *Midnight's Children* Salman Rushdie reflects what the spirit of India is for him and projects a vision that the reader, or at least, the European reader, has no trouble in identifying as a world somewhere between fact and fiction. This perception of truth as subjective and open to different interpretations makes it possible for the European reader to accept it, just as García Márquez's vision of Macondo as a place belonging to the realm of magic and fairy tale makes it possible for us to identify with it.

In *Midnight's Children*, truth never has an absolute value. «But although my mother was right when she made her public announcement, she was also wrong.»<sup>28</sup> is a typical statement which shows the ambiguity

inherent in all facts. And when in his account of the war of Bangladesh, Saleem says «it was not true because it could not be true»<sup>29</sup> he is simply stating his belief in the power of man's convictions to change history. Only what we wish to believe in can exist, and thus we remake the past and force it to conform to our picture of reality. And governments can do the same. So Rushdie is in fact writing about the creation of reality by man, a theme begun in *Grimus*, but less successfully.

As we have seen, Saleem's family and their vicissitudes contribute to create an effect of loss of reality. Certainly, reality as such is presented as non-existent. This effect is heightened by the narrative technique of the novel, in spite of various devices which seemingly make the novel more «real». Rushdie creates a narrator, Saleem, and a listener, Padma. Padma is a very down-to-earth creation, who mocks Saleem's flights of fantasy, and simply wants to hear the story of this life. She disapproves whenever the story overreaches itself, and what most annoys her, and causes her to disappear for some time is Saleem's assumption that she loves him. At times, she finds it almost impossible to believe his story: «The midnight children shook even Padma's faith in my narrative,»<sup>30</sup> says Saleem dejectedly and then reduces her to tears by his haughty behaviour. This little episode ends with significant words:

«Still, I've had a valuable warning. It's a dangerous business to try and impose one's view of things on others. Padma, if you're a little uncertain of my reliability, well, a little uncertainty is no bad thing.»<sup>31</sup>

Saleem is here warning not only Padma but also us, the reading public, that he expects us to accept his story since he seems to have «found from somewhere the trick of filling in the gaps in my knowledge». <sup>32</sup> He will tolerate some doubt and disbelief but no more. The introductory pages of the novels are dedicated to establishing his credentials; he insists on dates and times and on specifying the exact moment of an event, and he rejects the traditional fairy story beginning of «Once upon a time». Later on he confesses that he has got certain dates wrong, but considers his errors to be insignificant. The reader may, like Padma, be understanding and say, «Everybody forgets small things»<sup>33</sup> or we may feel that our grip on the world the novel is presenting is loosened, that we have been tricked into believing when we should have known better. We were of course first tricked into thinking we were reading about Saleem's family, and now the realization that perhaps Saleem is not trustworthy makes us question the whole story. Saleem throws doubt on his own words and on his knowledge of facts when he makes comments such as the following: «I have sniffed out a strange discontent in Padma, exuding its enigmatic spoor from her eccrine (or apocrine) glands,»<sup>34</sup> And we feel that the exact fact or name is irrelevant.



Not only are Saleem's words doubted. His very existence is questioned by the continual change of person. Why should the narrator refer to Saleem as «he» at one point and then as «I»? Is Saleem the narrator? Or is there a narrator and Saleem? This change of person occurs frequently in the same sentence, as in : «mutilated fingers and monks' tonsures no longer seemed like good enough excuses for the way in which he, I, had been treated.»<sup>35</sup> The juxtaposition of the two persons in this sentence seems to be pointed to the fact that Saleem is searching for his identity. The bombing which killed the remaining members of his family also caused him to forget his name. Parvati the Witch recognising him calls him by name and thus restores it to him, but in order to transport him to safety, she uses her powers to make him disappear. Saleem is dematerialized in a wicker basket and asks himself «Who what am I?»<sup>36</sup> From this passage it seems that the changing of narrative person reflects Saleem's own uncertainty as to his existence, his identity. At other times this is not so clear and the movement from first to third person appears to be quite arbitrary, as if Saleem wanted to distance himself from the action, to stand back and observe, as Flapping Eagle did at times. We find, for example,

«Saleem invaded Pakistan armed only with a hypersensitive nose; but, worst of all, he invaded *from the wrong direction...* Sailing ignorantly against the winds of history, I reached Karachi from the south-east, and by sea.»<sup>37</sup> (author's italics)

Here we are given the fact of the «invasion» in the third person and it is made more «real», humorously so, by the rather literary sounding «winds of history» followed by the somewhat puny «I». Similarly, in the following example,

«Saleem Sinai saw his son for the first time, he began to laugh helplessly..., and although Picture Singh, scandalised by my laughter...»<sup>38</sup>

The sentence begins on a formal tone, using first and second name, and we are led to expect an official occasion of the greatest importance, which is then deflated by the introduction not only of helpless laughter, but also by the fact that this laughter comes from «me», and not a distant third person whom we know only by his full name. Thus though in these cases, the change of narrating person lends a comic tone, the main effect is to distance the narrator from Saleem Sinai. This movement from third to first person enhances the mystery and confusion of the multitude that is India and mirrors the baby switch of the first part of the novel. It also shatters any illusion that the reader may entertain as to the existence of the protagonist Saleem. There is no such person. The author is drawing

attention to his own person as creator and allowing Saleem to take second, or even third place. The same effect is found in *Grimus*, but there, only the customary suspension of disbelief is required of the reader. The author does not attempt to prove the existence of Flapping Eagle and Mr. Jones by elaborate statements as to intention and time. We know that Calf Island is a figment of the imagination. In *Midnight's Children*, however, we are dealing with a real sub-continent. We know that it does exist; most of us, simply, do not know what it is like. We accept the Sinai and the Azis families as possible examples of Indian families and their lives as representative of life in India. Saleem could be a «real» little boy. Thus there is an inversion in these two novels—in the first we deal with a purely imaginative land which is presented as real, or at least its existence is not doubted, whereas in the second we have a real country presented as a dream. Flapping Eagle did not exist, Saleem could have existed—might exist even now, so the author goes to pains to show that he is an imaginary creation. With Flapping Eagle this was not necessary and therefore the change from third to first person is simply an unnecessary device.

There is humour in *Midnight's Children* not only from the switch from third to first person but also in the self-mocking tone that is of course reminiscent of *Grimus*. Saleem mocks himself and his deficiencies and deformities in a way that reminds us of Flapping Eagle's or the narrator's attitude not only to himself but also to Mr. Virgil Jones. In the opening paragraphs of *Grimus* we find the following description of Mr. Jones and Dolores O'Toole: «He was tripping goat fashion down the downward spiral of the path, trailing in the nimbler wake of a hunchback crone.»<sup>39</sup> The picture brought to our minds by an obese man «tripping goat fashion» cannot fail to evoke a smile, and the language used is that of Mr. Jones himself, the pedantic «down the downward spiral» being just the sort of thing Virgil Jones would say in his search for the origin of all things. The first pages of *Midnight's Children* as the story-teller draws us into his world, remind us immediately of this humorous vision of oneself:

«I, Saleem Sinai, later variously called Snotnose, Stainface, Baldy, Sniffer, Buddha and even Piece-of-the-Moon, had become heavily embroiled in Fate—at the best of times a dangerous sort of involvement. And I couldn't even wipe my own nose at the time.»<sup>40</sup>

Saleem is forever commenting on his shortcomings and deformities, explaining them at length, making himself out to be inferior, unworthy of the love of his parents or the attention of his uncle. He is in fact an alien—someone who does not fit in, who is different from those around him and who does not wish to impose himself on them. His self-abasement and

self-mockery seem characteristic of novels on India. The protagonist of R. K. Narayan's *The Bachelor of Arts* is afraid to assert himself, and we find the same fear in *The Householder* by Ruth Praver Jhabvala, who is not Indian by birth and who must have been struck by the apparent humility of the Indian's behaviour. In Saleem's case, the humility is certainly only apparent. He has learnt to give this impression out of necessity, in imitation of his country with which he identifies so closely. When as an innocent child he declared that he heard voices inside his head, he met with contempt and disbelief from his family, and a shattering blow on the head which impaired his hearing for life.

Saleem desperately wants to please his family. He is acutely conscious of being a cause of displeasure, of somehow meriting the lack of love he experiences. He puts this down to his ugliness and deformities since his is «a country where any physical or mental peculiarity in a child is a source of deep family shame.»<sup>41</sup> Yet though he adopts a placatory attitude towards his parents and is careful to always please them he is forever on the lookout for possible fathers. In fact, he does not know who his father is. All the following are at some point shown to be candidates; Ahmed Sinai, Wee Willie Winkie, Nadir Khan, Hanif Aziz, Picture Singh, Schaapsteker, and General Zulfikar. The omniscient narrator shows the readers that the real father was Mr. Methwold. But, how can Saleem possibly know this? Once again, we must decide whether we wish to believe or not. As for Saleem's mother, the possibilities are just as numerous; Amina Sinai, Vanita, Mary, Parvati who made him disappear and then returned him to life... The whole story is «full of potential mothers and possible fathers»<sup>42</sup> wafting in and out.

However, it seems that at the end, Saleem has found his «real» mother in Mary. When he arrives at the pickle factory, the virginal Mary, who had successfully escaped from the ghost of her early love, Joseph, by confessing her midnight crime, welcomes Saleem with open arms and the words: «O Jesus sweet Jesus, Baba my son.»<sup>43</sup>

Though Saleem undoubtedly sees himself as an alien, not only in his family but also in his country, he does consider himself to be its saviour. This is clear not only from his deep identification with India and from his Midnight Children's Conference, but also more specifically from his decision in the last part of the novel to save India. The fact that his coming was foretold by a fortune teller allows us to expect the birth of an important figure. Added to that, newspapers printed his photograph and so we are not really surprised when Saleem decides to save his country. However, when he explains his «historic mission to rescue the nation from her fate»<sup>44</sup> to his Uncle Mustapha he does not meet with recognition and

help but becomes a prophet in the wilderness and is finally deprived of his last family tie, free at last to return to the poverty and exile that will lead him back to his true mother, Mary.

I have already pointed out that *Midnight's Children* has been likened to *Cien Años de Soledad* and fitted into the slot that «magical realism» conveniently offers. I have also indicated that *Midnight's Children* and *Grimus* are about reality and its questionable existence. Rushdie presents us with a world he has created, which is in some ways a «real» world. He destroys the illusion of reality, that is of the reality of what *could* be real and of what our concept of the world admits as possible. Little Saleem Sinai, the strange boy with a big nose living in Buckingham Villa is not a creation of fantasy. Yet we are more likely to believe in his voices and in his exploits in the Sundarbans, than we are to accept his existence in «real» India. Presumably, this is why the novel is considered to be in the tradition of «magical realism». It seems worthwhile to turn to Borges's «El Arte Narrativo y la Magia» in the hope that he will help us understand why the washing-chest and the incredible rains are so easy to accept in *Midnight's Children*. According to Borges the magical is firmly rooted in our world. He says,

«la magia es la coronación o pesadilla de lo causal, no su contradicción. El milagro no es menos forastero en ese universo que en el de los astrónomos. Todas las leyes naturales lo rigen, y otras imaginarias». <sup>45</sup> (magic is the coronation or the nightmare of the causal, not its contradiction. The miracle is no less alien in this universe than in that of the astronomers. It is governed by all the natural laws, and by other imaginary ones. (My translation.))

Borges believes that causality is the central problem of the novel and that therefore the novelist must show that all events bear some relationship to one another. In this way he will help the reader to suspend disbelief and accept the world of the novel. This world should be made up of « un juego preciso de vigilancias, ecos y afinidades. Todo episodio en un cuidadoso relato, es de proyección ulterior.» <sup>46</sup> (a precise patterning of reminiscences, echoes and affinities. Each episode a careful narrative is projected from the future. (My translation))

Borges shows how the reader is persuaded to accept the centaurs and sirens in William Morris's *The Life and Death of Jason* (1867) and following his example I will try to show Rushdie persuades us that certain events, seemingly impossible, «really» happened. The technique is that of the pendulum. The narrator is constantly giving hints about what will happen, stopping himself from revealing too much too soon, and going back, giving summaries of what we already know. This to and fro

movement seems to authenticate the text. When Saleem is born his father hurts his toe. This is a very ordinary, commonplace event yet Rushdie prepares us for it by drawing our attention to Ahmed Sinai's big toe on the accelerator when he is driving his wife to the maternity hospital. After the birth, the toe in its splint is allowed to play its part and the same toe had already been mentioned on the first page of the novel. There is no magic here. The author focuses our attention on the toe and we expect something to happen to it. Our expectations are fulfilled and we are reminded of the event after it has taken place. Rushdie treats events that are not so ordinary and commonplace in exactly the same way and so we accept them without the least hesitation. For example, the children inside Saleem's head are introduced at the very beginning when he says, «Consumed multitudes are jostling and shoving inside me.»<sup>47</sup> The accident in the washing-chest is also hinted at in Tai's lack of cleanliness and his refusal to change his clothes. And dirty linen is included in Ramram Seth's prophecy of Saleem's birth. When he is nine, Saleem starts hiding from the world in the washing-chest and it is there that he first hears the voices. We accept them in spite of their unreal quality because we have been led to expect something unusual. Saleem is told again and again that he is special and destined for great things. And since the washing-chest incident is referred back to in later sections of the novel it becomes familiar and loses its strangeness.

The episode in the Sundarbans, the long journey and the rains, and Saleem's transformation into a dog and then a guide, undoubtedly belong to the realm of fantasy and magic but are presented under the guise of reality. When Saleem is prophesied we learn that «jungle will claim him»<sup>48</sup> and after the bombing of Karachi the narrator assures us that there is more to come, that electrocution and a rain forest await our protagonist. So when we find Saleem in the rain forest, we are not surprised and accept the facts he gives us. The jungle of dreams is allowed an existence of its own by the reader. The same technique is at work when the narrator reveals that he considers himself guilty of two murders which have not been committed yet. The reader is initially surprised but when the «murders» occur, is prepared for them. Similarly, when Saleem the Buddha is returned to life by a snake bite the reader takes it in his stride. This pendulum technique can also be seen in the terms of the pointing finger which is present throughout the whole novel and which draws the reader's attention to certain events. The fisherman's finger in the picture above baby Saleem's bed points into the unknown, and this image is frequently recalled. Fingers point everywhere, accusing or indicative. Fingers are lost. Fingers refuse to function, and become the pencil the narrator is using to write his novel...

Rushdie's third novel, *Shame*, appeared only two years after *Midnight's Children*, and though once again it is a completely different novel, it does bear a certain resemblance to *Grimus* and to the second novel. I see this resemblance as being mainly in the continued treatment of the alien figure and of reality. *Shame* takes the alien father-and-motherless protagonist of the earlier novels and converts them into Omar Khayam, the peripheral hero. Omar Khayam lacks a visible father and has three possible mothers. His search for a father leads him to revere first of all, his schoolmaster, the hapless Mr. Eduardo Rodrigues, then the equally unlucky Iskander Harappa, and finally, Raza Hyder, whose fortunes are no better. This peripheral hero is born in a peripheral town almost at the end of the world, and though he becomes a famous doctor, is forever destined to play the role of the outsider. Even in marriage, he is barred from his wife's bed.

The problem of reality is once again examined. As in *Midnight's Children* we have here a real country presented somewhat pessimistically as a «failure of the dreaming mind». <sup>49</sup> The author tells us that he is in fact building his own fairyland and that Pakistan is «A country so improbable it could almost exist». <sup>50</sup> In *Midnight's Children* India was described as «a country which would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will, except in a dream we all agreed to dream». <sup>51</sup> And we should remember that Virgil Jones says of Calf Island, «Impossible to say whether we *found* the island or *made* it» (author's italics). <sup>52</sup> I have said before that in *Grimus* Rushdie needed to establish the existence of an imaginary geographical location, while in *Midnight's Children* his task was almost the opposite-to destroy the illusion of the reality of India while at the same time create a situation in which the reader could suspend disbelief and accept the author's vision of his subcontinent as true. In *Shame* Rushdie achieves something similar. Borges's magical technique is used once again. Events are mentioned or introduced well before they actually occur. Before he finishes chapter One, the attentive reader will know who Omar Khayam will marry, will know of the explosion and fire that destroyed his old home, of his friendships with Hyder and Harappa and of his fainting fits. These, and other important events are mentioned following the same pendulum pattern observed in *Midnight's Children*, thus enabling the reader to accept the improbable when it happens in the narrative.

After finishing *Midnight's Children* Rushdie expressed the problems of the expatriate writer, and of the writer who writes of things he does not know at first hand. He upholds the right of the expatriate to «draw on the roots» of his community for his art, and reminds us of writers such as Grass, Joyce, Singer and others. He then says,

«If literature is in part the business of finding new angles at which to enter reality, then once again our distance, our long geographical perspective, may provide us with such angles». <sup>53</sup>

Obviously the problem affects Rushdie deeply and he brings it to the forefront in *Shame*. The narrator adopts two poses, that of the omniscient story-teller, and that of the author troubled by aspects of reality and truth, and writing of a country from which he is in a strange sense an exile. (Rushdie's family emigrated to Pakistan when he was studying in England, thus he has never lived there for more than short periods at time.) He realizes that Pakistanis resent him writing about their country, and I think he understands their attitude. The author in *Shame* feels almost guilty because he has never been arrested, and imagines that he is attacked in the following words:

«We know you, with your foreign language wrapped around you like a flag: speaking about us in your forked tongue, what can you tell but lies?» <sup>54</sup>

Yet he believes that history is not limited to the participants, and tells us his version of Pakistan. Other writers, such as Timothy Mo in *Sour Sweet* write of the experience of the exile in a new country, but Rushdie so far, is more interested in the old homeland, in going back to his roots.

The two voices of the narrator I have mentioned are distinguished mainly by the content. The tone is in each case that of direct address to the reader and his sympathies. Typical story elements are used by the omniscient narrator, such as «once upon a time». Sentences are frequently introduced by «and» or «but», and the narrator tends to use the present tense for obviously past events. All these devices, found in the «story» part of *Shame* make the reader feel he is reading a bed-time children's tale-say, «Beauty and the Beast». The direct address of the authorial voice is rather that of a serious conversation; the fairy-tale tone has disappeared, and the problems of history, immigration and «belonging» are discussed openly, as in the section beginning on page eighty-five.

The reader is thus presented with two distinct worlds: the one he knows and can participate in a discussion of, even if his knowledge is only second-hand, and the world of the narrator's imagination which, however, he is made to feel is even more real. In *Midnight's Children* the credentials of the narrator were successively established and destroyed in an unending battle between fact and fiction, reality and memory. In *Shame* the author-narrator does not doubt his own intentions. He states quite clearly that: «My story, my fictional country exist, like myself, at a slight angle to

reality.»<sup>55</sup> As in *Midnight's Children* the narrator's attitude to facts, especially to official facts, is disrespectful. He realizes the relative value of truth, since it can be distorted by governments, as in the horrors committed in Bangladesh recounted in *Midnight's Children* or the corruption of the first years on Independence as seen in *Shame*, where «there are things that cannot be permitted to be true».<sup>56</sup> If history can distort facts, cannot the author do so too? Cannot his memory fail him, may not his mind simply refuse certain explanations, certain accounts? Rushdie has said that he considers *Shame* to be an account of the tragedy of history, even though he says, «I am dealing with a past that refuses to be suppressed, that is daily doing battle with the present.»<sup>57</sup>

In all three of Salman Rushdie's novels, the past, whether «real» or imaginary, tries to assert itself in the present. Reality, truth, and the alien protagonist can also be seen as the subject matter of the three novels. There are other points of contact —some quite superficial, as the repetition of an identical love scene in *Midnight's Children* and *Grimus*,<sup>58</sup> and others, perhaps less so, as the fact that Aadam Aziz's father was visited by thirty different species of birds, which form a very tempting link between the first and second novel, permitting us to see Saleem as a descendant of Grimus-Flapping Eagle. Saleem's «universally intelligible thought forms which far transcended words»<sup>59</sup> remind us of the conceptualised world of Calf Island, as does his impression that he was «somehow creating a world».<sup>60</sup> Parvati's gifts of sorcery which permit her to make people disappear echo both Grimus's power over the inhabitants of K. and the effect of the Rose, and look forward to Omar Khayam Shakil's obsession with hypnotism. In the third novel shame is introduced as a concept which provides the motive for the actions of Sufiya Zinobia, but it was already present in the earlier novels. In *Midnight's Children*, Aadam Aziz's mother and Padma exemplify this feeling. In *Grimus*, Flapping Eagle feels acutely the shame of not belonging, and it is this shame, the feeling of alienation from her husband that finally brings the Beast out in Sufiya, when she realizes that she has failed him and that she may yet have to prove herself a wife. Thus shame and alienation are linked. In fact, the origin of *Shame* has been attributed to an incident Salman Rushdie's sister was involved in. (The author has denied this). Alone in an underground train, she was beaten up by a group of youths, and it was the feeling of shame that prevented her from pressing her case—the shame of an alien, of someone that does not belong.<sup>61</sup>

Given Salman Rushdie's background it is hardly surprising that his novels deal with the problems of aliens or of people who are conscious of being different. In *Shame*, Rushdie has made his hero peripheral, he also shows how this state of «not belonging» can affect an individual. It is a tale



of the alien in his own home and country, a tale also of secession and double secession, and immigration and emigration, and such a lack of homeland may well provoke the Beast in all of us.

Rushdie's protagonist is, in all three novels an alien figure searching for a homeland, a family, a father figure, a son... Such consciousness of alienation, of not belonging, is not generally a characteristic of the English novel as it is of the American, where the protagonist who is in some way aware of being different and of not fitting into the society that surrounds him is a constant—from Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, to Salinger's Holden Caulfield, right on to figures such as Allert in Hawke's *Death, Sleep and the Traveller*. Though it is easy to think of lonely, homeless protagonists in British fiction, such a character is different from the American alien, and not so frequent. If we think of, for example, Iris Murdoch's *The Sea, the Sea*, we have a lonely protagonist who is in some way searching for friends and family ties. But we must not forget that he had consciously rejected their company and their little world of the theatre preferring a solitary, peaceful life, away from their squabbles and sordid love affairs.

*Midnight's Children* in spite of being an «inclusive novel» and successfully, I would say, portraying the multitudes of India, is still a novel about a lonely child who fears he is not wanted or loved by his parents, and whose sense of alienation pervades his adult life. He is a foreigner in Pakistan, as he arrived there so late and from the wrong side... he is a foreigner in Bombay, as he does not have the papers to prove his identity. *Shame*, of course, apart from its peripheral hero, juxtaposes the life of the «Asian» in London with that of the Pakistani back home. And the central figures of Bilquis and Zufiya, and Raza Hyder, and Isky Harappa and his daughter are seen as unable to communicate with their closest and dearest, incapable of expressing their love and desires, and living in terrifying frustration. (It is in this novel in particular that Rushdie comments on the situation of women in Indian society. The utter lack of freedom and independence that the extended family implies for women, and the unhealthy attitude to sex, even marital sex, is beautifully exemplified by Bilquis's experiences in her «new» family. The power of the matriarch is seen when forty husbands steal into the communal dormitory to visit their wives—for Bariamma believes in marital chastity. Similarly, the new-wed Rani succumbs to the rule of her husband's old ayah. Rushdie does not outwardly condemn all this, but he does show his disapproval in the comic visual picture evoked by the comparison with the forty thieves in the episode mentioned. More importantly, he condemns Bilquis's delusion of grandeur and her lack of perception of reality.)

With Rushdie's novels, the alien protagonist has become an integral part of English fiction. This intrusion of the alien in fiction should not

surprised us, since after World War II the numbers of immigrants from Eastern Europe and from what was no longer an Empire has risen considerably, to say the least. It seems logical to expect an influence on all fields of life from this new section of the population. As Lorna Sage puts it, «the world the *language* colonized is breaking in». <sup>62</sup> This should be considered a good thing, since, certainly as far as the novel is concerned, it brings new life and excitement. The English novel has been frequently criticised for lacking the spirit of experiment that characterizes the American post-war novel where form has become almost more important than content. Rushdie, I believe, is attempting to confront not only form, but also content. From the formal point of view, his three novels use different techniques searching for devices that will make his meaning clear. As to content, he is not afraid to face the new reality of England, that of the immigrant who is different and therefore alien. Whether this alien protagonist actually lives in England, or in the «imaginary» worlds of India or Pakistan is beside the point. The alien and his reality, have, quite forcefully, entered British fiction.

#### Notes

1. Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, London; Picador, 1983.(1st. ed. London, Jonathan Cape Ltd. 1981) p. 9.
2. Salman Rushdie, *Grimus*, London; Granada Publishing Ltd. 1984. (1st. ed. 1975) Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, London; Picador, 1983. Salman Rushdie, *Shame*, London; Jonathan Cape Ltd. 1983. (All future references are to these editions)
3. Raymond Federman, «Surfiction-Four Propositions in Form of an Introduction», Raymond Federman (ed.) *Surfiction:Fiction Now and Tomorrow*, Chicago: Swallow Press, 1981. p. 8.
4. J. F. Galván Reula, «Los Cien Años de Soledad de Salman Rushdie: Shame», *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*, Abril 1984, pp. 119-137.
5. Tariq Ali, «Midnight's Children», *New Left Review*, November, 1982, p. 87.
6. For this statement I draw on personal conversation and Round Table and Lecture given by Salman Rushdie, at the AEDEAN Conference held in Málaga, in December 1984.
7. David Wilson, «Fable-Minded», *Times Literary Supplement*, 21.2.75. p. 185.
8. Salman Rushdie, *Grimus*, ed. cit. p. 258.
9. *ibidem*. p. 257.
10. Salman Rushdie, *Shame*, p. 11 and p. 270.
11. Salman Rushdie, *Grimus*, ed.cit. p. 217.
12. *ibidem*. p. 26.
13. *ibidem*. p. 21.
14. *ibidem*. p. 205.
15. *ibidem*. p. 205.
16. Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, ed.cit. p. 475.
17. *ibidem*. p. 39.
18. *ibidem*. p. 298.

19. Salman Rushdie, «Outside the Whale» *Granta* 11 Harmondsworth:Granta Publications Ltd. 1984. p. 134.
20. At the AEDEAN Conference in Málaga, Rushdie explained that his reasons were based on his dislike of the modern family saga-so popular today- and therefore he did not want to write one. Also, he realised that since the novel began years before the protagonist's birth, readers would inevitably be reminded of Tristram Shandy, so he wished to destroy that allusion.
21. Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, ed. cit. p. 118.
22. Salman Rushdie, «Imaginary Homelands» *London Review of Books*, 7-20 October, 1982. p. 19.
23. *ibidem*. p. 19.
24. Tariq Ali, *op. cit.* pp. 93-95.
25. Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, ed. cit. p. 118.
26. *ibidem*. p. 118.
27. Salman Rushdie, «Imaginary Homelands», ed. cit. p. 18.
28. Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, ed. cit. p. 77.
29. *ibidem*. p. 375.
30. *ibidem*. p. 211.
31. *ibidem*. p. 212.
32. *ibidem*. p. 19.
33. *ibidem*. p. 221.
34. *ibidem*. p. 121.
35. *ibidem*. p. 382.
36. *ibidem*. p. 283.
37. *ibidem*. p. 309.
38. *ibidem*. p. 419.
39. Salman Rushdie, *Grimus*, ed. cit. p. 12.
40. Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, ed. cit. p. 9.
41. *ibidem*. p. 169.
42. *ibidem*. p. 51.
43. *ibidem*. p.457.
44. *ibidem*. p. 394.
45. Jorge Luis Borges, «El Arte Narrativo y la Magia», *Discusión*, Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1976, pp. 71-79.
46. *ibidem*. p. 78.
47. Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, ed. cit. p. 9.
48. *ibidem*. p. 87.
49. Salman Rushdie, *Shame*, ed. cit. p. 87.
50. *ibidem*. p. 61.
51. Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, ed. cit. p. 112.
52. Salman Rushdie, *Grimus*, ed. cit. p. 225.
53. Salman Rushdie, «Imaginary Homelands», ed. cit. p. 19.
54. Salman Rushdie, *Shame*, ed. cit. p. 28.
55. *ibidem*. p. 29.
56. *ibidem*. p. 82.
57. *ibidem*. p. 87
58. Salman Rushdie, *Grimus*, ed. cit. p. 166 and *Midnight's Children*, ed. cit. p. 39.
59. Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, ed. cit. p. 168.
60. *ibidem*. p. 174.
61. Victoria Glendinning, «Country of the Mind», *Sunday Times*, 25 October 1981. p. 38.
62. Lorna Sage, «Invasion from Outsiders» *Granta* 3, Harmondsworth: Granta Publications Ltd. 1980. p. 136.