Reading Intertextual & Intercultural Airlocks in *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie

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Abstract

An airlock, says the dictionary, is a chamber which provides access to space between two different environments where air is under pressure. This particular modality of passage, a commonplace inside submarines or spacecraft, seems like a useful model to account for certain phenomena, intertextual, interdisciplinary and intercultural, at work in a literary piece like Midnight's Children by Salman Rushdie. This paper will examine cases ofmediated intertextuality in which a work, or an element of a work, serves as an "airlock", which allows two distinct cultures to come into contact, or which serves as a transition between two other works. It also describes what is considered to be the core reflections on interdisciplinary features and its hindrances in Rushdie's magic-realistic work. It will draw upon what happens when a third text is superimposed, on the parchment, on two imperfectly erased texts.While reflecting on these questions,the paper will show how this particular type of intertextuality fits into the contemporary literary landscape in general, and how it fits into the field- with blurred and often contested limits- of the postmodernist novel.

Keywords: Culture, Colonization, Post-truth, Hybridity

Intertextuality is the set of relationships that a text has with one or more other texts (quotes, allusions, references). The paper will use the term 'airlock' to refer to the spaces between the words of a text that allow it to transcend to and refer to several other pieces of work- this is not only possible with textualbut also visual references. For example, let's talk about a wondrous painting The Boyhood of Raleigh by John Everett Millais and how it is incorporated in a literary text, Midnight's Children by Salman Rushdie. Mlillais's painting The Boyhood of Raleigh is the subject of constant allusions from Saleem Sinai, the narrator of Midnight's Children.The painting dates back to 1871, five years before Queen Victoria was crowned Empress of India in 1876.The Boyhood of Raleigh is therefore part of the triumphant apology of imperialism which prevailedat the end of the nineteenth century; this painting obscures the setbacks suffered by the Raleigh's expeditions, as well as his death on the scaffold, to portray him as a young boy was to signify the glorious and lengthy destiny of the British Empire. In Midnight's Children, the narrator's parents buy one of the houses in a subdivision from an Englishman, Mrthwold, which was formerly rented to Englishmen who left in haste as independence approached. But since Methwold settles for a ridiculously low price for it, he puts a very symbolic condition on it: it is not until August 15, 1947 at 00:00 hours (or, more poetically, at midnight hour of the day India gets its independence- the very important hour on which the novel opens, and which provides its title) that Indian buyers will be

able to get rid of the furniture and various objects left behind by the former tenants. A reproduction of the said painting, duly framed, appears among this bric-a-brac, testifying by its presence to the fact that, just before the shameful and hasty abandonment of their former colony, the English felt a certain nostalgia, and clung to their ancestral dreams of reign, power, glory and wealth. Now this framed reproduction of Millais's painting is precisely one of the very rare objects that the Sinai family chooses to keep at home after the founding and fateful hour- "the picture on my wall survived", Saleem tells us (MC 128)- and this image that the narrator is going to keep in his mind throughout his childhood, nourishes his imagination.

Indeed the pointing finger which points to a vanishing point in the painting lends its title to the first chapter of the second part of the novel ("The fisherman's pointing finger"), and gives birth to a complex metaphorical game where the fingers return in a haunting leitmotif: Saleem's cut finger, minaret's pointed finger, the accusing finger, "pointing its unanswerable finger" (MC 236). The image is doubly useful: on the one hand, it helps Saleem to imagine his grandfather Aadam Aziz when he was still a little boy fascinated by the stories of an old boatman: "Tai, forecasting the fisherman on my wall, pointed at the mountain"(MC 16), thus entering into the paranoid creation of a spider's web where analogies, parallels and repetitions intersect and unite. On the other hand, this little Raleigh with amazed eyes stuck to the lips of the sailor, offers Rushdie an implicit self-reflexive metaphor allowing him to put another story into the story itself, which is in fact a hymn to orality in which a Snake-like-storyteller hypnotizes the mongooses that are Padma and the reader.

Although Saleem never specifically mentions the name of the painter or the exact title of the painting, we find in Midnight's Children more than thirty references, direct or indirect, to this painting suspended in Saleem's room, representing "the boy Raleigh", which the reader identifies (thanks to the description which is made of it).Yet the narrator describes him from memory, when he has become an adult, and the reproduction- and the villa itself- have long since disappeared. This explains why the sailor he portrays does not quite correspond to the character created by Millais: "an old, gnarled, net-mending sailor — did he have a walrus moustache? (MC 122). The sailor in the painting does have a walrus moustache, but he looks young, does not mend any net, and his earring makes him look more like one of Francis Drake's daring privateers, who did not bother with scruples.This shows the scope literature provides- an airlock which not only allows access to some foreign space, but also lends its author the liberty to mend and break references in order to make it fit the spaces between his/her novel.

Playing the anonymous figure of the second little boy (whom critic Stevens identifies as Raleigh's brother),Saleem asks:The young Raleigh- and who else? Because there was certainly another boy in the picture, sitting cross-legged in frilly collar and button-down tunic.(MC 122) This anonymous child laterdescends from the wall painting to invade the identity of Saleem, who is forced to endorse for his seventh birthday a copyofthe costume that the child wears in Millais's painting. Dressed in this costume, "hot and constricted in the outlandish garb" (MC 156), Saleem arouses the emotion of his mother and his neighbours: "Look, how chweet!" Lila Sabarmati exclaimed to my eternal mortification, "It's like he's just stepped out of the picture!" (MC 122)/ "So chweet!" [Amina cried] (MC 156). The boys in the painting who are symbolic for Imperialism and its adventures, relate to Saleem who is the by-product of colonisation in India, biological son of Methwold, a colonial administrator whose genealogy dates back to the time of the East India Company.

With the expression "stepped out of the picture", the English universe effectively overflows from the picture to invade and annex the Indian space: the limits which should separate distinct universes suddenly become permeable.Rushdie accesses the airlock between the text and the painting. It allows an English universe to penetrate the Indian universe. Amina's marvel at the sight of an English like dressed Saleem signifies that symbolic "colonization" is not surprising.Saleem penetrates into the painting and places it in a more Eastern context with Arab-dhows in a way that integrates it into a complex metaphorical network, specific to Midnight's Children, where fishermen and fish play an important role. His pointed finger, the narrator tells us, indicates, beyond the frame, the red sails of the Koli fishing boats, as if the red flag on the bow of the toy sailboat painted in the lower left corner had come out of the picture to ''integrate into the landscape, adopt the local colour, and become a Koli 'dhow'".

There is therefore really circulation in both directions, Millais's painting becomes an area that is both airtight and permeable, or an airlock, through which the two universes come into contact and "flow into each other" which constitutes a subtle subversion of a pictorial work which conveys Victorian imperialism. The colonization of India by England goes hand in hand with a "colonization" of England by India which laughs at chronology, realism and plausibility. Here we have an example of cultural refocusing: Rushdie slyly reminds his readers that Indian culture existed long before Europeans dared to "discover India". However, beyond a cultural rivalry, this should be seen as a hybridization phenomenon: India and England merge into each other like flavours.

There is a second example, in Midnight's Children, of mixing Indian and English cultures, but it is a clock, this time, which acts as an airlock and connects the East with the West in a transparent allusion to a third textin the novel, which is Lawrence Sterne's Tristram Shandy.Saleem Sinai, like Tristram Shandy, laments the time it takes him to tell his own life story, and insists on the duration of the act of uttering the text. Saleem, like Tristram before him, risks dying before he has. Before he can relate his birth, Tristram must explain the circumstances of his conception.With Rushdie, it is birth, not conception, that is associated with the clock, but the allusion to Sterne is transparent. From the first chapter, Saleem evokes his miraculous birth, which he calls "my clock-ridden birth". The word clock appears from the second paragraph of the incipit:I was born […] on the stroke of midnight. Clock-handsjoinedpalmsinrespectful greetingasI came.(MC 9)

The reference to Sterne is clear, but it is clearly "picked up" by another culture, by means of the allusion to the solemn oriental salute, which consists of a bow, performed with the two palms joined in front of the chest, which brings back the dead metaphor present in the compound name "clock-hands". The two hands of the clock, joined at midnight, evoke an oriental salute almost caricature, respectful but impenetrable and vaguely disturbing as if Rushdie was having fun ironically taking up the orientalist stereotypes denounced by Edward Said in his study Orientalism. The clock therefore provides Rushdie with another opportunity to reverse the usual sense of annexation, of cultural colonization, as if the airlock were a time machine, or even a synchronization machine.

With these games on Millais's painting and Sterne's clock, intertextuality becomes an example of the mutual interpenetration and enrichment of two cultures. Here we see at work a deliberate strategy of hybridization, of harmonious and successful fusion of two national identities and two radically different literary traditions, by means of intercultural airlocks formed by the allusion to a

previous work. Rushdie is a staunch supporter of "good" hybridization, and speaks out against the ill-advised longing for identity and cultural purity evident in India among fundamentalists, be they Hindus or Muslims.Rushdie is aware that Western and Eastern influences are interwoven in him, and although the character of Saleem has never set foot in England, the author reminds us, between the lines, that the novel was indeed written. far from India, in England.

We find in Rushdie the phenomenon of reversal, of deviation from a parody: this time it is a parody of a passage from Hamlet, inMidnight's Children, little Saleem spies on his mother just like Prince Hamlet of Denmark did. Rushdie's indirect reference to Hamlet echoes a quote from the scene V of Act II, quote features a hundred pages upstream in the novel. Indeed, when Saleem is confronted, in the bathroom, with the perfidy of his mother, he exclaims: "O horrible! -my mother" which parodies the exclamation of King Hamlet just after the enumeration of his own sins ("O horrible! O horrible! Most horrible!")Saleem adopts the same role model, Hamlet's, and defend their father's threatened honour.The reference to Hamlet also foreshadows Saleem's death who would give up his life trying to straighten the storyline. Multiple references throughout the novel hints at the story that would unravel later on. Just as Saleem lives in his house with the Millais painting, even after the political independence, the East, or ex-colonies continue to live with the Western/ colonial mind-set that permeate texts and representations. The painting also serves as an intercultural airlock for both Rushdie and Swift, it serves to bring eras and characters into contact, to make them interchangeable.

The function of the "airlocks" is therefore plural: they make it possible to question the historiography of rigor, while underlining the global culture of hybridity. Airlocks also allow a literary lineage to be traced back to its source, and problematize the relationship between reality and representation.The technique of drawing from other texts and sources became celebrated in the hands of T.S. Eliot. It is Eliot who provides a rhythm and tempo in 'The Wasteland'with the postmodern symbols and contemporary images juxtaposed with ancient vedas, epics and legends. Rushdie fully knows and is capable of successfully celebrating hybridity in his works- not just in terms of culture, but genres and ages. He can deconstruct the techniques of fiction, while arousing in readers an adherence to the story and satisfy their desire. Often deemed outdated by critics, but still as keen among readers, to identify with human and humanist characters.

Conclusion

Rushdie makes brilliant use of modernist experiments and their postmodernist extensions. Walton Litz suggested with a certain disdain, in 1986, that with postmodernist literature, whose name itself suggests "post-mortem", it carries the weight of the dead. However, with authors like Rushdie, this form of literature has never looked more alive.

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