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Travelling with Quichotte: Reading Rushdie's Quixotic Reinvention of Cervantes' Don

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Abstract. Salman Rushdie's latest novel *Quichotte*, inspired by Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, revolves around the journey of a fictional character named Ismail Smile who adopts the name Quichotte as he embarks on a fantastic quest across America to win the heart of celebrated actor and talk-show host Salma R, since his perception of reality has been muddled by incessant immersion in television shows, just as the mind of Cervantes' don had been addled by his preoccupation with chivalric romances. While Cervantes' protagonist, through his various misadventures, ironically exposed the many maladies of contemporary society, Quichotte's journey across America, accompanied by his son Sancho, whom he miraculously imagines into existence, also operates as a picaresque narrative that methodically dissects the alarming aberrations of contemporary world order. Taking Quixote's inability to distinguish between the real and the fictional as his starting point, Rushdie's text eclectically foregrounds the menacing fissures of a social order where a rampant disregard for facts also becomes a platform for widespread regression into atavistic atrocities. The proposed paper will focus on such issues and more in order to highlight how the famed Man of La Mancha continues to operate as a relevant figure even within the fractious contradictions of our times.

Keywords: picaresque, postmodern, atavism, racism, xenophobia, plurality, self-reflexive

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Путешествие с Кихотом Сервантеса: «переизобретение» Салмана Рушди

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Аннотация. Последний роман Салмана Рушди «Кихот», вдохновленный «Дон Кихотом» Сервантеса, посвящен путешествию вымышленного персонажа по имени Исмаил Смайл, который принимает имя Кихот, когда отправляется в фантастическое путешествие по Америке, чтобы завоевать сердце знаменитого актера и ведущего ток-шоу Сальма Р., поскольку его восприятие реальности было затуманено постоянным погружением в телевизионные шоу точно так же, как разум дона Сервантеса был затуманен его увлечением рыцарскими романами. В то время как главный герой Сервантеса своими различными злоключениями иронически обнажил многие недуги современного общества, путешествие Кихота по Америке в сопровождении сына Санчо, существование которого он чудесным образом воображает, также действует как плутовское повествование, методично анализирующее тревожные заблуждения общества, современный мировой порядок. Взяв за отправную точку неспособность Кихота различать реальное и вымышленное, Рушди эклектично выдвигает на первый план угрожающие трещины социального порядка, где безудержное игнорирование фактов также становится платформой для повсеместного регресса к атавистическим злодеяниям. Предлагаемый текст посвящен этим и другим вопросам, чтобы подчеркнуть, как знаменитый Человек из Ламанчи продолжает действовать как актуальная фигура даже в условиях прихотливых противоречий нашего времени.

Ключевые слова: плутовской роман, постмодернизм, атавизм, расизм, ксенофобия, плюрализм, саморефлексия

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Introduction

Ever since the days of the *Iliad* and the *Batrachomyomachia*, texts have been reshaped, revised, reconfigured, reworked and redefined by other texts which have cumulatively created an endless semantic web of dynamic and protean codes which keep giving birth to countless counterparts across time, space and culture.

Perhaps the most striking illustration of this fundamental feature of the world of literature is found in Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* when the protagonist Haroun is first introduced to the Ocean of the Streams of Story by Iff the Water Genie:

He looked into the water and saw that it was made up of a thousand thousand thousand and one different currents, each one a different color, weaving in and out of one another like a liquid tapestry of breathtaking complexity... each coloured strand represented and contained a single tale. Different parts of the Ocean contained different sorts of stories, and as all the stories that had ever been told and many that were still in the process of being invented could be found here, the Ocean of the Streams of Story was in fact the biggest library in the universe. And because the stories were held here in fluid form, they retained the ability to change, to become new versions of themselves, to join up with other stories and so become yet other stories; so that unlike a library of books, the Ocean of the Streams of Story was much more than a storeroom of yarns. It was not dead but alive (Rushdie, 2012, p. 39–40).

It is in acknowledgment of this truth that Roland Barthes would claim that “any text is an intertext” (Barthes, 1981, p. 39), Kristeva would identify intertextuality as inherent in the very process of literary creation, J. Hillis Miller would find literary texts inhabited by a “long chain of parasitical presences, echoes, allusions, guests, ghosts of previous texts” (Gilbert and Gubar, 2000, p. 46) and Gerard Genette would speak of the “palimpsestuous nature of texts” and assert that “any text is a hypertext, grafting itself onto a hypotext, an earlier text that it imitates or transforms” (Genette, 1997, p. 9).

One author who was certainly aware of all these networks and connections that texts have with other texts was Cervantes. The narrator of *Don Quixote* therefore claimed that while the early chapters were derived from the archives of La Mancha, the rest was translated from an Arabic text authored by Moorish author Cide Hamete Benengeli, who was an entirely fictional character. Alongside such a metafictional sleight of hand we also notice in the novel a series of parodic episodes referencing popular chivalric romances which had ensured Quixote's insanity as well as an acknowledgement of a spurious sequel authored by Alonso Avelleneda which the second part of *Don Quixote* robustly refutes. It is but natural therefore that the text of *Don Quixote* itself has been the source of countless other texts across genres which have either been inspired by the adventures of Quixote and Sancho Panza or have retold their experiences from other perspectives. Such illustrious novelists of world history as Fielding, Smollett, Sterne, Diderot, Stendhal, Flaubert, Daudet, Gogol, Dostoyevsky, Galdos, Melville, Twain, Faulkner, Mann, Nabokov, Fuentes and many others have been inspired and influenced in varying ways by the inexhaustible plurality and allure enshrined in Cervantes' timeless masterpiece. No wonder then that Lionel Trilling remarked that “All prose fiction is a variation of the theme of ‘Don Quixote’: ...the problem of appearance and reality” (Trilling, 2008, p. 281). Such a judgment has been echoed by several others and Michel Foucault also asserted

that “*Don Quixote* is the first modern work of literature, because in it we see the cruel reason of identities and differences make endless sport of signs and similitudes” (Foucault, 2002, p. 48–49). Remarkably, such assertions also point to one of the key features of the postmodern world where differences of appearance and reality are blurred and the conflict between signifiers and signifieds acquire ever-varying and dizzying proportions. This is precisely why French theorist Jean Baudrillard had asserted long back that the Western civilization had arrived at the age of the “hyperreal” (Baudrillard, 1995, p. 122) which generates a simulacra in which the traditional relationship between signifier and signified is lost and one finds oneself in a world where language and external reality remain starkly dissociated from each other. The inevitable outcome of such a paradigm shift is a world where the distinction between truth and lies is blurred, where all categories of good and evil, right and wrong become relative, fluid and at times irrelevant. It is at this conjuncture of postmodern contemporaneity and the exceptional legacy of *Don Quixote* that Rusdhi’s latest novel *Quichotte* is situated.

Understanding *Quichotte*

Quichotte presents to us a colourful, multi-dimensional and metafictional text where the Pan-American journey of Ismail Smile, a travelling salesman who adopts the name Quichotte, the protagonist of a novel being written by author Sam DuChamp, becomes a canvas of magic realist phenomena which serves to foreground the ethical crises of our contemporary world. Just as Cervantes’ don, obsessed as he was with chivalric romances, had tilted at the windmills, supposing them to be monsters of some kind, Rusdhi’s Quichotte also fails to retain the distinctions between reality and the world of the television and consequently embarks on an impossible quest to win the heart of Salma R., one of the celebrated icons of the American television world.

Of course, Don Quixote was not alone in his journey and neither is Quichotte. Just as Cervantes’ don had a squire, Quichotte generates an adolescent son. On the night of a meteor shower, in a drastic reversal of the Immaculate Conception, as the manifestation of childless Quichotte’s long-cherished desire, Sancho miraculously appears on the passenger seat of Quichotte’s car as an adolescent boy who goes on to become Quichotte’s companion in his fabulous journey. This is as much an indication of Rusdhi’s habitually magic-realist narrative paradigm as it is of a bizarre present where the borders between fact and fiction keep disappearing. In the process, the fundamental element of the quest-motif used in *Don Quixote* becomes transposed onto the context of contemporary America through the duo of Quichotte and Sancho who operate as a fabulous postmodern counterpart to Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. However, the crucial significance of an adaptation lies less in its rather obvious semblances to the original and more in how it is able to offer a relevant commentary to the concerns of its own age. Herein lies the significance of *Quichotte* which appropriates *Don Quixote* only to offer a searching critique of some of the

abiding maladies of our times, particularly the violent and hateful assertions of singular identities and belligerent nationalisms, which have claimed many victims across the world.

Such maladies recurrently haunt the quest of Quichotte and Sancho during different episodes of their journey as they confront various degrees of xenophobia, racist hatred and brazen intolerance. For example, near Lake Capote a large white woman becomes convinced that Quichotte and Sancho must be representatives of ISIS and potential terrorists and therefore hurls at them a series of abusive remarks and questions:

Who knows how you got here. This aint a place for you. You shouldn't be allowed past the border controls. How'd you get in? You look like you come from a country on that no-entry list. You hitch a ride with a Mexican? What you lookin' for in America? What's your purpose? (Rushdie, 2019, p. 126).

In one moment, all of Quichotte's hitherto cherished notions about America are shattered as he realises that mindless hatred may unapologetically dominate public discourse by drowning facts and humane considerations.

In fact, such events are regularly confronted by Quichotte and Sancho during the course of their journey. Consequently they find themselves entangled in a ruthless world where hatred born out of fabrication and falsification generates a fusion of ignorance and imbecility whose arrogant exhibition strings together the scream of the political follower and the proclamations of the head of the state. Quite naturally, Sancho realises that "normalcy" refers now to a land of accepted inversions. Such inversions violently manifest themselves to Quichotte and Sancho when in front of both of them in a diner in the ironically named city of Beautiful in the state of Kansas, a racist drunk first abuses a couple of Americans of Indian origin and then shoots them dead. Readers are inevitably reminded in this context of the assassination of Srinivas Kuchibotla and such other incidents of racially motivated violence directed towards persons of Indian and subcontinental origin both in post-Trump United States and post-Brexit UK. In Rushdie's analysis such increasing incidents of violence are also indicative of a growing atavism and savagery. Therefore, Sancho curiously observes a leather collar around the neck of the fat white racist woman who abuses them near Lake Capote, such as those that are generally tied to dogs. Later, when Sancho is again attacked by three racist men in a park in New York city, he surprisingly observes similar collars around their necks as well. Combining surrealism, magic realism and multi-layered symbolic resonances, such episodes become telling representations of chronic social degeneration.

The same perspective once again becomes evident when, during their journey to New York, Quichotte and Sancho unexpectedly enter a bizarre city named Berenger where several inhabitants have transformed into gigantic, extinct pachyderms known as mastodons. Some of the residents believe that such transformation may actually be the result of sustained deprivation to which sections of the population had been subjected for years and that their recent assaults are an expression of years of pent up rage. These assaults create, on the

one hand, an ambiance of fear and panic and on the other hand provoke ruthless hate and urge for violence. The novel here remarkably combines within its quixotic world elements from Eugene Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* and the *X-Men* series of comics and films to produce a metaphoric paradigm of socio-political commentary whose folds embrace within itself not just contemporary UK and USA but also India. Thus, just as Cervantes' mad protagonist serves to comically and ironically underscore the maladies of his own age, Rushdie's similarly insane protagonist becomes that redemptive figure of humanity who serves to expose the vitriolic and corrosive consequences of those unitary modes of identity and belonging which are gathering momentum across the world.

But it must be remembered that Rushdie has never been one of those realistic authors devoted to the exclusive dissection of socio-political maladies through the medium of the novel. Therefore, in *Quichotte* too, alongside the socio-political commentary, Rushdie also deploys a narrative style that not only incorporates within itself innumerable elements of popular culture spanning television, social media, films, graphic novels etc. but also fosters through its multiple layers an aesthetic of self-reflexive scepticism. This is evident from the very structure of the narrative — the saga of Quichotte and Sancho is part of a novel being written by Brother, a character who adopts the pseudonym Sam DuChamp for his novels, the events of whose life are being narrated to us by an anonymous omniscient narrator. Incidentally, not only do Quichotte and Brother hail from the same part of the subcontinent but also have similar histories of familial struggle and loneliness. Furthermore, both these characters also embody various aspects of Rushdie's own much-publicised personal existence, which perhaps lends greater depth to characterisation. The crazed Quichotte's paternal affection and his unconditional love for Salma, Brother's desperate attempt to bridge the decade-long gulf between siblings, Salma's quest for true love and solace beyond fame, addiction and the nightmarish past of her family life, the cordial bond between Sister and her husband – all of these render Rushdie's novel eminently evocative and alive. Stringing personal life, family, ethnicity and state with a global consciousness, Rushdie leads us into a pluralistic postmodern hall of mirrors, bedazzled with endless significations.

Conclusion

However, just as Cervantes' wide-ranging world of ridicule, satire and irony was never predicated on moral relativism, Rushdie's postmodernism is also not without its ethical foundations. Quixote may be mad and may even wish to renounce his madness on his deathbed, but his friends and acquaintances understand enough of his idealism, honesty and ethical integrity, however misplaced, to wish that he does not change. Likewise, however muddled the brain of Ismail Smile may be, in a novelistic universe punctuated by numerous examples of violence, bigotry, deceit, corruption and malice, Quichotte remains redemptively free of all such contamination and extols the value of selfless and

steadfast love and affection. Northrop Frye had observed that “The picaresque novel is the social form of what with *Don Quixote* modulates into a more intellectualized satire” (Frye, 2000, p. 229). Yet Frye also called Cervantes’ protagonist “possibly the greatest figure in the history of romance,” whose proper role is that of “social visionary” (Frye, 1990, p. 179). The same dichotomy is also true in a way for *Quichotte*: it not only operates as a scathing satire of the bigoted fabrications and violent outbursts ravaging various parts of the contemporary world, but also envisions how individuals may rise above such treacherous currents on the wings of their love. Just as death and darkness are dispelled by the unending narrative of Arabian Nights’ Scheherzade, faced with the crisis of civilisation and mortality of life, Rushdie too presents to us a sea of stories where love continues to shine amid tempests and shipwrecks. The tales go marching On! On! On!

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