



ON REALITY, FANTASY AND FICTION. A CONVERSATION WITH SALMAN RUSHDIE

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(This conversation took place on the 20th of December, 1984, in Málaga during the VIIIth Conference of AEDEAN (Spanish Association for Anglo-American Studies). The American writer John Barth had addressed a large audience some minutes before, and the previous day Salman Rushdie had talked about his novels *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*, and participated in two-hour session of questions and answers on his work. References to these events are made in this interview).

- You have been reading your works in public these days and have had several contacts with your readers through a long session of questions and answers. Do you find this useful when writings?
- I think not when writing, no. I mean, when I'm engaged in a big piece of work, then I don't do any of this, I don't do anything like this, I just sit at home and work, but there are moments, especially between pieces of work, when it is very enjoyable to go and see, you know, because normally as I said, I think, yesterday, I had once intended to be an actor and, of course, one of the things about being an actor is you have the response of your audience, but when you are a writer you never usually experience that; it's not possible to know what the readers are reading, so this is the next best thing; every so often you can at least get some kind of brief dialogue with people who read your work.
- So you feel there is a feed-back process with your readers, and perhaps this is important for you, when writing.
- Sometimes yes, certainly. I find it so, yes.
- We were also talking yesterday about the influence that acting and cinema have had on your work, your technique or style of writing. As you have mentioned your early acting career, can you be more precise about the relation between acting and writing? is this experience a help when you write?

- I think so. You see, in many cases Indian art... in many of the arts the idea of performance is absolutely essential to the art; I mean, for instance, in the classical musical tradition. There's not such a thing as a written text which the performer then performs, as there is in the West, you know. The performer in the act of performing is, in fact, composing the music as well.
- Is it then a kind of improvisation?
- Yes, an improvisation but around a structure, there's a previously existing structure around which these elaborations are made. But the idea of the performer and the creator is always very close; and so I think there is a sense in what I was saying about the oral tradition, that the performances of a text of literature are what makes people enjoy it, but I think that what John Barth said just now is very true ... the thing that makes this kind of literature valuable is if it also touches the audience. If it's only a performance, if it's only a clever game, then it doesn't really live, it doesn't really stay with the reader, you know; it is only when affecting when it becomes valuable, I think.
- Which is your main purpose when selecting your material, that is, do you want to write —let's call them— «committed works of art»? Do you think that the aim of the writer should be to try to change things, in a political way?
- No; I mean, I would describe myself as a Socialist, and I do write polemic work which is not fictional. The purpose of fiction, as it seems to me, is not usually that, or not in that sense. What it can do... and I think there are aspects in *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* which try to speak what is officially taboo, you know, that there are things that are falsifications of reality which the State attempts to make, and then I think it becomes important to analyse them, not for polemic purposes, but for reasons of the truth, to write against that view of the world, to say that the things that happened in India during the Emergency *did* happen, you know, to say that the things that are happening in Pakistan *are* happening; and they're odd things, because certainly I've never said them out for people to arise, you know. It was simply forced upon me by the world that existed and by the other descriptions that have been made of it, against which it is necessary to write.
- And do you think that your works can help to change things, to make a revolution, for example?
- No, I think there is no doubt that literature has an effect. I think it has, but it is very difficult to say exactly what the effect is, because I don't think it is an effect of that kind, I don't think..., I think it is very unusual the idea that a novel can be something that makes people go to war, you know; but what it does is make changes in the way in which people see, and those changes can make other changes, and those changes can make other changes; it is not a very direct process. No, I don't think that a novel can start a revolution.
- And what about the fantastic events in your three novels? How do these fantasies appeal to Western audiences in contrast, perhaps, to Eastern audiences?
- Well, very differently. I think there's a difference in strategy in my first novel and the next two; and in many ways I rejected the ideas of the way in which the first novel was written, so I'll talk about the other two. Well, you see, in

the West the level of knowledge of the world I have been describing is very low, so they read the whole book as an imaginative work, really as a kind of self-enclosed system, without really referring it to a culture outside the book, for reasons obviously that they don't know anything about it; but in India and Pakistan the books are read completely differently because people are of course intimately acquainted with, and much of the material in these books comes very directly out of events that many people are familiar with, so they are not really read there as fantasy novels at all, but more as... well, yes, as reconstructions of history, but as books which discuss the nature of contemporary reality, because fantasy always is a kind of escape, you know, and in that sense they are not escapist books. See, my idea was always to make somehow... What the use of metaphorical elements can do in a fiction is to make a kind of compression of reality, and make it more intense, intensified, so that when the reader reads the book he experiences the real world more intensely than we normally do, you know, and that something of that extra intensity stays with you afterwards, you see; it becomes a sharp way of perceiving the world.

- Could we also say perhaps that the reality in the East is completely different from the reality in the West, and that can explain the so-called «magical realism» in your work?
- Yes. That is absolutely the case. And that's what I said yesterday on the point of a religious society. If you live in a society where most people believe in God, then you live in a society where the miraculous is accepted at the same level as, for instance, the political. But if you are to construct a book which expresses that reality, you have to write in such a way that is the way that permits the miraculous and the everyday to coexist on the page as the same kind of event, not to say that they are different kinds of events; and that cannot be done within the conventions of realism, and you have to find a new form.
- And that is probably the basic similarity that is found between your work and García Márquez's.
- Yes. I think so.
- Realities are similar in the sense of being magnified realities, quite different from the Western world...
- Yes, I accept that. You know, I have a great admiration for García Márquez, and it's very typical. You see, when I write I don't think about other writers consciously, so it is hard for me to know whether this passage or that passage is influenced by García Márquez, but certainly his writing as a whole is of great importance to me.
- Can you mention any other writer, either Latin American or European, who has exerted any kind of influence in your background?
- Well, I know that when I was very young, when I was twenty or twenty-one, I read the same book that Barth was talking about, the *Ficciones* of Borges; and that had in a way a bigger impact on me, because it came out of nowhere. At least by the time of García Márquez, I knew something about Latin America; but with Borges, I had never heard of this book, I had never known this

writer, and it was an explosion really. So I would say that the influence of Borges was bigger. Also Grass, you know, I think there's no doubt that he is the other one of contemporary writers who I admire very much. And Calvino somewhat, although I think the influence of Calvino is not very direct, but he is a writer that I admire very much.

- And Sábato, perhaps?
- Well, I've read, I've read, but much later; actually only quite recently I've read *On Heroes and Tombs*, and to tell you the truth, I didn't like it very much. I liked passages in it, but I didn't feel that the book succeeded.
- And what about Sterne and the classical eighteenth-century novelists?
- Well, certainly, the eighteenth century. I think, you know, that anybody who writes in the form of a comic epic is obliged to be indebted to Fielding, so you have to start with *Tom Jones*; and *Tristram Shandy* of course is also a very important book. Dickens, some of Dickens, you know, because I think the thing that I learned or tried to learn from Dickens is the technique he uses, which is very unusual, where he places entirely surrealistic, exaggerated characters against completely naturalistic, very closely observed backgrounds. So he makes his characters look like animated cartoons against the documentary, and the technique should not work, it should look wrong, you know; and the great skill with which he plans these grotesque figures, within a very particularly observed, natural way, is something I have found very useful, and I've tried to do a similar thing.
- And Joyce?
- And Joyce of course; Joyce for the language. I remember again, more or less the same time that I read Borges I read *Ulysses*. And it is very depressing, you know, when you are twenty-one and you want to be a writer and you read *Ulysses*; it makes you want to stop writing. So you have to recover from Joyce.
- Which are the writers you admire today in English literature?; or to put it like this, who is the writer you would like to be if you were not Salman Rushdie?
- Oh, I can't answer that, I can't think... I mean, there are many amongst American writers I like. I mean, I like many, I like Bellow, and Pynchon, and Joseph Heller very much, and some of Barth's novels (not all, I mean, sometimes they get very academic). In English literature I think... in England, I must say, there are very few, exceptional writers just now. Actually I admire Graham Greene, I think in a way his reputation is too big. I don't think he is quite as exceptional, but I think that amongst his generation of English writers, I think there's no doubt he is the most remarkable, a varied writer, and the least parochial, you know, which has been a danger in English literature. So I would be happy to be Graham Greene, I suppose.
- Your novels are fantasies or talk about magical and extraordinary things, but moral and social issues seem to be very important. Although they look like allegories, these moral and social aspects are always present.
- Yes, Well, I think that in the case of *Shame* particularly... this is a novel which tries to say that history has an explanation, that the way in which the history of a country develops has an explanation which you must look not only to

economics and so forth, which is what the Marxist analysis would do, but you also must look towards the ideological, because according to Marxists ideology is not the end, ideology is not fundamental, that economics is fundamental and ideology is secondary. Now, it seems to me that that's one of the limitations of orthodox Marxist thinking, because I think that one of the phenomena that we find all over the world at the moment is that ideology frequently is prior; if you look at a country like Iran, if you look at... many things; if you look, for instance, in something like the feminist movements, you can see that to say that ideology is of secondary importance is to make an oversimplification. And so, this is the book which does, I suppose, talk about the ideological, that is, talks about the moral and social dimensions of our society as being things where we can also find the roots of history; and it struck me that the more I looked at a culture like the Islamic culture in Pakistan, the more I kept coming up against these ideas of honour and shame. Wherever you look at any culture, you find these ideas somehow at the centre, and it seemed to me it became impossible to explain the culture except through these ideas. Of course, these are ideas that are very central to the Islamic world, but it seems to me more and more that they are not only to do with the Islamic world. I've talked to African writers, people from Africa, and these same ideas crop up over and over again in many different African societies, not only the Islamic African societies; and then, of course, in Latin America you find the same ideas. I had not read, at the time when I wrote *Shame*, the novel of García Márquez, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*; and in a way he is writing about a similar thing in this book, when he is writing of a moral code which oppresses the people who live beneath it, you know; and here is a book where nobody wants to commit a murder, but the moral code makes them do it. But it was very striking to me to read that book because it seemed to me to be writing.... oh, he writes more about honour than about shame, he writes about the other side of it, you know; maybe honour is the male side and shame is the female side and there is also that, because honour in the *Chronicle* is all to do with male honour, with machismo and so forth, while shame in my book is very much to do with what is had by women; men are without shame, you know, the women are the shame. So it may be that this is also a gender thing. I was very struck when I read this novel, because it seemed that he was showing me that in this completely different place of the other side of the planet where I've never been the same kind of social code was in operation; so it seems that's why I made pleas in the novel, I said that this is not only about Pakistan, you know, that I deliberately did not name the country Pakistan, because I said that to think that this only operates in this one place is to make a mistake.

— But let's talk about another aspect of your work! *Grimus* is usually cast out of your production. It was your first published novel. But was it really your first novel?

— No, it wasn't. I wrote one before, which was never published. And well, it didn't deserve to be published. It had some interesting ideas; it was in a way prophetic because it was also set in Pakistan, well, not exactly, in a mountain

- area of India and Pakistan (the country was never specified). And it was about a holy man who used to preach in one of these mountain villages and became very popular and was taken up by a group of industrialists, politicians and so forth, and made the leader of a sort of right-wing coup, in the States; so in a way it was a kind of prophecy of Khomeini, I suppose, you know, but very possibly it was a coincidence, and it never was published.
- Was it partly autobiographical, since most first works usually reflect a writer's experiences?
 - No, it wasn't at all autobiographical. It took me a long time to have the strength to come round to autobiography.
 - What can you tell now about the metaphysical and esoteric manner in which *Grimus* is told? Do you feel satisfied now with it?
 - No, not at all. But, you see, the idea at the time was to take certain ideas out of Islamid, and particularly Sufi, philosophy and apply them to the convention of the Western science-fiction novel. So that the root of that novel comes from a twelfth-century metaphysical poem, a Persian poem called *The Conference of the Birds*, by a poet called Farid ud-Din Attar, which is a kind of *Pilgrim's Progress*, in which there are these thirty birds which make an allegorical journey through various symbolic valleys in search of a bird god, and when they get to the top of the mountain—the mountain in the poem is called *Kâf*, which is a letter in the alphabet which is almost a circle, and so the mountain is supposed to encircle the world; that's why it is called *Kâf*— anyway, they get to the top of the mountain, where the god is supposed to live, but there's nothing there, and they get very annoyed with the bird which has led them there, and say «where is the god?», you see, and the god is called *Simurg* (*Grimus* is an anagram for *Simurg*, you see) and the whole poem turns upon this metaphysical pun; the leader bird explains that the word *Simurg*, if you break it into its two syllables, *Si* and *murg*, you can translate as «thirty birds»; so when they have reached the top of the mountain they themselves have become the god, having been purified and so forth; so this kind of religious allegory and this poem, and it is a very beautiful poem and the adventure is very extraordinary... the novel doesn't follow the form of the poem, it doesn't follow the form of the allegorical journey so precisely, but the poem is somewhat behind the book. And what I wanted to do was to take those ideas and to try and translate them into the conventions of the Western novel. I think it didn't work really; I think it was too cerebral, you know, because of what we were saying, it doesn't touch the emotions.
 - The language, the style of *Grimus* is very similar sometimes to the genre of *Nonsense*, to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, for instance: the absurd questions and answers, the animals...
 - Yes, yes, it might be, yes. I think Lewis Carroll is a great novelist, and I think that certainly *Alice in Wonderland* at that time was, and probably still is, a major influence; and yes, it does use all those techniques of kind of surrealist debate, of kind of *Nonsense* debate and so forth. I think the book contains a number of motifs which are quite clever and quite interesting, but I think

it doesn't work as an entity, you know, a book. And I think that really the main shift... there are *two* shifts I made between that and *Midnight's Children*; one is the shift of voice, which is that, I have felt in retrospect, that book was not written in my voice; there are many writers who, if they chose to, could write in that way, and it was like a young writer maybe I had not quite found my voice. And I think that in *Midnight's Children* I did find it: to me the discovery of *Midnight's Children* was that really: it was to find the voice in which I could speak in my own way, not in anybody else's. And the other shift was this idea, you see, because *Grimus* was so abstract a novel, in the end I thought it was that abstraction what was wrong with it; and it was wrong to use such techniques, such fantasizing techniques, that they were only useful when they were firmly rooted inside the real world, and so after that, ever since then, I've tried to make sure that you have the roots in reality first, you know, before you make these leaps.

- And about these roots in reality to which you have referred, do they appear as pieces of autobiography? Or to put it clearer with an example, the intrusion in *Shame* of the *persona* of the writer when talking about the story of Anna Muhammad, what about that: is it reality or is fiction disguised as reality?
- Well, it's obviously designed to be very close to reality, but the point about a novel is that a novel is a novel, you know, and even the bits which pretend not to be a novel are still so a novel; so although the 'I' in *Shame* is obviously very much closer to me than the narrator in *Midnight's Children*, for instance, there are still distinctions to be made, so it mustn't be read as a straightforward autobiography. For example, when he talks about his being writing from the outside, and he says how he goes back to Pakistan every so often, and so it's a country which he knows in slices, and there are gaps, now that's true, and it is true of me as it is of him; but in order to make the point I in his case exaggerated his ignorance, so he goes, he's been there less often than me; his contacts are more intermittent than mine, but now that was simply in order to dramatize the point; you know, otherwise it would never have been a point if I said I go back every six months. In a way it's not interesting; it is more interesting when he goes back only every three years. So in that way there is a slight distinction to be made between he and me, but not very much. It was very deliberate, an attempt to speak very directly.
- And about the complexity of the novels. How much do you work with each one? They seem very elaborate, with many recurrent elements...
- Yes, yes, they are, they are very much reworked. They are reworked over and over again; in fact, I only gradually discover the novel, you know. I always plan quite carefully beforehand, but then always I write the first draft of the novel and change everything; and I really only discover what the novel is about during the first time of writing it through. Then I have to rework and rework in order to get at the control of it. So they are written many times.
- Do you have a special habit when writing? Are you dedicated wholly to the novel in progress or do you do other things at the same time?

- Well, more or less; I never work at night, or very rarely, and usually only in the last stages of a book. I mean, in the last draft of a book, which is always written more quickly than the earlier drafts because by then I've solved most of the problems and it's really a final act of control. The last draft I usually do write completely manacled, and I do almost nothing else, and I write the day and the night and so forth until it's finished; but that maybe the last few months, you know; the process takes many years and in the rest of the time I work in the day. I make a point of usually not working in the evening, so that I can have some kind of life; that, I think, is also necessary to have.
- What happens with your short stories? Although you possess the art of the story teller, your short stories are not usually read because they are not collected in a single volume. Do you have a plan for them?
- Yes, but not yet. Yes, so far there are only... you know, one does not collect every story one writes, because there are some stories sometimes that you'd sooner allow them to go away. At the moment, simply there aren't enough. There are about six or seven I'm happy with, that I would like to see collected. But maybe it needs another four or five, you know, before there are enough for a collection. So in one or two years, yes, I hope so. Also I hope to make a collection of my non-fiction writing, political writing or critical writings, and also there are a lot of that in the last few years, one way or another. And again it's impossible to find because it is scattered especially in newspapers. At some point I'd also like to make a collection of these.
- You are now working on a novel and a script for a film.
- Yes, I have finished the script.
- Most of your novels reflect the influence of cinema. The style of a script, even; and some episodes are written in that style...
- Well, that's strange, yes. I've always been very interested in the cinema. I think, you know, for somebody like me who was between... my time at the University was between eighteen and twenty-one in the years '65 to '68, which was also the great period of the New Wave in the cinema; and every week it seemed there was a new cinematic masterpiece to go and see, so certainly in that period the main artistic influences on me I would say were cinematic and not literary. You know, that people like Buñuel, I mean supremely Buñuel, but also Godard, and Resnais, and Wadja, and Truffaut, and Fellini, etc., all producing their movies, Bergman, Kurosawa also... that every week there was a new film, and this was not an old film you went to see in, you know, art-cinema houses; these were new movies that they were then releasing; it was a very exciting period to go to cinema and I think that a great deal of what I began to think about how to write and how to be an artist came out of the experience of the New Wave, so it was quite natural that some of that should affect the writing that I came to do. What is strange is that I thought it was quite easy to write a screen play, and I've found it very difficult because, you see, I think, in fact if you look at the prose of *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*, the quantity of dialogue is very small. I hadn't really realized this until I came to write something in which I had to do everything in dialogue.

In fact, in *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* there is very little, small quantity, with long period passages of prose and very short moments of dialogue. And I had in a way to learn a completely new kind of writing. I think what helped is in my imagination; it's quite pictorial and it does tend to think in images, so that made it possible. But I found it a big problem not to have any descriptive prose at all.

- So an adaptation of these two novels would have to be done by somebody else.
- Yes. I wouldn't be interested anyway, you know, because I spent five years with one book, I spent three years with the other book, and I've already exhausted this material, you know, as far as I'm concerned. So in a way, it is not even a work for me; it is for somebody else to do it, because whoever does it, particularly *Midnight's Children* (it is a difficult book to film because it is too long, you know), so whoever is to film it would have to make a selection, and I couldn't do that. It's more interesting to have somebody else to do that.
- Many thanks!



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