

The Wonders and Perils of Air: Crossing Magic Realities in Salman Rushdie's Fiction

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I had never been up in a plane before, and the experience of passing through clouds – I had left Bombay on a rare cloudy day – was so spookily like the images of the After Life in movies, paintings and story-books that I got the shivers. Was I travelling to the country of the dead? I half-expected to see a pair of pearly gates standing on the fluffy fields of cumulus outside my window, and a man holding a double-entry account-book of rights and wrongs. Sleep rolled over me, and in my first-ever high-altitude dreams I learned that I had indeed already left the land of the living.¹

In this quotation from Salman Rushdie's novel *The Moor's Last Sigh*, the act of flying emerges as a deeply unsettling experience, the outcome of which is eerily insecure, as it literally lifts characters out of their usual surroundings and delivers them into the unreliable forces of air. It is the purpose of this essay to explore the symbolic significance of flying in Rushdie's fiction: it discusses the fantastic flight experiences of Rushdie's characters, and considers how such flight experiences metaphorically represent the act of migration. Focussing on *The Satanic Verses*, *The Moor's Last Sigh* and *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, this paper suggests that the passage through air constitutes a liminal phase in the lives of Rushdie's migrant characters, who experience migration as a journey through a transitory zone which forever alters their perception of reality. The paper argues that by taking into account the perilous nature of flying, one can reach a re-evaluation of migration in Rushdie's fiction. It seeks to distance itself from the almost ubiquitous critical agreement that Rushdie depicts migration as a more or less unambiguous cause for celebration. Leela Gandhi, for example, claims that '[t]hroughout his writing, Rushdie

¹ Salman Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), p. 381.

celebrates the migrant condition as the basis for an alternative epistemology', and she accuses him of constructing India as uninhabitable in order to justify his characters' emigration.² Mita Banerjee's conviction that Rushdie ignores the dismal reality of immigrants and prefers to celebrate migration as liberation is similarly representative of the predominant tendency to interpret Rushdie's take on migration as overly optimistic.³ Contrary to such arguments, my contention is that a reading which links migration to the fantastic flight experiences of Rushdie's protagonists can unearth a full awareness of the deeply unsettling nature of migration.

Rushdie first symbolically connects migration and flying in *Shame*. Here, the narrator explicitly links the migrant condition with the 'conquest of the force of gravity',⁴ and argues for the existence of a conceptual link between the two. He thus equates the migrant's accomplishment with the fulfilment of one of humankind's oldest dreams – that of being able to fly. Developing this association further, the narrator also sees the resentment with which migrants tend to be confronted as being caused by their literal rise above the forces of gravity: 'We have performed the act of which all men anciently dream, the thing for which they envy birds; that is to say, we have flown'.⁵

Seen in this light, migration becomes a form of liberation, a loosening of ties that contrasts with the concept of belonging. Feelings of belonging, the narrator suggests, can be confining, preventing people from breaking out of old routines and seeking new chances in new realms. At his most radical and negative, the narrator of *Shame* even suggests that the notions of emotional belonging and roots are promoted in order to thwart people's urge to achieve independence: 'Look under your feet. You will not

² Leela Gandhi, "'Ellowen, Deeowen'": Salman Rushdie and The Migrant's Desire', in *England Through Colonial Eyes in Twentieth-Century Fiction*, ed. by Ann Blake, Leela Gandhi and Sue Thomas (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 157-170 (p. 157).

³ Mita Banerjee, *The Chutneyfication of History: Salman Rushdie, Michael Ondaatje, Bharati*

Mukherjee and the Postcolonial Debate, American Studies 95 (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 2002), throughout.

⁴ Salman Rushdie, *Shame* (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 85.

⁵ *Shame*, p. 85.

find gnarled growths sprouting through the soles. Roots, I sometimes think, are a conservative myth, designed to keep us in our places'.⁶ Hence migration becomes a desirable act of secession, a refusal to succumb to traditions that seek to dominate a person's identity. In this instance, the act of flying is employed as an ideal symbol of the liberating potential of migration.

Yet, flying is not just a positive image; in fact, it is a trope involving a profound conceptual clash, which is expressed in the bizarre events that characterise plane journeys in Rushdie's fiction. I would suggest that an awareness of this clash can lead us to an evaluation of Rushdie's treatment of migration as being slightly more ambiguous than generally suggested. Flying is not a natural form of movement for human beings, and it is seen as involving serious risks. This is already apparent in ancient mythology, where autonomous human attempts to fly are perceived as a form of hubris and are, accordingly, frustrated. When Icarus, for example, forgets his place in the cosmological world order, the result is disastrous: he falls out of the sky and dies. Air is the element of the gods only, and humans are allowed in this realm solely with their express permission, such as when Demeter presents Triptolemus with a chariot drawn by dragons. In other mythologies, air and the heavens are also the abode of supernatural beings, and consequently barred to humans: witches, angels and houris all inhabit the air and the heavens.⁷

⁶ *Shame*, p. 86.

⁷ Such conventional creatures of the air appear in Rushdie as well, if in parodied forms. Eduvigis Refugio, the flight attendant from *The Moor's Last Sigh* who might be a houri, will be mentioned below. Recall also Gibreel's imagined or real transformation into the archangel Gabriel, as well as his former lover Rekha Merchant, who haunts Gibreel as an evil demon or witch on a flying carpet. Unfortunately, a discussion of Gibreel and Rekha is outwith the scope of this article. A tentative suggestion would be that Gibreel's situation is similar to that of Ormus, as discussed below. His ultimate failure is connected to his inflexibility, and to his inability to tolerate, let alone accept, foreign cultures. Such an interpretation would also offer an explanation for Gibreel's transformation into an archangel obsessed with rules and orders. A detailed analysis of the unholy trinity of archangel Gibreel, fallen angel Saladin, and evil spirit Rekha, would, no doubt, prove particularly fascinating.

Air-space, though a focus of desire, is an element fundamentally alien to humans, and flight is not only an expression of freedom; it also entails a profound loss of control, since by entering the realm of air we surrender ourselves completely to influences beyond our authority. This mental relinquishing of control is mirrored by an actual one, as Gottdiener repeatedly emphasises in his discussion of the culture of air travel.⁸ In the confined space of the aircraft, faced with the infinity of the sky outside, the recognition of the plane's – and our own – fragility causes even the illusion of autonomous agency to fade as we become aware of our own enforced passivity. As Gottdiener argues, this complete loss of control is an exceptional experience that 'provokes primitive fears for survival'.⁹

The feeling of being at the mercy of other forces forms another symbolic bridge between migration and flight. While flying and migrating can both be seen as a metaphorical means of evading control by old and mundane patterns of behaviour, they are also acts that prevent individuals from seizing control over their own fates. Upon arrival in their new home countries, migrants typically find themselves subjected to significant restrictions to their personal freedom, and in combination with their confrontation with new social codes, their control of their lives diminishes.

The awareness of the profoundly unsettling nature of such an experience, as well as the awareness of the highly contradictory symbolic content of flying, I would suggest, is what motivates the peculiar character of air travel in Rushdie's fiction. Flying becomes a liminal experience, and the act of flight constitutes a liminal phase in which old familiar laws and structures are suspended, and reality is redefined. From the moment they enter the plane, migrants are no longer in their own countries, and in severing the ties that bind them to the ground, migrants also loosen their hold on reality, since in their new home countries they will encounter notions of reality that are emphatically different from their own. Air is the

⁸ Mark Gottdiener, *Life in the Air: Surviving the New Culture of Air Travel* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), p. 91 and throughout.

⁹ Gottdiener, p. 114.

transitory zone through which migrants have to pass, on a journey that leads them from one concept of reality to another. This is also what befalls Rushdie's migrant characters. Once they succumb to the fluidity of air, the logic of life on the ground begins to disintegrate, and their grip on their own perception of reality starts to slip as the supernatural begins to assert itself.

For Saladin Chamcha, one of the protagonists of *The Satanic Verses*, the alteration of reality starts with an unpleasant surprise as his carefully cultivated British accent begins unaccountably to slip on his flight back to Bombay, giving way to his long-shed 'Bombay lilt'.¹⁰ That this transformation takes place on an eastbound flight is unusual, but it is logical in the context of this novel since for, fully anglicised Saladin, his journey back to India amounts to a form of migration, as he visits his former home not as an Indian returned, but as a British citizen for whom Indians are despicable savages.

Even though Saladin is shocked by the unexpected collapse of his British vowel system, part of him acknowledges the appropriateness of such a development, since he recognises its accordance with the absurd nature of his return to India, which he regards as 'an unnatural journey'.¹¹ Hence from his flight back to London he expects a normalisation of events, but quite the opposite is the case as the transformative potential of air makes itself felt in its full miraculous force. When the aircraft is destroyed in an explosion, Saladin and Gibreel, the only other survivor, plummet towards the English Channel, and they begin, imperceptibly at first, to transform. It is symptomatic that their transmutations commence during their passage through air, since air is the 'most insecure and transitory of zones, illusory, discontinuous, metamorphic', and hence an ideal symbol of the migrant's passage.¹² When Saladin lands on the English beach, he feels that even the ground beneath his feet is no longer quite solid, as he finds himself metamorphosed into a stereotypical representation of the migrant-as-devil,

¹⁰ Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (London: Viking, 1988), p. 34.

¹¹ *Verses*, p. 34.

¹² *Verses*, p. 5.

complete with hoofs and horns. Hence Saladin's fall through air has momentous consequences: it turns him from an established member of the English bourgeoisie into an illegal immigrant, and compels him to readjust his picture of England when he suddenly finds himself at the mercy of sadistic immigration police. Stranded on the English beach, Saladin's perception of reality is irrevocably changed as the world around him grows ever more fantastic. His conviction that 'This isn't England' betrays his complete bewilderment and initial failure to reconcile his version of glorious Britain with the face the country shows to less privileged immigrants.¹³ Forced to accept that the surreal world into which he has fallen from the skies is very real, Saladin is now faced with the migrant's age-old task of dealing with bizarre surroundings, a task which he needs to master in order to reclaim his former physical identity.

Moraes 'Moor' Zogoiby, the protagonist of *The Moor's Last Sigh*, is subjected to a similarly unsettling experience on his flight from Bombay to Spain. He is overcome by epistemological confusion as his notion of reality quickly breaks down, and when the fantastic enters the real, he is no longer sure whether the crew of the plane consists of ghosts or living beings. Things turn bizarre when Eduvigis Refugio, one of the stewardesses, befriends Moor, persuades him into brief sexual intercourse, and disappears; and the strangeness deepens when the other flight attendants deny that she even exists. When Moor insists that his encounter with Eduvigis was not a dream, he is faced with a situation that is even more profoundly surreal: the other flight attendants suddenly accuse him of having sexually assaulted them.¹⁴ Confused and unable to find an explanation of this bizarre situation, Moor eventually resigns himself to the possibility of a supernatural explanation of events, a decision which betrays the impact of air travel on Moor's perception of reality, as he himself concedes:

¹³ *Verses*, p. 158.

¹⁴ *Moor*, pp. 382-383.

You will see that I had entered an unfamiliar state of mind. The place, language, people and customs I knew had all been removed from me by the simple act of boarding this flying vehicle; and these, for most of us, are the four anchors of the soul.¹⁵

This is quite a dramatic description of the immediate effect of flying on Moor's perception of the universe. Having lost the anchorage of his old life in Bombay, Moor experiences a loss of control and enters a state of uncertainty which propels him on a journey towards mystery and a 'surreal foreignness' which he feels unable to 'decode'.¹⁶

While Moor's experience of air travel leads to epistemological confusion, Ormus's journey through air in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* causes an ontological crisis which will influence the rest of his life. Ormus is eager to migrate, and fully prepared to shed his old skin and become new, but migration turns out more complex than he imagines. When the aircraft is just about to cross the frontier between Asia and Europe, the mystery of air hits Ormus full force. A membrane in the air seems to be holding the plane back and fighting against its movement towards Europe; and once the plane has managed to break through this obstacle, the air holds true miracles in store for Ormus:

And as he passes that unseen frontier he sees the tear in the sky, and for a terror-stricken instant glimpses miracles through the gash, visions for which he can find no words, the mysteries at the heart of things, Eleusinian, unspeakable, bright.¹⁷

Thus the act of flying engenders in Ormus an awareness of the fragility of reality. This liminal experience is the more unsettling since the flight from Bombay to London not only confronts Ormus with the flimsy substance of the real, but marks the starting point of what will eventually develop into an

¹⁵ Moor, p. 383.

¹⁶ Moor, p. 383.

¹⁷ Salman Rushdie, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999), p. 254.

even more shattering revelation about the nature of reality. As the migrant's impression that the unfamiliar foreign cultures which he encounters are utterly fantastic is literalised, Ormus is gradually driven towards a full awareness of the existence of parallel worlds.¹⁸ The interconnection between the act of flying and the migrant's altered perception of reality is made explicit when Ormus himself perceives his revelations as intrinsically linked with his airborne state: 'now that he has taken flight, the miraculous has assailed him, has surged through the fractured sky and anointed him with magic.'¹⁹ Thus in the experiences of all three characters, the impact of the supernatural is closely linked to the act of flying. However, the effects of the supernatural linger even when the characters return to the ground. Their notion of the real being irrevocably transformed, the characters are now faced with the task of coming to terms with a surreal reality.

The strategies the three characters employ to accommodate their fantastic experiences are quite diverse, and marked by varying degrees of success. Their different ways of coping with their absurd surroundings can thus be seen to reflect migrants' varying capacity to strike a balance between the appropriation of and by 'other' cultures.

Of all the three characters, Moor's engagement with the parameters of a foreign culture is the least productive. The feeling of strangeness which first assails him aboard the plane refuses to subside and the effects of his journey remain insurmountable. Moor experiences migration as a force that threatens his sense of individuality as all familiar certainties are erased and he comes to question even his ability to make sense of the world. This is connected to the fact that he left Bombay out of necessity rather than choice, and lacks any true inner motivation to adapt to his new environment. Despairing in his attempts to reconcile his perception of reality with the bizarre events in Benengeli, Moor never manages to fuse the two into a new whole, causing his view of the world to disintegrate without being able to substitute a productive alternative.

¹⁸ *Ground*, p. 347.

¹⁹ *Ground*, p. 254.

Ormus in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* and Saladin in *The Satanic Verses* are more enthusiastic migrants, and their attitude towards their new surroundings is characterised by a greater eagerness to turn their sense of displacement into a positive force. Yet their strategies are fundamentally different. While Saladin's contempt for India leads him to shed all Indianness in order to re-invent himself as an Englishman, Ormus, though eager to be westernised, wants to leave his mark on England and the USA. He recognises that the direction of influence between him and his new culture needs to be reciprocal, as apparent in his very first appreciation of England: 'This is a mirage, a ghost world, which becomes real only beneath our magic touch, our loving footfall, our kiss. We have to imagine it into being, from the ground up.'²⁰ If Ormus's strategy of dealing with the migrant's dilemma of finding the right balance between active and passive appropriation seems at first to be highly productive, this impression needs to be readjusted upon reading the later parts of the novel. With his growing fame as a pop singer, Ormus becomes more and more aloof, and he retreats into his penthouse apartment, where he resides above the city, free from the necessity of active engagement. As his distance from real life increases, so does his sensitivity to changes in his immediate environment, and he becomes unable to tolerate novelty. On his last world tour he insists that every hotel suite he occupies be turned into an exact replica of his own flat, as he refuses to adapt even to the interchangeable features of hotel rooms.

If Ormus's dwindling willingness to be appropriated by new cultures marks the ultimate failure of his engagement with his environment, the same development in Saladin heralds a productive form of emancipation in *The Satanic Verses*. Saladin's growing awareness of British racism and his eventual refusal to succumb to the stereotypical representations of 'the other' which British society constructs lead to his re-transformation into his former physical self. Yet while his body changes back, his personality remains altered by his encounter with another culture in a way which allows

²⁰ *Ground*, p. 268.

him to exploit his experience of the cultural clash in a positive way. At the end of his metamorphosis lies his reintegration into a community, as well as his reconciliation with his cultural roots. Learning of the necessity to preserve his own autonomous self when coming into contact with ‘the other’, in Saladin’s case is productively balanced with his acknowledgement of the role of his English experiences in his character formation, allowing him to achieve a state of productive hybridity. If Saladin, at the end of the novel, returns to Bombay to stay, this does not delete the migrant years from his life. And if his final passage through air passes without noteworthy event, then this is the ultimate symbol of his successful fusion of all available realities in his final mastery of the task of negotiating the wonders and perils of air.

My reading of flying as a metaphor for migration has sought to suggest that Rushdie’s attitude towards migration is less unambiguously positive than most critics seem to propose. The fantastic and violent flight experiences to which his characters are subjected reveal that Rushdie fully appreciates the disturbing nature of the act of migrating. The ways in which the characters deal with such experiences, however, also show that Rushdie portrays the inability to engage with the challenges of migration productively as a serious, and sometimes fatal, deficiency. Although his depiction of such failures might be sympathetic – such as in his treatment of Gibreel’s plight and eventual suicide – what prevails is the belief that migration can be turned into a positive experience. My discussion started with the narrator of *Shame* and his comments on flying, and it is with this narrator, and with one of his comments on translation and migration, that I also want to conclude. ‘It is generally believed,’ says the narrator, ‘that something is always lost in translation; I cling to the notion ... that something can also be gained’.²¹

²¹ *Shame*, p. 29.

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