

SEDUCTIONS OF WRITING AND READING: A REVIEW OF *RUSHDIE'S CROSS-POLLINATIONS* BY DANA BĂDULESCU

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This book is a passionate reader's informed critical analysis of the emotional, cultural and, ultimately, textual function of love in Salman Rushdie's fiction. In Dana Bădulescu's refined approach, love – for cultures and texts, for people and among people caught up in various social and historical circumstances – is the mechanism through which, despite, at times, serious adverse circumstances, the famous novelist's literary work comes to life and touches the hearts of a vast international audience. It is well known that Rushdie's position in the world has always been that of a critical intellectual at odds with the powers that be. Yet, as Bădulescu shows in her vast, enthusiastic and original reading that boldly avoids stereotypes and covers almost the whole of Rushdie's work so far, his embattled attitude towards the various injustices of political systems hides a fascination with otherness that leads him to a long series of geographical, cultural and inter-human border-crossings. Bădulescu's Rushdie is a positive, luminous, infinitely creative storyteller (rather than the victim of political injustice, spending his life in hiding and potentially seeking vengeance), in love with the world and with the beauty of its many cultures and mythologies, whose rich web of scenarios of seduction charm audiences worldwide through the power of his unmatched imagination.

The book is introduced by a Foreword signed by Petya Tsoneva of the “St. Cyril and St. Methodius” University of Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria. Tsoneva positions Bădulescu's contribution within the international exchange of critical ideas under the sign of a “reading of borders”, which she describes as “a recent prolific preoccupation of the academic world”, and describes it as “a multi-level analysis of Rushdie's spectacular position in the world of writing” (Bădulescu, 2022, ix). Bădulescu, in turn, invites us in her preface to this edition to read the book through the lens of love, which seems to be the most appropriate emotion that should govern the approach to writing of this calibre. She describes herself – and, by extension, any critic – as a reader in love with Rushdie's writing and proposes an

interpretation of the celebrated novelist's many layers of intertextuality through the lens of cross-pollination or, rather, cross-pollinations. This is how Tsoneva defines the central concept of Bădulescu's book: "'Cross-pollinations' – a conceptual term that modulates the degree of negotiable borders in Rushdie's work – suggest liquid, cross-border and air-borne relationships between places, cultures, times and identities in his novels" (Bădulescu, 2022, ix-x). A measure of the degree of polysemy in Rushdie's novels, this concept is, as the book shows, also about love, in its most benefic, fertile guise, that travels the world and produces texts of a cultural hybridity defying all limitations.

The first edition of *Rushdie's Cross-Pollinations* came out with the Junimea Publishing House in Iași in 2013. The current edition is faithful to some of the main ideas that gave birth to the original project, but otherwise departs from it significantly, being a completely restructured, updated and rethought version of the initial book. As announced on the title page, there are three new subchapters dedicated to Rushdie's 2019 novel *Quichotte*, which had not been published at the time of the first edition. Bădulescu preserves the original title, whose highly polysemous meaning is key to her approach and which is faithful to the dynamic to-and-fro of fertile intertextualities and cross-border encounters that make up Rushdie's writing.

Much criticism has been written on the work of the groundbreaking and rather controversial "classic" of postcolonial writing Salman Rushdie. Being original in this field is therefore a daunting challenge. And yet, Dana Bădulescu manages it to a great extent, by addressing that part of Rushdie's singularity that transcends postcolonial or postmodernist cultural/ literary analyses (without these two perspectives being eliminated from her book, as a separate chapter is dedicated to each). While identifying instances of magical realism, metafiction and creative anachronism in Rushdie's writing, the book purports to re-position the multi-faceted, multi-cultural personality of the author in today's world. Beyond postcolonial literature's central gesture of the empire writing back to the centre and the much-debated *Satanic Verses* scandal, Rushdie is shown to represent a major reinterpreter of universal mythical and cultural traditions, but also a citizen of today's world, an international public intellectual whose literature zooms in on some of the most delicate issues of the turn of the third millennium.

This exercise of reading Rushdie in a fresh light is part of Bădulescu's long-term interest in and contributions to the theory of reading, as proven most recently by two articles on the topic published in the journal *Philologica Jassyensia* (Bădulescu 2020 and 2023), as well as being indicative of her interest in translation, both from one language into another and as cultural translation (as reflected in many published articles and interviews related to translation). *Rushdie's Cross-Pollinations* operates

on the metaphor of reading as journey or quest, but also as a palimpsestuous endeavour, in the light of Gerard Genette's theory of "transtextuality," (Genette, 1997, 1, qtd. in Bădulescu, 2022, 16). Thus, a multi-layered approach, which goes into vertical, temporal depths, is doubled by a horizontal exploration of space through the act of travelling, both of which match Rushdie's own exploration of time and space in his novels. The eight chapters of the book, divided, in their turn, into subchapters, explore a variety of perspectives on Rushdie's work, offering the reader a complex, lively and, at the same time, fresh perspective on the author's towering personality. It is to be noted that Bădulescu avoids pigeonholing Rushdie's work and personality into pre-established slots. While her exegesis takes on board a long bibliographical list quoted at the end of the book, careful close reading prevails, not allowing any critical grid to influence her direct contact with the text.

The first chapter, "Rushdie's Sorcery with Language", explores the multiplicity of Rushdie's experiments with language in the process of forging a voice. Bădulescu delves into an elaborate, theoretically-informed language analysis, with all the pleasure of the dedicated, language-sensitive reader that she confesses herself to be in the Author's Introduction. The chapter revolves around Rushdie's "chutnification" as described by Saleem Sinai in *Midnight's Children*. This concept mediates Rushdie's approach to history (or his turning of history into fiction), read through the lens of concepts such as "palimpsest" and "ekphrasis", which describe the many layers of Rushdie's linguistic acrobatics, but also his exquisite combinations of the visual with the narrative flow. Bădulescu carefully follows the parallel development of Rushdie's plots and his linguistic achievements, starting from the observation that translation is the linguistic equivalent of travelling across borders (Rushdie describes himself as a "translated man" in *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie, 1991, 17) and that the Greek word for "metaphor" has the same meaning as the Latin word "translatio" (Bădulescu, 2022, 2-3). Chutnification, Rushdie's metaphor for preserving history in pickle-jars in *Midnight's Children*, is, importantly, based on these processes of defamiliarizing language by creating his own variety of English. Thus, in novels such as *The Satanic Verses* or *The Moor's Last Sigh*, writing becomes an exquisite political act that contains in itself a whole power narrative that doubles the one displayed on the level of the plot.

The following chapters build a complex web of connections in space and time between Rushdie's writing and the historical, literary, cultural and political context that surrounds him. In chapter 2, "Rushdie's Joyce", Bădulescu connects Rushdie with the immediately preceding literary tradition in the guise of Joyce's modernist experiment, in which some of Rushdie's own postmodern acrobatics originate. The chapter argues that Joyce and Rushdie are both transcultural writers, each having his own "imaginary homeland", as proven by their bold cosmopolitan choices. Important thematic and stylistic connections are established between the two writers. This is also an opportunity to actually

compare two postcolonialisms – as well as two exquisite polyglot approaches to the multiculturalism of the world – as they manifest themselves in their relationship with the British (post)colonial centre of power: Joyce's Irish one and Rushdie's Indian one.

Chapter 3, "Meddling with the Muddling Rushdie Affair" looks at the most adverse political context Rushdie has had to face in his career. It focuses on the unmissable subject of the *fatwa*, Rushdie's condemnation to death by the Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran on account of the alleged blasphemy of which a few sentences in *The Satanic Verses* are deemed to be guilty. With an unadulterated sense of humour, Bădulescu dedicates a short subchapter to the fact that the *fatwa* will never be lifted off Rushdie's head, as the only person who could have lifted it, the Ayatollah himself, died shortly after he pronounced the writer's death sentence. Throughout the chapter we read a careful depiction of the spectacular evolution of the *Satanic Verses* scandal. Subchapter III.3, about "Muslim Reactions to 'What's in a Name'", raises, once again, an issue of language and naming, which, when misused, leads to cataclysmic developments. Western and Eastern reactions to the *Fatwa* are mentioned in parallel with Rushdie's own reaction and the ways the event affected his relation with his own country, India, and the rest of the world. The obligatory positioning of Rushdie's personality in the world of his time opens to Bădulescu a whole variety of tracks to explore in her search for the sources of inspiration that fertilized Rushdie's creative endeavour.

Thus, Chapter 4, "Body, Sensuousness, Eros and the New Aesthetic Order from Schiller to Rushdie", is a rather surprising one as it goes even further back in time in search of Rushdie's roots in the European cultural and philosophical tradition. Some of the sources of eroticism and its relation with the aesthetic in Rushdie's novels are found in the European counter-tradition of Eros as expressed for example in Schiller's 1795 *Letters of the Aesthetic Education of Man*, through Nietzsche's *Gay Science* and the Pre-Raphaelites' eroticism and the nineteenth fin de siècle aestheticised homoeroticism, read through the lens of contemporary thinkers such as Marcuse and Bataille. This engaging chapter stands out by going down a less explored track – because of an excess of postcolonial readings of Rushdie – which gives Bădulescu the opportunity to build graceful philosophical interpretative scenarios. These scenarios draw on Rushdie's constructions of Eros in novels such as *Midnight's Children*, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* and *The Enchantress of Florence*, identifying various instances of aesthetically sublimated polymorphous sexuality. This exercise in theorizing is continued in Chapter 5, titled "Liquid Bridges in Salman Rushdie's Writing", where Rushdie's contribution to modernity is approached through Zygmunt Bauman's theories of liquid modernity, placed in a dialogue with, this time, postcolonial sources such as Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* and Arjun Appadurai in *Modernity at Large*. Rushdie's

own claim at defining modernity is thus positioned within the East/ West modernity debate, in which Rushdie has engaged both in his essay books and in his novels.

A monograph dedicated to intertextual connections across time and space in Salman Rushdie's work could not overlook his important encounter with postmodernist aesthetics. This mission is accomplished in Chapter 6, "Rushdie's Postmodernist Twist". An earlier version of this chapter was published in article form in *Ethos*, a magazine on the theory of culture, in 2012, at a very timely date, when the literary world was reconsidering, with hindsight, the literary and cultural trend presupposed by a number of critics to have ended. Dana Bădulescu discusses Rushdie's extremely self-conscious narrators, with Rai Merchant in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* as the most convincing example, as well as his own awareness of the constructedness and fictitiousness of the world of his novels. His "non-mimetic narrative mode" involves a complex interaction with "myth, dream, fiction and hybridity" (Bădulescu, 2022, 71), which results in a truly postmodern freeplay of imagination for which Rushdie is famous. This goes hand in hand with the postcolonial writer's oppositional attitude with respect to the former centre of Empire and with Rushdie's particular use of magic realism. The discussion continues in Chapter 7, "Rushdie's Postcolonial Satire," of which an earlier version was published in the same *Ethos* magazine two years later, to complete the postmodern/ postcolonial dyad which famously characterizes Rushdie's writing in the eyes of most of his readers. These interdependent aspects of Rushdie's writing (as his postcolonial satire displays strong postmodern elements) could not have been left aside in a monograph, but Bădulescu spices them up through her approach in the light of Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque and dialogic imagination, polyphony and heteroglossia, which characterize Rushdie's voice across his career and stand out in novels such as *Midnight's Children*, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* and *Fury*.

Chapter 8, significantly titled "From Rushdie's Novel of Disorientation to His New York Novels, of Which the Latest is *Quichotte*", concludes the monograph with considerations about Rushdie's American period. His "novel of disorientation", as Bădulescu calls it, which announces a significant change of direction, is *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*. The novel is announced in the author's preface as "a limbo drawing on Eastern and Western myths and archetypes, redolent of a transcultural sensitivity" (Bădulescu, 2022, xviii). Rushdie's turn-of-the-century novel is further described in the chapter as a story about "losing the East", about the rock'n'roll spirit of the fifties rendered through the reader's "suspension of disbelief" (Bădulescu, 2022, 89). Bădulescu follows this change of perspective in Rushdie's writing, through his American novels, which amplify this suspension of disbelief into the symbolical creation of a New World in *The Enchantress of Florence* (which connect America to the Renaissance dreamers who led to its invention), *Fury* (a true New York novel that

triggers comparisons with Don DeLillo) and *Quichotte*, a contemporary reinterpretation of Cervantes's classic as a global novel, connecting remote spaces and temporalities whose meanings fuse into the present moment. This novel marks a new stage in Rushdie's writing for Bădulescu: one that goes beyond postcolonialism into a cosmopolitan third-millennium world, changed into a highly dynamic space on the move by technology. The book concludes by acknowledging its endeavour to describe Rushdie's change from a postcolonial author (even *the* postcolonial author) to that of a writer of the global world.

As stated at the beginning of this review, Rushdie criticism around the world is abundant and positioning the study under discussion within this vast plethora of critical work can only be an approximate endeavour. Yet, as compared to other Rushdie monographs, such as Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Cambridge Companion to Salman Rushdie* or Andrew Teverson's *Salman Rushdie* (both published in 2007), or edited collections on Rushdie's works such as *Salman Rushdie in Context*, ed. by Florian Stadler (2023), this book is singled out through its complex exercise in changing critical perspectives upon Rushdie's work as his own fiction progresses from the status of exemplary postcolonial writing to the global space of writing in English. Like Rushdie's work, which has travelled across the world, Bădulescu's critical exercise coming from Eastern Europe (where the first edition, directed primarily at Romanian students and scholars of Rushdie was published) has travelled into the global world of critical exchange of ideas through its second revised edition. As compared to other thematically focused studies of Rushdie's writing, such as Vassilena Parashkevova's 2012 monograph *Salman Rushdie's Cities* or Ursula Kluwick's 2011 *Exploring Magic Realism in Salman Rushdie's Fiction*, Bădulescu's book, which also contains references to cities and magic realism, fuses them under the auspices of an elaborate aesthetics of love that governs, as she argues, both Rushdie's writing and her own critical approach, and where the book's originality stems from.

Fruitful dialogues can also be established between this book and other studies of contemporary literatures in English that contain chapters on Salman Rushdie and, like Bădulescu's book, trace historical or intercultural connections between Rushdie and other authors within various critical perspectives. Such books are, for instance, Robert Marzec's *An Ecological and Postcolonial Study of Literature: From Daniel Defoe to Salman Rushdie* (2007), which historicizes an ecological (rather than, in Bădulescu's case, aesthetic) tradition present in fiction about distant territories that we came to think of as (post)colonial spaces; Søren Frank's *Migration and Literature: Günter Grass, Milan Kundera, Salman Rushdie, and Jan Kjærstad* (2008), which looks at migration outside the postcolonial space, at some of Rushdie's fellow "translated men" coming from social and political backgrounds comparable to, but different from Rushdie's; or my own *Performance and*

Performativity in Contemporary Fiction in English (2015), which examines reinterpretations of Indian mythical narratives through the tradition of Indian theatrical performance and through the performative function of language (as defined by J.L. Austin) in the works of Salman Rushdie, Vikram Chandra and Arundhati Roy. Bădulescu's approach to the postcolonial debate, to migration and to language in and as translation differs from all of these studies through the vast variety of interconnected perspectives offered on Rushdie's writing, thus being a useful compendium of possible approaches to the interested scholar. Her many perspectives are brought together by a permanent awareness of the monumental literary edifice we associate with Rushdie, to which one can only do justice, as she does, through infinite reverence and love. The book offers a fresh, uninhibited interpretation of Rushdie that urges academics and students alike to re-approach Rushdie's work outside the many grills of interpretation that have been forced onto it. This is an academic book that makes an enchanting reading, is convincingly inviting and stimulates further interpretations.

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