https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14226181

Magdalena Kostova-Panayotova
Sofia University "Saint Kliment Ohridski", Bulgaria
[mpanayotova@diuu.uni-sofia.bg]

The Imagined Memory/Invented History

Abstract: *Rushdie's first essay, in his book Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991, published four years before The Moor's Last Breath, seems to me very important to the understanding of this novel. In this Rushdie essay, exiled writers are seen as haunted by a sense of loss, but the homeland is always imagined, the view of it, a view through broken mirrors. However, they are not simply mirrors of nostalgia, but "a useful tool with which to work in the present...we are not gods, but wounded beings, cracked lenses, capable of only fragmentary perceptions" (Rushdi 1991). Rushdie compares the emigrant's gaze to the past, to the imagined homeland, to the "Indian of the mind" with that of Lot's wife: even if you turn into a pillar of salt, you cannot resist looking back. For the writer, the novel is one of the ways to deny the official, political version of the truth, quoting Kundera: "Man's struggle against power is a struggle of memory against forgetting" (ibid.). The novel's title receives various illuminations in the course of the text, referring both successively and simultaneously to the story of Boabdil, to the iconic "Song of my Cid" (the comparison of Bella with Jimena and Camoinche with Cid, later in the novel, the story of the Japanese artist and the Moor), to Shakespeare's "Othello", but also to the gas station with the same name "Last Breath" at the beginning of the text. The historical eras to which the narrative is directed at the very beginning are several: the Spanish Reconquista of Granada and the exile of the Moors, the establishment of trade relations between Europe and India, the colonial expansion of Portugal, social and political events in India in the 20th century, and the narrative in the writer's ironically mimetic strategy it resembles the classic novels of the 19th century, describing the lives and family histories of four generations of Gamma-Zogobi.*
Keywords: *Rushdie; imaginary homelands; the exile of the Moors; memory.*

The Moor's Last Sigh (1995), is a book read through different lenses, as are many of Salman Rushdie's global postmodern fairytale fantasies. As noted, this novel is the first after the fatwa and after *The Satanic Verses*, after about seven years of novelistic silence, which justifiably leads critics to search for the ideas embodied in the work with which this silence was pregnant.

Critics such as Dohra Ahmad read it through the lens of fundamentalism, Muslimism or lack thereof, Jewishness and hybridity (Ahmad 2005), but Matthew Henry turns to neoliberalism and rebellion

(Henry 2015), Loyene to the destruction of postcolonial hybridity (Laouyene 2007), Gutman reads the novel through the metaphor of Jewishness (Guttman 2013), and Halkin sees Jewish imagery as gestures of "cowardice" (Halkin 1996:59). Other critics turn to magical realism, globalization, and postcolonial criticism (De Loughry 2020).

More or less politicized, in search of the imagined homeland, through the prism of intertextuality and postmodernism, the simulacrum and the code (D'haen 1997), through the concept of the palimpsest (Coetzee 1996; Grindberg 1996), the nostalgic-bitter messages of this novel are not easy for analysis, because the novel is made of layers and references, and in practice it is a veritable palimpsest of ideas, cultures, literary and historical images.

The carnival assemblage of *The Moor's Last Sigh* juxtaposes high and low, religions, fine art, history, literary authorities and cartoon characters in a postmodern amalgam, but in it a key idea of the Self is clearly discernible, namely the idea of man as non-uniform man, of the human wholeness as hybridity, which I think is key not only to Rushdie's novels in general, but also to other so-called cross-cultural writers such as Ishiguro, Naipaul, J.M. Coetzee…

The historical eras to which the narrative is directed at the very beginning are several: the Spanish Reconquista of Granada and the exile of the Moors, the establishment of trade relations between Europe and India, the colonial expansion of Portugal, social and political events in India in the 20th century, and the narrative in the writer's ironically mimetic strategy, it resembles the classic novels of the 19th century, describing the lives and family histories of four generations of Gamma-Zogoibi.

The character's destiny as a Moor, as his mother calls him, is peculiar, and so is the story of his double-speed life: his mother is an artist from India, with Portuguese ancestry leading to Vasco da Gama, the Moor's father traces his descent from the ancient sect of the Kochan Jews, but probably also an illegitimate descendant of the last Moorish Sultan of Granada: the Sultan expelled by Ferdinand and Isabella in 1492. Like his ancestor, who turned his gaze to the fabulous and terrible past, at the end of his life, Moraes Zogoibi examines the meaning of his short life, examines his destroyed family, trying to see the lost paradise, which is apparently scattered because of hatred, intolerance: religious and ethnic. Thus, begins and thus ends the novel, a tale and a pastiche at the same time.

For the understanding of this novel, Rushdie's first essay, in his book *Imaginary Homelands* (1981-1991), published four years before the novel *The Moor's Last Sigh* seems very important to me. In this essay, exiled writers are seen as haunted by a sense of loss, but the homeland is always imagined, the view of it a view through broken mirrors. Rushdie compares the emigrant's gaze to the past, to the imagined homeland, to the "Indian of the mind" with the gaze of Lot's wife: even if you turn into a pillar of salt, you cannot resist looking back. For the writer, the novel is one of the ways to deny the official, political version of the truth, quoting Kundera: "*Man's struggle against power is a struggle of memory against forgetting*" (ibid.). Two of the key themes in this author's novel emerge here: memory and exile.

Memory is the thread that joins together the mosaic family history, it is also contained in the paintings, telling about the past, but also prophetically about the events in the Gamma-Zogoibi family; it is also reflected in the leaves that the hero sticks on the doors to preserve the memory of a story that must survive with the understanding that something can become immortal only if it is made public. The indirect comparison with Martin Luther's testaments speaks to the narrator's ambition to see history as creating a new paradigm that overcomes division, blood, and exile. Nostalgia for the golden age is understood here as a multicultural utopia.

At the same time, since it is a postmodern novel, Laouyene's doubt about the way Andalusian history is presented and the reference to the national narrative of India is logical. According to him, this is not simply a question of nostalgia for an exotic golden age, but an ideal multicultural model for a troubled India, adjacent to the writer's doubts "about the ironic possibility that some forms of Indian fundamentalism (political, religious, ethnic and/or artistic) may use such a model for their own purposes. In this way, the apparent nostalgia for the ideal multicultural hybrid modeled on Arab Spain is parodically undercut in the novel of the post-exotic Rushdie" (Laouyene 2007).

In our opinion, however, despite the parody that is present, the main messages of Rushdie's postmodern palimpsest are not condescending.

The novel's title receives various illuminations in the course of the text, referring both successively and simultaneously to the story of Boabdil, to the iconic *Song of my Cid* (the comparison of Bella with

Jimena and Camoinche with Cid, later in the novel the story of the Japanese artist and the Moor), to Shakespeare's *Othello*, but also to the gas station with the same name "Last Sigh" at the beginning of the text.

The entire narrative is permeated by the metaphor of exile, uniting the expulsion of the Moors from Spain with the symbolic expulsion of the Moor from India, associatively leading to the writer's personal history. But falling away from home - paradise is also seen as a loss of light, a loss of one's own history, it is not by chance that the Moor is called "son of the dawn", a nickname for Lucifer. Hence the exotic vampire references associated with the genus (Mother Aurora says: "*My dear, we feed on flesh and blood is our favorite drink!"*

The Moor's narrative begins when he is 36 years old, "on the field alive in the midst" (to which the reference to Virgil's name leads), but in fact without a guide and with the body of an old man of seventy. So the balance sheet, instead of being in the middle of his life, actually marks his end. The final touch, however, points back to the theme of rebirth: through a series of references Arthur, Barbarossa, the Ouroboros Serpent, vampirization, Sleeping Beauty and finally Rip Van Winkle (Max Frisch's character). Incidentally, RIP, apart from being an acronym for the character's name, is a pretty accurate parallel to the Moor's life, a life cut twice short, a descendant of fearless ancestors, a man capable of self-reflection, who doesn't feel happy and wants to find out who he is. One day he wakes up and realizes that half his life has passed. Soon he was young and strong, and before he knew it he had become old and worn out. It is no coincidence that the image of the stuffed dog, which seems to carry the Moor at the end of the novel with absolutely no motivation (Rip also finds the bones of his beloved dog) also works to support this juxtaposition.

At least a double perspective is reflected in the figure of Moraesh Zogoibi: first, the tragedy of the historical figure of Boabdil, the sultan forced to flee his citadel. The book begins and ends in the fictional Spanish village of Benengeli, an allusion to a quote by Hamet Benengeli, the fictional Arabic author of Don Quixote, which Cervantes supposedly translated.

But the hero's sigh, both personally and collectively, is a sign of the parallel between the emotions felt by the Moor in the novel and the sigh of the torn Indian nation. Events from modern Indian history permeate the tale - the struggle for independence, partition, scandals, Indian fundamentalism, and assassinations.

It is no coincidence that the image of Mother India appears in the novel kaleidoscopically both through the image of Aurora and through the reference to the film of the same name, because through this image the history of the divided home is most clearly outlined. Motherhood in India, as Rushdie notes in the novel, is one of the most significant ideas and is associated with the mother earth, with the mother goddess, and in the case of *The Moor's Last Sigh*, it has a number of incarnations. However, when it is used for propaganda by certain politicians (referring to Indira Gandhi) with impure ideas, the narrator parodically subverts this mythology. Rushdie uses the past not only to show the evolution of the story but also what is happening in his contemporary India.

Sighing and breathing in the novel have a special status: the story that the Moor tells is a "breathless story" , the hero merges with his breath , Bella's struggle for air with her mother-in-law, her tuberculosis later, the asthmatic Camoinch, the Moor's asthmatic attacks which finish him off. It is no coincidence that the fourth chapter in the novel begins with a meditation on breathing:

The people of my family find it difficult to breathe the air of this world; we are born with the hope of something better.

Paraphrasing Descartes ("I think, therefore I am"), the narrator states:

Suspiro ergo sum. I breathe, therefore I exist... A sigh is not just a sigh. We breathe in the world and breathe out meaning (

Inherited problems with breathing are carried over into a wider aspect: the air of this one does not bring hope, so breathing in the light is compared to a rearrangement of the broken world.

The breath is also related to the exoticism of the spices: inhaling the aroma of pepper, pistachios, ginger, cloves, cinnamon refers not only to the family business of Gamma Zogoibi, but also connects the history of Vasco da Gama with the rediscovery of India: the India that is exoticism, spiciness and all that, "what the men are looking for in the brothel" (ibid.:10). Against this vision of exotic and backward India, Rushdie's novel is actually indirectly opposed.

The postmodern tale, in which the Moor plays the part of Scheherazade, mixes religions and ethnicities: a devout Indian of Christian descent, a devout Indian non-Christian, a Catholic anti-Western anarchist and an artist with Portuguese roots, a Jew from Kochani. Against the background of the recent fatwa, this fact has been interpreted differently in criticism. However, Dohra Ahmad rightly notes that Islam is

rather absent from the novel, and the conversion to fundamentalist Islam is through the portrayal of other types of fundamentalism (Ahmad 2005:1).

Although the main character is a Moor, fundamentalism is symbolically present through the appearances of other religions and ethnic groups. In this sense, Ahmad shows that Rushdie does not shrink the term, but expands it, believing that "fundamentalist views infect not only Islam, but also Hinduism, Christianity, Marxism, contemporary art, and even the doctrine of hybridity, which many of us would prefer to seen as relatively flexible" (Ahmad 2005:3-4).

According to Dohra Ahmad, Rushdie's choice of Jews reflects both his attitude towards India and Islam, because "they find themselves in a position both inside and outside of India". And through them, the writer reflects "the double pressure of isolation and assimilation on the small Kochan municipality... In this way, the invisible Islam disintegrates into two main components: the Islam of the migrants, the religion of the exiled Boabdil, becomes the struggling Judaism, and the fundamentalist Islam, the religion of majority and state ideology becomes a distorted, dishonest monotheistic Hinduism (ibid.).

Particularly interesting and again seen in many ways is the motif of the failed sacrifice of the first-born son: Abraham's Jewish mother, offended by his relationship with a Catholic woman, gives him money to develop his business against a signed oath to take and raise his first-born son. The biblical references are obvious, but also reversed: Abraham's child, nicknamed the Moor, is and is not the heir of the Kochan Jews. He does not continue his father's questionable business, nor was he raised by his religious grandmother, and seeks the meaning of his life away from fanatical strife. Kaleidoscopically, this motif is reflected through the second reference – to the tale of Rumpelstiltskin by the Brothers Grimm, in which the troll who can turn straw into gold fails to take the child.

The multi-layered reading of the novel meets hundreds of texts with the classics, religious books such as the Ramayana, the Bible, etc., tales of various peoples from the East and the West, propaganda posters, films, games (Eeny, meeny, miny, moe, the game, which paradoxically gives names to the Moor's sisters), and Popeye the sailor and cartoon characters in a postmodern mosaic that shows us the need to see the world in a new way of rearrangement and juxtaposition.

Tolkachov systematizes the sources in the novel as follows:

1) Magical tales;

2) Family legends,
3) Hindu and other religious mythologies;
4) Cartoons of pop culture;
5) Surrealism and fantasy;
6) Elements of fantasy
7) Allusions to Indian history in the context of European and modern history
8) "Lusiada" and "Reconquista" plots, as well as tales of the Moors and Jews of Spain;
9) Xanada motifs — the artist's dreams;
10) Religious fundamentalist ideologies and autobiographical elements (Tolkachev 2003: 129)

The rearrangement of the world, and the re-creation of myth and history in Rushdie's works takes on a new context. With the help of the plots of East and West, Rushdie tries to create another history and identity, and in this sense, the imagination becomes the connecting thread between the past and the future, it is the engine for the renewal of the world.

The interpretation of the novel cannot go without the plot of the two paintings with the same title *The Moor's Last Sigh*, painted by Aurora and Vashku Miranda, an artist and Aurora's rejected lover. Aurora in the novel is depicted as a genius artist, the emotional center of the work, but not at all an exemplary mother and wife, who very often looks at the world and her children through the prism of her art and her sense of uniqueness.

The portrait that Father Abraham did not like and therefore was "covered", another picture was painted over it, is a "lost image". The search for this image, and then the peeling back of the painting in the novel's finale to reveal the palimpsest, guides the development of the action. Although he constantly eschews an autobiographical interpretation of his works, the very idea of the lost portrait is autobiographical, as is evident from Rushdie's interview with John Banville (Banville 2000).

Abraham commissioned Vashku Miranda to paint a portrait of the pregnant Aurora, which originally depicted a beautiful woman cross-legged on a huge lizard nursing an invisible child with her bare breast. Outraged by the obscenity of the portrait, Abraham refuses to accept it, and the aggrieved artist superimposes on it "*a strange new image of Vasco Miranda in masquerade costume, weeping on a huge white horse*" - a painting that refers to the Moor of Granada.

This sentimental tear-jerking picture reaped great commercial success. Unlike Miranda, Aurora's picture of this subject contrasts sharply. Like her Nehru-supporting father, Aurora espoused the idea of a secular democracy in which national identity was not defined by religion, but rather by a belief in cultural pluralism and freedom of expression. Her variations on the theme of the Moor are many and menacingly prescient in their characterization of the image.

The art in the novel has other projections – not only in the Miranda-Aurora juxtaposition, but also through the art of two strong and charming women: Moraes' cruel but straightforward mother and his chameleon-like lover, Uma. As ideas and messages, their works are diametrically opposed and reflect two different views of art: Aurora's painting is contradictory, "abounding in surreal and multivalent images. …Uma's sculpture also claims to convey "being", but in a pure, unified and essentialist form" (Ahmad 2005: 6).

Art as a visionary, diverse rearrangement of the world was seen precisely through Aurora's painting. Her last picture, which she sends to Miranda, carries an unexpected message: it reveals her future killer.

The image of Abraham in the novel undergoes a serious transformation: from a loving and devoted husband to a drug trafficker and murderer, a dark figure associated with dark deals that chose his new "son" from the criminal world. In criticism, he has been compared to a comic book villain, but his incarnation is logically connected to the idea of betrayed love, which is a recurring motif in the novel.

Love in the novel is part of the multi-layered palimpsest. The love story between Bella, the woman who strengthens the foundations of family wealth and memory, and Camoinch is the only one that does not contain betrayal and recalls the legendary love between Cid and Jimena. However, Isabella and Camoinch have no heirs and their ideal love turns into history. All the other loves in the novel contain the motif of betrayal. Beginning exotically, on sacks of spices, the love between the Jew and the Catholic artist finally ends with Abraham's betrayal.

Betrayal also contains the relationship between the offended Miranda and Aurora. The vile and beautiful Uma, who has conquered the mind and body of the Moor, also turns out to be a traitor; the Japanese artist is also disappointed by her husband's love and betrayal. When Uma first lies and betrays the Moor, she is ironically compared to Jimena. Here the analogy of Moraes is not with Cid, but with Boabdil, the betrayed and exiled ruler. For the second time, the image of Jimena

as an ironic consolation appears in the face of the Japanese woman in the castle prison. So she was named by the jailer Miranda.

The lover invariably turns out to be deceived, but that is not the point, the novel argues. Because broken love, as Moraes Zogoibi calls it, is real, worthwhile love, it can make you feel whole, complete, it is worth feeling in this life, in which very often things are not as they are; we want to be (Falling in love with Mind, the hero for the first time feels complete, despite his crippled arm. The motive of inferiority fits into the writer's idea of man as a wounded being (see, for example, the essay *Imaginary Homelands*, 1991).

Everything that meets the Moor on his way is pain, the whole life of the hero is connected with hatred, terror, murder, rebellion and enmity - something that he does not even feel, because he is used to the divided home, to the terrible inheritance, and realizes when his story horrifies the Japanese Aoi Ue. In the finale of the novel, laid to rest, the Moor asks what remains behind him, the heir of what he is. And in his short life he sees love as the only force that overcomes division, the pinch of love that unites India, the pirate map of a treasure that is a mosaic of cultural layers.

The metaphor of the palimpsest, both here and in Rushdie's other works, is comprehensive – not only do politics, art, and religion turn out to be palimpsests, but history is also a palimpsest in the novel, insofar as the writer denies the single truth; the culture in which meaning is drawn through the reference to other literary texts and characters. The character himself is a palimpsest, since his identity is made up of layered pieces.

However, the palimpsest in the work is not simply a postmodern form of parody or, more precisely, it is a parody, but in the understanding of Linda Hutchen, according to which postmodern parody is a form of cultural and narrative practice that aims at a critical reconstruction of history. Thus, parody is not mocking imitation, but becomes a productive approach to creative recoding of tradition that emphasizes difference at the heart of similitude (Hutcheon 2000).

"*The past is a foreign country, everything is different there,*" Rushdie wrote in the essay in the *Imaginary Homelands*, quoting L. Hardley - "*But photography suggests just the opposite; it reminds me that all my present is foreign and that the past is home too, albeit a lost home in a lost city, sinking into the mists of lost time*" (Rushdie 1991:9).

However, the "alien past" is realized as the home that you have to reincarnate in order to preserve it, the sunken image that has to be

described in order not to sink into oblivion, because it is a part of the Self and because it shows the meaning of the path traveled. I am not putting a full stop, as there cannot be one in research unless it is there to remind us of realizing the boundaries of it, as V. Dibra and F. Jashari say ("just as an interactive sign, as a spelling convention, because the point is not put under any circumstances in research, research, and analytics, I was reminded that the moment itself - awareness gives the boundaries of culture definability"). (Dibra, Jashari 2024:217*).*

Looking back, to ancestral memory, is part of man's struggle with oblivion, part of his desire to recreate history in a new way, and the figure of the palimpsest in this novel as part of the hero's personality is the desire to create a new paradigm from the fragmented pieces, overcoming division, exile and hatred.

References

Ahmad, D. (2005). This fundo stuff is really something new: Fundamentalism and Hybridity in The Moor's Last Sigh. *The Yale Journal of Criticism,* Volume 18, Number 1, Spring 2005, pp. 1-20(Article).Published by Johns Hopkins University Press DOI:For additional information about this article[This content has been declared free to read by the pubisher during the COVID19pandemic.] – https://doi.org/10.1353/yale.2005.0002https://muse.jhu.edu/article/183096

Banville, J., (2000). "Interview with Salman Rushdie." *The New York Review of Books* 40.5, March 4, 1993, 34–36. Reprinted in Conversations with Salman Rushdie, edited by Michael R. Reder, 152–161. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi,

Coetzee, J. M., (1996). "Palimpsest Regained." Rev. of -e Moor's Last Sigh, by Salman Rushdie. -*e New York Review of Books* 21 Mar.:pp13–16.

De Loughry, T., (2020). Worlds in Collision: Salman Rushdie, Globalisation, and Postcoloniality-in-Crisis. *The Global Novel and Capitalism in Crisis*. pp 45-86.

D'haen, Th., (1997). Rushdie's The Moor's Last Sigh, or, The Emotional Depths of Postmodernism. *Emotion in Postmodernism, American Studies* 74, Gerhard Hoffmann and Alfred Hornung, ed., Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, pp. 225-35.

Dibra, Jashari, (2024). Women as the main characters in the history of the world literature: comparative parallels between "The lost honour of Katharina Blum" and "A Moonlit Night" . Linguarum universe, volume 1, issue 2, pp. 217

Greenberg, J., (1996). 'e Base Indian' or 'the Base Judean'?: Othello and the Metaphor of the Palimpsest in Salman Rushdie's -e Moor's Last Sigh.*Modern Language Studies* 29.2 (1999): 93–107.

Guttman, A., (2013). *Writing Indians and Jews: Metaphorics of Jewishness in South Asian Literature*, NY, 2013

Halkin, H., (1996). Salman Rushdie Surrenders. *Commentary* 102.1(1996): 59 - https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/hillel-halkin/salman-rushdie-surrenders/

Henry, M., (2015). Neoliberalism's Children: India's Economy, Wageless Life, and Organized Crime in The Moor's Last Sigh ariel: *A Review of International English Literature*, Volume 46, Number 3,July 2015, pp. 137-163. Published by Johns Hopkins University Press DOI: For additional information about this article. [This content has been declared free to read by the publisher during the COVID-19 pandemic.] https://doi.org/10.1353/ari.2015.0017https://muse.jhu.edu/article/589876

Hutcheon, L., (2000). *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*., University of Illinois Press.

Laouyene, A., 2007. Andalusian poetics: Rushdie's The Moor's Last Sigh and the limits of hybridity. *Ariel*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2007, p. 143+. Accessed 1 July 2020.

Rushdie, S., 1991. *Imaginary Homelands*. L., P. 9.

Rushdie, S., (1995). *The Moor's Last Sigh*, London: Jonathan Cape, London.

Rushdie, S., (2012). *East, West* / Salman Rushdie. – Vintage Digital, New ed. Edition, Amazon Digital Services.

Tolkachev, S. (2003). Multikulturnyj kontekst sovremennogo anglijskogo romana, disertacia, Moskva, MGU.