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SALMAN RUSHDIE'S "UNFETTERED REPUBLIC OF THE TONGUE" IN *FURY*

Salman Rushdie's 2001 novel *Fury* is a book that epitomizes the *Zeitgeist* of a restless end of millennium giving way to a new millennium seething with accumulated multi-layered wrath. Indeed, as the title so impatiently prepares its readers for it, Rushdie's New York novel is an explosion of unfettered fury. Fury is the book's thematic focus, a basic human feeling – if not instinct – capable of destroying humanity and uplifting it to the upper limits of its creative potential at the same time. Malik Solanka, the key figure in the novel thinks of it as a paradox of all times, but the Freudian jargon he uses indicates that fury is essentially a paradox that typifies our post-Freudian globalised contemporary society:

> Life is fury, he'd thought. Fury – sexual, Oedipal, political, magical, brutal – drives us to our finest heights and coarsest depths. Out of *furia* comes creation, inspiration, originality, passion, but also violence, pain, pure unafraid destruction, the giving and receiving of blows from which we never recover. The Furies pursue us; Shiva dances his furious dance to create and also to destroy. (Rushdie 2002: 30-31)

1. A NOVEL FOR THE NEW MILLENNIUM

Fury has enjoyed mixed reception. At its publication some reviewers were furious at the writer's allegedly "poor parody" of his own "higher scalings of the vocab gymnastics heights" in this novel, which is a sign that Rushdie has "mellowed"[1], or even worse, others claimed that "Rushdie is a bad writer, and it's clear from *Fury* that he isn't getting any better", that the dialogue in this novel "is a joke, failing to capture any of the rhythm of speech", that "the barrage of stupid puns and overuse of mythology are soon annoying" and "the cartoonish racism is downright insulting."[2] Contrary to these unfavourable receptions, there are reviewers who consider Rushdie "the

modern era's most perfectly globalized author", praising *Fury* for blending straightforwardness with elegy, loftiness with bluntness, for mixing "Indian mythology, Greek mythology, Western philosophers, rap lyrics, and the trendspeak of computer savvy teens." Although there are fallacies in this novel, the reviewer "wholeheartedly" recommends it for being "simply so well written, filled with such human passion, such tart observation, such humorous types that it sings despite its weaknesses, because of them."[3] David A. Lawton, Professor of English at Washington University states that "the body of work Rushdie has produced makes him arguably the most important novelist writing in English today."[4] Lawton also shows that in *Fury* Rushdie acts out an impulse that has been driving him to write his other significant novels, which is a desire to blaspheme. This desire informs an iconoclastic attitude that pervades Rushdie's novels, which put the writer's own life in jeopardy.

This mixed reception is a mirror reflection of the type of novel *Fury* is and also a reaction to its unleashed fury: it is a contemporary novel about our contemporary world addressing the contemporary audience with urgency and anger. A novel about fury is most likely to stir fury, a book of "cultural evisceration"[5] stands all the chances to irritate. At the same time, and in a paradoxical manner which mirrors its paradox, it may stir admiration or even the passion that fury itself induces. In any case, *Fury* is not a book to pass unnoticed simply because it is a reflection of our contemporary world written by a contemporary who looks at it from a position that makes him an insider-outsider in-between dweller of several cultures.

New York, *Fury's* setting is seen by many as the epicentre of our post-post-modern civilization. Malik Solanka, "retired historian of ideas" (Rushdie 2002:3) of Indian origin, a migrant to London and now settled in New York, has come to America to be "eaten" by it. New York is the very place that – Solanka imagines – could do the trick because "this about New York Professor Solanka liked a lot – this sense of being crowded out by other people's stories, of walking like a phantom through a city that was in the middle of a story which didn't need him as a character." (Rushdie 2002:89) The irony of it is that having come to New York, America's epicentre "in ambivalence, in extremis, and in unrealistic hope" of getting rid of his demons, Solanka discovers that America – the glamorous land of the plenty – is no salvation because "behind this façade of this age of gold, this time of plenty, the contradictions and impoverishment of the Western human individual, or let's say the human self in America, were deepening and widening." (Rushdie 2002: 86) After critiquing Pakistan in *Shame* and Iran in *The Satanic Verses*, after tracing the history of the Jews and Arabs in Spain in the savory fiction of *The Moor's Last Sigh*, and after weaving the Oriental fabric of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, Rushdie shifts his focus of critique from East to West in *Fury*. The novel abounds in diatribes against New York's philistinism. This "money-mad burg" is associated by Solanka with ancient Rome, though of all undeserving empires "this one" seems to be "particularly crass". Thinking of it, Solanka admits that America has seduced him, "yes, its brilliance aroused him, and its vast potency too", but he also finds himself opposing it and realizes that

what he opposes in it "he must also attack in himself." It seems that Rushdie's inclination to criticize and attack the various cultures that he deals with finds in America its best target, because, as Solanka continues to think to himself, "everyone was an American now, or at least Americanized: Indians, Iranians, Uzbeks, Japanese, Lilliputians, all. America was the world's playing field, its rule book, umpire and ball." (Rushdie 2002: 87)

Rushdie's eye for all these aspects of contemporary life in America – its consumerism, depthlessness, hedonism, electronic media addiction – is as keen as DeLillo's in *White Noise*. In this respect, *Fury* continues a line in American fiction that scrutinizes contemporary American culture and civilization exposing its most alarming aspects in a most entertaining humorous style and exploring the possibilities given by language in a delightfully playful way. The protagonists of the two novels are – interestingly enough – middle-aged men observing the effects of this "late capitalist" culture (in Jameson's terms) upon them. However, although the two protagonists look at their lives rather worried, what makes the difference is Malik's "Britishness", which singles him out in the American environment. It is true that Jack Gladney is more at home in America, while Malik has come here to get rid of identity, which is anyway hybrid, and home, which is anyway insecure, but he also feels at ease with American colloquialisms and slang, with American pop culture and its icons. What Malik discovers at every step he takes through the New York jungle is something Rushdie himself must have discovered: that New York is full of aliens like him pursued by the furies. Jack Gladney also feels alienated in an environment which makes him "a sum total of [his] data" (DeLillo 1998: 141) and when his virtual "death is rendered graphically" on the computer screen he cannot help thinking that there is "an eerie separation between your condition and yourself." (DeLillo 1998: 142) Malik and Jack feel alienated in a peculiar way: their alienation is not caused by displacement from a secure home, it is alienation in a globalised "Americanized" environment, where virtually everybody lives in an insecure location.

DeLillo's tempo in *White Noise* feels slower than Rushdie's in *Fury*, which is a lot more impatient novel than DeLillo's. As Professor David A. Lawton argues, "*Fury* is aptly titled: it is one of Rushdie's short and furious novels, like *Shame*, not one of his longer, more developed and digressive works." Professor Lawton further argues that "at times the novel, like its central character, is in danger of being overwhelmed by the speed and volume of its own plot"[6], but this seems to suggest the speed and information overload of the virtual life on the Internet, which is increasingly enmeshed in our life, which gradually loses its reality. Solanka is aware of this and instead of opposing this "demon" of speed and overload, as he thought he should at some point, he throws himself into the pleasure of creating a hypertext, a virtual "sea of stories" branching out virtually endlessly and virtually attracting lots of virtual consumers for virtually more and more money ("all major credit cards accepted.") (Rushdie 2002: 168)

The novel's dust jacket is also very suggestive of the restlessness and wrath plaguing our contemporary world. It shows a view of New York with its

skyscrapers hovered by what ambiguously look like menacing grey clouds or flames consuming the presiding building from above. The novel was published several months before the 9.11 terrorist attack, and this suggestive picture seems to anticipate the event, while now that this intimation has come true it stays there on the book's cover as a reminder of it.

2. A WORLD OF SIMULACRA AND SPECTACLE

The hyperreal virtual nature of today's world is one of its characteristic aspects. Jean Baudrillard, one of the most quoted writers on postmodern culture argues that this "is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself." (Baudrillard 2001: 170) Umberto Eco considers America to be the epitome of hyperreality as its culture is underpinned by "a philosophy of immortality as duplication. It dominates the relation with the self, with the past, not infrequently with the present, always with History and, even, with the European tradition." (Eco 1986: 6) Eco argues that American imagination demands "the real thing", but "to attain it, [America] must fabricate the absolute fake." This impulse of imagination has therefore turned America into a blueprint, a hyperreal world "where the boundaries between game and illusion are blurred, the art museum is contaminated by the freak show, and falsehood is enjoyed in a situation of "fullness", of *horror vacui*." (Eco 1986: 8) Of all these fabrications, Disneyland is "the quintessence of consumer ideology" and it "makes it clear that within its magic enclosure it is fantasy that is absolutely reproduced." (Eco 1986: 43) The Internet and the speed with which it has progressed have added to this new configuration of our contemporary world. Marshall McLuhan argues that "as electronically contracted, the globe is no more than a village." (McLuhan 1964: 5)

Rushdie's New York is, like DeLillo's America in *White Noise*, a glossy hyperreality, a simulacrum. The real world is only a reflection, or even the reflection of a reflection, i.e. fiction. Malik Solanka, the resourceful inventor of Little Brain – the successful doll – is also a creator of the back-story of a hypertext suggestively titled "The Fittest Survive: The Coming of the Puppet Kings", and the eerie sense that both Solanka and the reader have is that the story takes on a proliferating life of its own, that fiction has them in its grip, that the events in the "real" world simply follow the story's script.

Malik's hypertext implies new narrative strategies, branching out from the back-story, abolishing linear chronology, developing virtually *ad infinitum*. To Malik this hypertext's "freedom from the clock, from the tyranny of what happened next, was exhilarating, allowing him to develop his ideas in parallel, without worrying about sequence or step-by-step causation. Links were electronic, not narrative. Everything existed at once." (Rushdie 2002: 186-187) Malik likens this freedom from time's tyranny with God's omniscience and freedom. To humans, Malik broods, it is available "at the merest click of a mouse". In the virtual world of the website, our global village, distances in both time and space are compressed into simultaneity, and thus Malik

contemplates the wonderful possibility that "visitors would be able to wander at will between the project's different storylines and themes", while "each of these in turn would lead to further pages, plunging deeper and deeper into the multidimensional world of the Puppet Kings, offering games to play, video segments to watch, chat rooms to enter and, naturally, things to buy." (Rushdie 2002: 187) These puppets are in fact cyborgs, protean figures populating the virtual world of the Internet, shifty projections of a world that is already "the desert of the real itself" (Baudrillard 2001: 169), a world of endlessly reproducible copies of copies for consumers to buy. Rushdie's story of Solanka's back-story seems to draw on "the Borges tale where the cartographers of the Empire draw a map so detailed that it ends up exactly covering the territory." (Baudrillard 2001: 169) Various mythologies coexist in the hi-tech medium of the on-line going hypertext, which will always be a work in progress, generating a thousand streams of comments. In its combination of old myths and new digital technology, Solanka's back-story in progress is Rushdie's translation of *The Matrix* style in fiction.

Baudrillard's thesis that the hyperreal is "produced from miniaturized units, from matrices, memory banks and command models – and with these it can be reproduced an infinite number of times" (Baudrillard 2001: 170) can be tested against Rushdie's approach to the relation between Solanka's back-story and reality. Thus in Chapter 16 of *Fury* Neela Mahendra, Malik's much younger dangerously beautiful lover informs him about the intervention of the living dolls from the fictitious planet Galileo-1 in the public affairs of the actually existing Earth. However, it is virtually impossible to tell the map/fiction from territory/reality in *Fury* because Lilliput, the allegedly "real" place is an intertextual echo of Swift's imaginary place in *Gulliver's Travels*. Thus layers of fiction proliferate and multiply to eventually cover the territory of the real.

America is real only by name, its "reality" being constantly blurred by the performance staged on streets, round street corners and acted by a gang of killers dressed up like characters from Disneyland. Thus Disneyland, "the absolute fake" is trespassing in New York, giving it an eerie cartoonish aspect which makes the creepy crimes lose their reality. In this cartoon city, we are reminded at every turn of the page, characters from books, videos, movies or songs feel more solidly real than most living people do. Although Malik thinks that movies infantilize their audience, he also admits that, numbed by "daily life, its rush, its overloadedness", people go to movies "to remember how to feel", and as a result, in the minds of many adults, the experience in the movie theatres now feels more real than what is available in the world outside. (Rushdie 2002: 230-231) *Fury* is Rushdie's reflection of Solanka's "brave new world", a stage of "encounters between "real" and "real", "real" and "double", "double" and "double", which is a demonstration of "the dissolution of the frontiers between the categories." (Rushdie 2002: 187)

Watching *Solaris* in Chapter 16, Solanka looks at himself as if in a mirror and recognizes the scene and the characters, but at the same time he realizes the "unreality" of it all: the scene (of happy reunion) is fake, the man in the role of the father (himself) is only an actor playing a role, and the role is

a lie, the home (his home in London) is not a happy home, the child (his son Asmaan) is not itself, nothing is what it seems, and this is a reply frequently occurring in movies.

The recurrence of scenes and replies from the movies, video clips and songs, Solanka's frequent revelations of dejà-vus while watching movies or real life events, his blackouts, which project his real life in an imaginary scenario of a mysterious series of murders that consume his murderous intention of killing his wife and son, are constant reminders of simulation.

3. THE "UNFETTERED REPUBLIC OF THE TONGUE" IN RUSHDIE'S "NICELY POLISHED LOOKING-GLASS"[7]

Chapter 6 of *Fury* begins with "Islam will cleanse this street of godless motherfucker bad drivers" and continues with irreverent fury-intoxicated language pouring out from the lips of Ali Manju, a young Indian or Pakistani cab driver. At Solanka's reprimand, the Urdu speaker tries in vain to hide behind his customer's alleged ignorance of Urdu, pretending that what he has been shouting is not "blue language." Solanka assures him that Urdu is his mother tongue, but eventually excuses the young man's linguistic fit as "road rage." However, as he walks off along Broadway, Solanka is shouted after by Ali, who says: "It means nothing, sahib. Me, I don't even go to the mosque. God bless America, okay? It's just words." (Rushdie 2002: 65-66)

Words are the writer's medium, and this novel's theme is fury. Rushdie foregrounds fury as one of the most prominent forces that makes our contemporary world go round. Fiction and reality look at each other in the virtually proliferating mirrors of more than one story in more than one style and proliferating plots. Solanka's life story opens windows to Eleanor's story, Sara Jane Lear's story, Jack Rhinehart's story, Mila Milo's story, Neela Mahendra's story, less developed stories like Dubdub's or some stranger's scrap of story told from a mobile phone and overheard by Solanka, also Little Brain's story, movie stories, and of course the virtually endless story of the Puppet Kings created by Solanka for the web. All these stories are "just words", but these words set the whole world in motion and seem to keep it going. But for Neela's words that reach Solanka after her death "the earth moves. The earth goes round the sun" (Rushdie 2002: 255) all motion may cease and the whole of what we call the world might lose shape and vanish. Neela's words set Solanka in the acrobatic motion that brings the novel to an ambiguous closure: "Look at me, Asmaan! I'm bouncing very well! I'm bouncing higher and higher!" (Rushdie 2002: 259) Solanka's bouncing is an echo in words of Shiva's "furious dance", which virtually creates and destroys the world, while Asmaan – to whom Solanka performs his bouncing – is his "celestially" named son. A keen reader may take this suggestion as a clue to the novel's irresolute ending: the literal meaning of "Asmaan", we are carefully explained in chapter one of the book, is "the sky", while its figurative meaning is "paradise" (Rushdie 2002: 9). *Fury* is a critique of East and West, which meet

and clash in Rushdie's and Solanka's New York, but it is also a virtual space which transcends dualities and oppositions, a figment of Rushdie's hybrid imagination.

1 Available at http://www.howtotellagreatstory.com/bookclub/review12.html [16.02.2006]
2 Available at http://www.goodreports.net/reviews/fury.htm (Review first published October 20, 2001) [16. 02. 2006]
3 Available at http://latereviews.blogspot.com/2005/03/fury-leashed.html [16.02. 2006]
4 Available at http://cenhum.artsci.wustl.edu/Belle-Lettres/novdec01.html [16.02. 2006]
5 Available at http://latereviews.blogspot.com/2005/03/fury-leashed.html [16.02. 2006]
6 Available at http://cenhum.artsci.wustl.edu/Belle-Lettres/novdec01.html [16. 02.2006]
7 "The unfettered Republic of the Tongue" is Salman Rushdie's metaphoric description of the writers' "habitations" in *A Declaration of Independence* drafted on the 14th of February 1994, at the fifth anniversary of the fatwa pronounced against him. Rushdie's *Declaration* served as the charter of the International Parliament of Writers, founded in July 1993.
"My nicely polished looking-glass" is a phrase used by James Joyce in a letter to the Irish publisher Grant Richards. The metaphor of the looking-glass is recurrent in Joyce's writings, and in this letter it is suggestive of the Irish writer's scrupulous portrayal of the City of Dublin at the turn of the 19th century in *Dubliners*. Rushdie has frequently acknowledged his indebtedness to Joyce's imaginative spirit and technical virtuosity and since *Fury* is a city novel Joyce's phrase may apply to it and thus indicate Rushdie's postmodernist affiliation to Joyce's modernist spirit in his treatment of the turn of the 20th century New York.

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SUMMARY

SALMAN RUSHDIE'S "UNFETTERED REPUBLIC OF THE TONGUE" IN *FURY*

Salman Rushdie's "Unfettered Republic of the Tongue" in Fury is an assessment of Rushdie's achievement in this novel, which is a remarkable contribution to the contemporary literature written in English.

The core argument of this essay is that Rushdie's *Fury* is a novel for the new millennium by its thematic focus, setting, keen observation of various cultural aspects of contemporary America, narrative tempo and even by its

suggestive dust-jacket. The mixed reception enjoyed by the novel is an aspect that reflects back on *Fury's* potential to both irritate and elate or at least entertain. As a matter of fact, the postmodern itself has this dual potential, and *Fury* is just another novel in which Rushdie gives us a "nice work" of "cultural evisceration".

Fury is also an illustration in fiction of Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and simulations. Rushdie's New York is, like DeLillo's America in *White Noise*, a glossy hyperreality, a simulacrum. America is real only by name, its "reality" being constantly blurred by a constant erasure of the borderline between reality and fiction and by the constant intrusion of the fictitious into the real.

To Rushdie's mind "the unfettered republic of the tongue" is the most important of the writers' "habitations". This implies that a writer's imagination has no frontiers and can never be fettered. An entertaining story-teller, Rushdie knows that stories are words invested with the power to create and restore or to destroy. In *Fury* words retain this double-edged potential, and the novel ends on an ambiguous note that leaves the reader in limbo.

KEYWORDS: cultural evisceration, simulacra, simulations, glossy hyperreality, erasure of borderline, limbo.