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*Classical Configurations and Reconfigurations in Salman
Rushdie's The Enchantress of Florence*

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In *The Enchantress of Florence*, Salman Rushdie's fictional universe illustrates how "language upon a silvered tongue affords enchantment enough" (Rushdie 2008, 75). This Rushdiean double tale reveals the power of the master storyteller to weave together Florentine and Indian strands of classical storytelling traditions to figure the twin settings of Renaissance Florence of the West and the Mogul city of Fatehpur Sikri, imagined as the Florence of the East. To configure 'mirror episodes', the master juggler conjures new stories, tosses and catches with unerring accuracy the shape-shifting storylines, casts a magical spell on the reader by configuring crisscross patterns from Eastern and Western epic traditions, from *The Mahabharatha* and Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*. The novel juxtaposes aspects of Eastern story telling traditions as related by Scheherazade in *The Thousand and One Nights* or the Mogul court jester in the *Tales from Birbal*, with the Western episodic narrative of Cervantes in *Don Quixote*. Somadeva's chain of stories in the *Kathasaritsagara* or *The Ocean of Stories*, and waves of Potato Witch stories from the Caspian shores meet, converge and meld into new waves in this hybrid tall tale showing new ways for old worlds to collide and for classical configurations to metamorphose. Rushdie's postmodern endeavour embraces 'tradition' and 'continuity' by experimenting with traditional narrative forms and by drawing from old story lines. By juxtaposing storytelling traditions of the 'East' and the 'West' Rushdie shows how stories are revisited.

The Enchantress of Florence is set in a distinctly Cervantine world where the novel's central conceit revolves around the 'quest' of accomplishing the 'impossible dream'. Like Cervantes's captive tale of *Don Quixote*, Rushdie's novel opens with the arrival of a stranger, whose quixotic endeavors threaten to disrupt the established order. Set in *medias res*, the novel celebrates a carnival of story canvases where as in Somadeva's *Kathasaritsagara* or

The Ocean of Stories, a master-narrator assigns the telling of each tale to a character-narrator, who in turn narrates it to eager and avid listeners. In *The Enchantress of Florence*, multiple divisions of narration reveal layers of stories from the Mughal and Florentine courts. The frame story of the arrival of a foreigner in the Mughal court serves as the ‘chain link’ in this composition. There is a mingling of story currents in *The Enchantress of Florence* with the waves of stories in *The Kathasaritsagara*. In *The Kathasaritsagara*, the tale of the retrieval of the great tale’ relates the yarn about not just the nature of a tale in the making, but also the life of a tale so fraught with dangers, so that it appears to be a matter of chance if a tale survives. In *The Enchantress of Florence*, the arrival of the enigmatic European stranger with three names to his cap - ‘Mogor dell’Amore (the Mughal of Love)/Sir Uccello/Agostino Vespucci (the fictional cousin of Amerigo Vespucci) - and a secret tale meant only for imperial ears, soon transforms the Mughal city of Fatehpur Sikri into a hybrid fictional space where the tale is transformed, reconfigured, and re-imagined to enable it to survive and to be passed on thanks to the wanderer-storyteller’s enchanted powers of narration. In a typical Rushdiean twist of the tale, the Teller of Tall tales understands that “those who do not have power over the story that dominates their lives, power to retell it, rethink it, deconstruct it, joke above it, change it as times change, truly are powerless, because they cannot think new thoughts” (Rushdie 1992, 432).

The fictional space of *The Enchantress of Florence* is rich with loosely arranged group of story fragments that interlace multiple plots and interweave multiple classical quest narratives, thus figuring Ludovico Ariosto’s ironic reproduction and subversion of the chivalric world in *Orlando Furioso* of “knights and ladies, of love and arms, of courtly chivalry, of courageous deeds” (Rushdie 2008, 1). Mogor dell’Amore’s quest to have his tale endorsed in Mughal territory can be compared to the Ariostesque tale of Astolfo’s quest on the moon to find a cure for Orlando’s love madness. As in the romance genre, the fictional space of *The Enchantress of Florence* abounds in exemplary characters like Antonino Argalio, Niccolo ‘il Machia’ and Agostino Vespucci, who constantly arise to accomplish the quest and help the knight errant to get back on track. As in Cervantes’s baroque transformation in *Don Quixote* of the medieval romances of chivalry, Rushdie’s storytelling enchanter takes an Ariostian landscape for reality itself. It is interesting to compare Cervantine and Rushdiean postmodern configurations of medieval romances. The sonnet placed at the opening of *Don Quixote* by Cervantes pays tribute to the fictional knight of renaissance chivalry: “You will enjoy renown as valiant knight; your kingdom will be first, among all realms; and your wise chronicler, unique on earth” (Cervantes 2003, 14). Similarly in *The Enchantress of Florence*, the character-narrator praises the valiant knight-storyteller: “Today is your day, little man, my storyteller,’ the Admiral said softly. ‘Today you will achieve greatness by deeds instead of words’” (Rushdie

2008, 174). Rushdie draws inspiration both from the Este court romance of the *Furioso* and Cervantes's chivalric reproduction in *Don Quixote*, as both authors were precursors of their times in creating a literary consciousness of following previous texts and narrative procedures.

The Hindu polytheist pantheon from the Indian epic, *The Mahabharatha*, appear on the fictional horizon: the many-limbed-Hindu trinity of Brahma, the creator of the universe, Vishnu and Shiva representing opposing forces; their consorts - Saraswati, the goddess of wisdom, Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and Parvati, the goddess of love; higher gods of supreme beings, lesser gods and celestial beings; Shiva who performed the cosmic dance of creation; Kali, the ferocious laughing goddess who enacted the dance of destruction; Indira, the god of Lightning wielding his thunderbolt; and Krishna, the cowherd god of love playing the flute. Jodhaa's statement asserting that "if history had gone a different path ... maybe that would have been an improvement" (Rushdie 2008, 51) echoes the Borgesian idea of forking paths. In "The Garden of Forking Paths", the narrator muses - "in all fictional works, each time a man is confronted with several alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others" (Borges 1964, 26); this finds an echo in Jodhaa's reiteration that every decision taken excludes a whole range of other potential choices and destinies.

In *The Enchantress of Florence*, the master-narrator attempts to present two different poles of popular myths as in the Mughal Court *Tales of Birbal* versus a precise Western-type rationality in the analysis of facts and figures. The magical realist dubious reality of the presence of 'imaginary' queens in the fictional space is conveyed through 'rumours,' 'gossip', 'spells', 'prophesies', and 'secrets': "The self is beset by secrets, secrets eat at it constantly, secrets will tear down its kingdom and leave its scepter broken in the dust" (Rushdie2008,17). Secrets magically swell and shrink, mingle and meld in the fictional space, leading to magical realist transformations in the novel as in the case of "the religious fanatic Badauni, whose secret book of poisonous attacks on the emperor grew fatter and fatter every day while its author grew thinner and thinner" (Rushdie 2008, 312). Spells cast by the potato witch Mother Olga Volga from Astrakhan in the form of a "Caviar and potato spell" (Rushdie 2008,212) result in fictional discord over the magical origins of witchcraft, and in her telling of the tale through prophesies, emerges the battles between the Ottoman and Persian kingdoms. In the magical realist dream world of tales, "magic invariably flowed from the more magical person (the emperor, the necromancer, the witch) to the lesser: that was one of its laws" (Rushdie 2008, 318).

In *The Enchantress of Florence*, Rushdie incorporates the history of medieval India into his text to how the cultural supremacy of the East over the West. By juxtaposing classical quest narratives from the 'East' and the 'West', the 'old' and the 'new', 'order' and 'disorder', 'fact' and 'fancy', Rushdie's postmodern narrative opposes stasis, eschews closure, invites

multiple readings of the text and jolts the reader's casual submission to the written word, while adhering at the same time to the influences of 'tradition' and 'continuity'. Rushdie's fictional space in *The Enchantress of Florence* is alive with "voices talking about everything in every possible way" (Rushdie 1992,429). The yarn tellers articulate the dire need to preserve creative fictional enterprise through "renewal, regeneration, rebirth" (Rushdie 2008, 150), thus showing how through literary artifice the teller can recast an old story and direct the way it is heard. In *The Enchantress of Florence*, the storyteller casts his stories in a hybrid liquid tapestry, an indeterminate, flowing, fluid and shapeless mass, replete with the reprise and rejuvenation of old tales favouring the dual configuration of Eastern and Western classical storytelling traditions. The storyteller-protagonists in the fictional space are akin to hungry fish that consume old stories, regurgitate them and produce new tales from old fragments. The reader discovers to his utter delight how "... no story comes from nowhere; new stories are born from old – it is the new combinations that make them new" (Rushdie 1991, 86).

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