SALMAN RUSHDIE-THE CONTEMPORARY MIGRANT

Irina Toma

Assoc. Prof., Phd, Petroleum – Gas University of Ploiești

Abstract: The present paper approaches the condition of the migrant in three novels by the British-Indian writer Salman Rushdie. The author examines the sufferings and difficulties caused by displacement throughout his main characters that undergo radical changes regarding their identities and sense of space and belonging. The migrant moves from one place to another and because of these geographical movements, his identity becomes hybrid and fluid. As he is spatially dislocated, he also loses his cultural environment,experiencing thus a permanent state of in-betweennes , of belonging neither to his native country, nor to the one he lives in at present. Salman Rushdie's life and experiences as an Indian-British citizen certainly influenced his works. This present paper will enlarge upon the main characters of three novels: Shame, Midnight's Children and The Enchantress of Florence – novels that offer different perspectives about the migrant. Through Omar Khayam, Saleem Sinai and Mogor dell'Amore, Rushdie presented some aspects of the migrant who seeks for an identity in a place where he does not belong .He insists on the fact that roots are not always something we are born with, but they rather represent the choices we make throughout our life. Although the characters belong to many homelands and to no one completely, this is not something that weakens their sense of identity, it rather gives the latter a way towards replenishment.

Keywords: migrant, displacement, rootlessness, identity, in-betweenness.

Rushdie's Experience as a Migrant

Salman Rushdie himself is a migrant as he moved more than once from one place to another; he is an emigrant from India and a new comer in three countries: Pakistan, where he moved with his family against his will, as he stated in *Imaginary Homelands*; England, where he lived during his studies and many years after, and finally the United States where he moved after the fatwa and is still living now. To a certain extent, Rushdie believes that there are good things in the process of migration and consequently of searching for an identity:

> ... exile or emigrants or expatriates are haunted by some sense of loss, some argue to reclaim, to look back even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge - which gives rise to profound uncertainties - that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost, that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.
> (Rushdie, 1991, 15)

Rushdie believes that the migrant has the power to create new worlds, 'imaginary homelands', in his case 'Indias of the mind', having thus access to more than one world. Although migration implies losing the sense of belonging, the homeland, the identity, the migrant has the ability to recreate his self and the space he inhabits. Rushdie compares the migration with a translation. From an etymological point of view, 'translation' comes from the Latin word for 'bearing across'. The individual's border crossing means to be transformed and (culturally) translated, as Rushdie stated: 'Having been borne across the world, we are

BDD-A25630 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 21:59:09 UTC)

translated men' (Rushdie, 1991, 17). Migration implies moving out of origins and relocating into a new space, creating an imaginary homeland. In his collection of essays *Step Across this Line*, the author emphasizes certain issues about migration. The condition of the translated man will be just a mirror of the real, inferring thus the representation of a hybrid identity. Rushdie says in one of his essays:

> As a migrant myself, I have always tried to stress the creative aspects of such cultural commingling. The migrant, severed from his roots, often transplanted into a new language, always obliged to learn the ways of a new community, is forced to face the great questions of change and adaptation; but many migrants, faced with the sheer existential difficulty of making such changes, and also, often, with the sheer alienness and defensive hostility of the peoples amongst whom they find themselves, retreat from such questions behind the walls of the old culture they have brought along and left behind. The running man, rejected by those people who have built great walls to keep him out, leaps into a confining stockade of his own.
>
> (Rushdie, 2002, 356)

Rushdie stresses the issues a migrant is facing – he must change and adapt to the new community, grow new roots, learn a new language. The migrant has a double consciousness, an identity which is produced through continuous adaptation, thus an entity which is not stable and constant. As the migrant is a translated man, Rushdie believes that 'something always gets lost in the translation' (Rushdie, 1991, 17). In other words, the identity of the migrant becomes hybrid because of the geographical and cultural dislocation. The individual transforms himself into the Other as he has to construct a new personal identity in agreement with the new space he inhabits. The new home place will not allow them to feel comfortable and at ease. Homi K. Bhabha called this new homeland 'a third space' which represents a space between two different countries, two different cultures: the place the migrant left and the one where he arrived. This is the place where the migrant will have to construct a new personal identity in order to make it fit into the new world. The migrant lives thus 'in between two geographical cultural locations, which is often perilous and marginalizing' (Bhabha, 1994, 17).

Salman Rushdie's novels are also a translation – a journey from one country to another, a quest for identity and for a new homeland. The reality of the third space is magically presented in his novels. His works are representative of magic realism, as the author makes use of fantasy in order to create fictional realities for his characters. As far as the author feels this trauma of migration, he expresses his grieves through his characters. Most of them are the perfect examples of migrants, who wander from country to country searching for the ideal home place, in hope for a better life. However, the reality of the migrant is not lacking difficulties as they struggle to be accepted by the natives and also to accept the 'third space'.

Victims of Hybrid Identities

From *Grimus*, *Shame*, *Midnight's Children*, and *The Satanic Verses* to *The Enchantress of Florence*, Rushdie's novels are certainly influenced by his own experience of migration. His novels deal with the themes of diaspora and postcolonialism; his characters seem lost in-between two worlds and they must create a new space, a 'third space'. Rushdie's first novel *Grimus* presents the story of a young Indian, Flapping Eagle, who is rejected by the society and wanders for centuries in search for his identity. In *Midnight's Children*, the narrator Saleem Sinai expresses his sufferings after losing his family home in India and moving in Pakistan. *The Satanic Verses* develops its narrative on the story of two migrants to England – the Indian Gibreel Farishta and the countryman Saladin Chamcha. The first refuses to adapt to the English society, whereas the latter chooses to adapt to the new environment. *The Enchantress of Florence* presents both sides of migration – the perspective of the immigrant as well as the one of the emigrant. Mogor and Qara Koz suffer an identity crisis in the land where they migrate – the East and the West.

BDD-A25630 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 21:59:09 UTC)

The novels seem to demonstrate the fact that the migrant has a difficult position in a new world and must adapt and search for a new identity. They create not only worlds of their own mind, 'imaginary homelands', but they also mould their character and identity in relation to their environment. This paper will focus on three of Rushdie's major works – *Shame*, *Midnight's Children* and *The Enchantress of Florence*. All of them present characters that migrate against their will or on the contrary because of their free will; however, in both cases, they become victims of their families, of the circumstances or cultural events that occur in the novels and consequently, their notion of personal identity becomes hybrid and fragmentary.

Shame is certainly a novel about migration and it is considered a semi-autobiographical novel as the story is located in the country where Rushdie migrated for the first time – Pakistan. However, he stresses the fact that it is not about Pakistan at all: 'The country in this story is not Pakistan, not quite. There are two countries, real and fictional occupying the same space or almost the same space' (Rushdie, 1995, 24). Just like its main characters – Sufiya Zinobia and Omar Khayam – 'Peccavistan' is also the representation of shame and shamelessness. Moreover, it is an imaginary homeland built on an existing one where the characters must survive although they are invisible for other people.

The narrator reflects in the novel on the condition of the human being as a migrant and consequently, rootless. He undermines the importance of feeling rooted in a certain place, of having a family, a culture.

> I have a theory that the resentments we mohajirs engender have something to do with our conquest of the force of gravity. We have performed the act of which all men anciently dream, the thing for which they envy the birds; that is to say, we have flown. I am comparing gravity with belonging. [...] We know the force of gravity, but not its origins; and to explain why we become attached to our birthplaces we pretend that we are trees and speak of roots. Look under your feet. You will not find gnarled growths sprouting through the soles. Roots, I sometimes think, are a conservative myth, designed to keep us in our places. The anti-myths of gravity and of belonging bear the same name: flight. Migration, n., moving, for instance in flight, from one place to another. To fly and to flee: both are ways of seeking freedom... (Rushdie, 1995, 84)

Here, Rushdie illustrates that the people's need to belong to a place or culture is no longer a valid standpoint; it is just a 'conservative myth' that keeps them stuck to their origins and limit their freedom. Moreover, he associates the emigration with a 'flight' of birds, and opposes it to the gravity and the roots. For him, the identity of the migrant looks like a rhizome – that is, there still are a lot of threads and knots. So, this does not mean that the migrant individual is totally rootless. His ability to fly represents his freedom, his power to deterritorialize himself from the place he belongs to. Being raised in a solitary confinement in Nishapur, Omar wants to know the world outside his prison-like home. He finds a way to connect himself to the world outside: a telescope of his grandfather. Through this channel, Omar observes that he was living on the edge of the planet, and constantly fears to fall off. Although he was afraid to cross the border of Nishapur, he feels that he must emigrate from that place with a view to going to school, but in fact, seeking for freedom. However, it is not easy for him to live in the real world, as he knew nothing about it, and what is more important, live with his traumatic experiences from childhood. In his case, his roots are illustrated by his misshapen personality. The fact that he has been raised with no ethical values, but with the mother's advice to feel no shame, made Omar feel like a foreign in the real world. This shows the migrant's position in a new place – exempt from his birthplace, Omar can neither adopt the outside behaviour and culture nor act shamelessly in society. The fact that he abandoned his family and home, but he cannot totally break with it, illustrates the migrant's identity, which is constantly uncertain. Thus, it can be said that Omar Khayyam has a hybrid identity and also that he is unable not to perceive himself in a state of in-betweenness. Moreover, in the end of the novel, when he confesses to his sins, the first on the list is 'fleeing-from-roots' (Rushdie, 1995, 301), showing thus his lack of

BDD-A25630 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 21:59:09 UTC)

identity. Through Omar Khayam, Rushdie illustrates the psychological crisis caused by the loss of roots and identity.

In *Midnight's Children*, the author reveals that there are many alternatives to draw the identity of human beings, so he undermines one more time the role of roots, ties of blood and so on and so forth. Once again, Rushdie illustrates that identity is acquired rather through imagination, than through a genealogical tree.

Saleem firstly outlines his family genealogy, as it is considered one of the most important ways to support the roots of a human. In the first book, although the narrator meticulously presents his grandparents and their children, he immediately undermines what he said before, claiming that he is not the real son of Amina and Ahmed Sinai. His statement, although followed by the revelation of his real roots, does not become stabilized as his lineage is still confusing. As he knows that Mary Pereira changed the babies at their birth, his parents would normally be Vanita and Wee Willie Winkie, but neither this is true. His biological father was in fact William Methwold, an Englishman who owned the Methwold Estate. Because of such a confusing lineage, Saleem actually concludes by saying at the end of the novel: 'Family: an overrated idea' (Rushdie, 1991, 392). However, although he knows that he was not the real son of the Sinai family, he realizes that the blood ties are not more important than his experiences in this family. Identity is not always created through the genealogical tree of the family, where the origins are well defined. On the contrary, it is produced by those events that disturb the established order. Moreover, he inherits several characteristics from his family, which in fact is not his family. It is true that Aadam Aziz is not his real grandfather, but still, Saleem has 'inherited' many things from him, physical features, but also spiritual ones. Both of them seem to have a disbelief in religion. Just like his grandfather, who is found somewhere between the Western science and the Muslim religion, Saleem is also characterized by the absence of faith. However, this absence is not exactly an empty hole, but rather a space full of doubt and uncertainties. So, it is not something that passed on genealogically; everything is the product of Saleem's ability to imagine correspondences.

Imagination becomes the drug which helps the migrant create a functional identity, and also heal his disorientation. His hybrid identity is illustrated also through the fact that he invented many imaginary parents, such as such as Amina Sinai, Mary Pereira, Pia Aziz, Vanita or Ahmed Sinai, Wee Willie Winkie, Nadir Khan, Dr. Schaapsteker, Zulfikar, Picture Singh and William Methwold. This multiplication of parentage does not seem plausible, so it brings out Saleem's state of being an orphan and a displaced person. However, Saleem seems rooted everywhere in the world, not only in places like India, England and Pakistan, but also in religions such as Islam, Christianity or Hinduism. Moreover, the hybridity of Saleem's personality is showed also at the level of syntax, as the narrator introduces himself as 'Snotnose, Stainface, Sniffer, Baldy, Piece-of-the-Moon' (Rushdie, 1991, 116). This line of metonymies emphasizes the fragmentariness of his identity; not only is the character made up of fragments, but so is his description. Because the line resembles a list or a catalogue, Rushdie stresses that Saleem has an encyclopaedic identity that tries to capture the whole universe, which in fact is also stated by the character himself:

> I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I'm gone which would not have happened if I had not come.
> (Rushdie, 1991, 440)

Saleem's claim that he is 'the sum of everything' emphasizes the chaos of the contemporary world and the fact that everything on this planet is related to everything. Rushdie introduces the concept of elephantiasis, seeking to reformulate the human identity. This metaphor intends to capture life in its totality. Saleem's form of elephantiasis, however, can kill him – the narrator and its narrative are in a mutual relationship of proportionality. In this sense,

BDD-A25630 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 21:59:09 UTC)

the death of the Saleem and the end of novel were getting closer simultaneously, exemplifying thus how the life of human beings is transformed into art. As he knows that he is falling apart, the narrator seeks to create for himself a significant personal identity, constantly making parallels between his personal life and Indian history - all of these connections are explained by the fact that he was born on the Independence midnight. The process of falling apart which he goes by is underlined several times by the Saleem as he is constantly saying that there is a 'hole in the centre of me' (Rushdie, 1991, 192). Thus the protagonist, Saleem Sinai pictures the trauma of a fluid and hybrid identity as he is made up by fragments and had to adapt his identity in order to conform to the reality he lived in. The novel portrays the pain of the migrant, of Saleem who travels from one place to another, from country to country, not only physically, but also through his telepathic powers.

The Enchantress of Florence draws another kind of diaspora. Rushdie introduced in the novel a white immigrant – Mogor dell'Amore – seeking to illustrate that it is not only a colonized person who suffers from this trauma of migration. From the very beginning of the novel, the reader learns that this is the story of a European who pretends to be the ambassador of England's Queen, but then he changes his aim and claims saying that he is the emperor's uncle, thus, a Mughal. He actually came to Sikri in order to seek for an identity, while simultaneously performing another, as the narrator says: 'If he had a fault, it was that of ostentation, of seeking to be not only himself but a performance of himself as well, and, the driver thought, around here everybody is a little bit that way too, so maybe this man is not so foreign to us after all' (Rushdie, 2008, 3). But first, he starts his identity performance under the name of an Italian, Ucello di Firenze. He uses his charm as a storyteller in order to remain on Scáthach, the pirate ship of Lord Hauksbank. From the first pages of the novel, the instability of the character's identity is revealed, making the reader also question the truthfulness of this name. The quest for an identity becomes the central theme of this work through Rushdie's creative strategy of creating mystery and suspense. The instability of the traveller's identity provides foundation for the uncertainty of other characters. In fact, the protagonist uses different names depending on the situation he finds himself in. Being at the Mughal court, Ucello di Firenze becomes Mogor dell'Amore, and introduces himself to Emperor Akbar as the ambassador of England. Although he pretends to have a letter of acceptance from the Queen of England, his identity is questioned when the crew of the pirate ship comes to arrest him because he had poisoned the lord.

By assuming that he is a distant relative of Mughal Emperor Akbar, the European is not trusted by anyone at the court, being also considered a man from the West who came to weaken the powerful kingdom of the Mughals. The doubt was increased also by Father Acquaviva who revealed the fact that Mogor was not even a name, but a nickname, which means: 'a Mughal born out of wedlock. It is a name that dares much and will offend many' (Rushdie, 2008, 43). By assuming it he implies that he wishes to be thought of as an illegitimate prince. This affirmation made everyone at the court regard the traveller as untrustworthy, and consequently ask for his real name. However, when the traveller finally admits that he is Niccolò Vespucci, he is not believed, as Vespucci was a very well known Florentine name. Moreover, the people from the Mughal court realized that he combined two of the names of the three friends from his story – Niccolò il Machia and Agostino Vespucci. With so many lies behind, even the emperor accuses him of creating another fake identity as 'a man who lies about his name will lie about much besides' (Rushdie, 2008, 43). Mogor is thus a victim of an identity crisis. He adopts several names, depending on the situation in which he is, wearing thus a mask of convenience in order to conform to a certain context or environment. The quest of an identity becomes the central theme of the novel. In fact, just as the migrant does, he changes and adapts himself to the new community. *The Enchantress of Florence* also presents the experience of the emigrant. If Mogor is a migrant to the East, the Mughal princess Qara Koz is a traveller

BDD-A25630 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 21:59:09 UTC)

towards the West. She left the Mughal Empire hoping for the best, as Argalia realized: 'She comes here of her own free will, in the hope of forging a union between the great cultures of Europe and the East, knowing she has much to learn from us and believing too, that she has much to teach' (Rushdie, 2008, 276). However she must face the problems that each migrant suffers from. The novel seeks to illustrate that both West and East accept the migrant at the beginning and afterwards reject them. Moreover Qara Koz is also known through other names – Lady Black Eyes, Angelica and Angelique – showing thus an ambiguous self and identity. The narrator presents the disintegration of the lost princess Qara Köz who because of „dreaming of finding her way back to her point of origin, of being rejoined to that earlier self, she was lost for ever' (Rushdie, 2008, 418).

Rushdie's characters express the feelings that the author himself experienced and perhaps still feels while living in an adopted land. The characters are illustrative as victims as they were forced by the circumstances to act or think in a certain way. Saleem, for instance, believes that he is the child of India, and thus, his life is connected to the history of India. Moreover, throughout him, the narrator expresses the sufferings of the migrant – just like Saleem who has many parents, the migrant also has more than one home place. Omar also has a hybrid identity, as he feels rootless. He needs to adapt in society, but does not manage to do this because of his lack of education and his wicked morals. Both of them are characterized by the fact that they are victims, as they are powerless in deciding their life. However, the other main character, Mogor dell'Amore, can choose whatever identity he wants, he is also considered to be a victim as his identity is multiple, ambiguous and not coherent. Rushdie stresses the experience of the migrant in *Shame*, where he illustrates the feeling of not belonging or rather of belonging in more than one place:

> What is the worst thing about migrant peoples…? I think it is their hopefulness…And what is the worst thing? It's the emptiness of one's baggage. We've come unstuck from more than one land. We've floated upwards from history, from memory, from Time.
> (Rushdie, 1995, 91)

Each one of the three characters taken under consideration suffers an identity crisis caused by displacement and rootlessness, although they try to come to terms with virtual or imaginary homelands. Their identities are fragmentary, fluid, hybrid and multiple, just as it is stated in *The Enchantress of Florence*: the human beings are always 'bags of selves, bursting with plurality' (Rushdie, 2008, 15). Rushdie managed to demonstrate throughout his novels that personal identity is the product of the chaos of the contemporary society characterized by globalization, border crossing and inbetweenness.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Bhabha, Homi K., *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London, 1994.
2. Morrison, Jago, *Contemporary Fiction*,Routledge, London and New York, 2003.
3. Rushdie, Salman, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism*, Penguin, Harmondswoth, 1991
4. Rushdie, Salman, *Midnight's Children*, Penguin Books, London, 1991.
5. Rushdie, Salman, *Shame*, Vintage, USA, 1995.
6. Rushdie, Salman, *Step Across this Line: Collected Nonfiction 1992-2002*, Knopf, Toronto, 2003.
7. Rushdie, Salman, *The Enchantress of Florence*, Random House, USA, 2008.

BDD-A25630 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 21:59:09 UTC)