INTRODUCTION

METAMORPHOSES OF THE SELF
ON THE BORDER BETWEEN ‘EAST’ AND ‘WEST’

In the issue of The New Yorker for 23 and 30 June 1997, in anticipation of the country’s fiftieth anniversary of independence, dedicated to Indian fiction, Salman Rushdie published a new short story entitled ‘The Firebird’s Nest’. Written soon after the author’s relocation to America, ‘The Firebird’s Nest’ can be read as a summary of the main topics that had interested Rushdie up to that point in his career as a novelist. As I will further suggest, it can also be seen as emblematic of some of the main preoccupations of contemporary Indian fiction in English at that moment.

Rushdie, present in the issue with this story and with an article on the current status of Indian fiction in English, was to many people an authority in the matter. He was not only born in 1947 (almost at the same time as independent India), but he was also the author of Midnight’s Children. Since 1981 when it was published, the novel has been read as the most significant fictional account of post-independence India. The autobiographical element – based on the fact that Saleem, the narrator who spells out the story/history of his nation, was born at the same time as free India and very soon after Rushdie himself was born – contributes to this identification.

2 Salman Rushdie, ‘Damme, This is the Oriental Scene for You!’, ibid., 50-61.
3 In A Tall Story: How Salman Rushdie Pickled All India, an interview he gave for the programme ‘Arena’, on BBC 2, in 1982, Salman Rushdie mentioned that the autobiographical element in Midnight’s Children was inspired by a family joke: that Salman’s birth (two and a half months before independence) had made the British leave India. The modelling of the narrator’s figure on the novelist’s personality is also indicated by the choice of Saleem’s name, very close to Salman’s, as Anuradha Dingwaney shows, quoting Rushdie (Chapter 20, ‘Salman Rushdie’, in A History of
Children was also an important turning point in Indian writing. It confirmed the transformation of English, often seen as the bequest of the former colonial empire in India, into an indisputably Indian literary language. The anniversary issue of The New Yorker looks back to that and draws a parallel between the birth of America’s post-independence literature, also written in a non-British variety of English, and the 1997 moment, when India celebrated a similar event. At the same time, the issue signals the originality and the local colour of this relatively new school of writing. This is also suggested by its cover, which features a picture of the Hindu god Ganesha, the patron of storytellers, the remover of obstacles in Indian tradition, standing for the revival of the rich mythical traditions of India in contemporary narratives.

The issue exhibits a festive attitude towards Indian fiction. As part of the celebration, it features a picture of the most important contemporary Indian novelists writing in English: Vikram Chandra, Rohinton Mistry, Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, Amit Chaudhuri, Kiran Desai, Ardashir Vakil, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, along with the Sri Lankan author Romesh Gunesekera. The variety of writing styles represented by this group is impressive: from realism (as represented by Rohinton Mistry and also Vikram Seth and Amitav Ghosh in some of their novels) to more subjective fictions of the female self (Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Arundhati Roy) and digressive storytelling that mixes Indian tradition with contemporary developments of the novel form (Vikram Chandra). They are all grouped around Salman Rushdie, identified as the father figure of the group.

In his introductory article to the issue, entitled ‘Declarations of Independence’, with the significant lead-in subtitle ‘Why are there suddenly so many Indian novelists?’, Bill Buford notices that most of the authors featuring in the New Yorker group photograph as a compact old family of friends, met on the occasion of this group picture for the first time. The reason that they all came to London for the photo shoot from very different parts of the world (none actually

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5 The New Yorker, 23 and 30 June 1997, 118-19.