Salman Rushdie’s Transcultural ‘Jesture’
in *The Enchantress of Florence*

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In Salman Rushdie’s works, one of the most striking and recurring features is the adamant refusal of singularities, stable identifications, or monologic representations. Instead, aesthetic, ethical, and political issues obtain their value in and through imaginative plurality, hybrid formations, and heterogeneous dialogue. In *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008), Rushdie plays with history, combining Europe and Mughal India in an imaginative way through the journey of the protagonist Niccolò Vespucci. In my article, I look into the ways in which Vespucci’s appearance – as a transcultural ‘jesture’ (more on this presently) – in Akbar’s Mughal court destabilizes accepted identifications, and possibly hybridizes the perceived histories of both Europe and India. For this, I start from the idea that Vespucci’s multilingualism and multiculturalism pose either a threat to or an opportunity for identity. The multiplicity is further positioned within the realm of imagination and dreams: “He could dream in seven languages.”¹ What suggests that the position of a polyglot is not an unproblematic issue is Vespucci’s relationship with these identificational languages: “He had picked up languages the way most sailors picked up diseases” (10). The transcultural protagonist is a hybrid creation who negotiates with multiple parallel realities. As what kind of a ‘disease’, then, is hybridity presented in *The Enchantress of Florence*?

What Does Hybridity Mean?

What does it mean when we talk about hybridity in our analyses of literary and other cultural work? For sure, we do not use it in any ‘real’ or realistic sense to refer to factual fusions of elements, as in biology, or to mixtures of different people, as in sociology or anthropology. These aspects are amply and accurately discussed in contemporary academic fora in these fields.

Ours seems to be a different kind of hybridity. But what does it mean? Hybridity is an elusive (and often enough evasive) term, as it flaunts such a multiplicity of roots. In my own work, I have tried to take hybridity seriously as a critically significant concept, and not just as something fancy and fashionable, the loose employment of which has attracted the disparagement of many critics. In our introduction to the book Reconstructing Hybridity which Jopi Nyman and myself edited in 2007, we tried to encapsulate the term’s specificity in the postcolonial context as follows:

we would like to propose that hybridity, in our framework, does not mean any given mixing of cultural materials, backgrounds, or identities, but implies a markedly unbalanced relationship.²

As I see it, we are dealing with hybridity, and particularly with postcolonial and transcultural hybridity, when we are analysing texts that negotiate with, or are influenced by, such unbalanced hierarchical relationships, be they political, social, religious, linguistic, cultural, or otherwise. There is, of course, no definite boundary here denoting what is “markedly unbalanced,” but it has to do with relative power over and across these relationships.

Rushdie and Hybridity

Whether it is the Midnight’s Children’s Conference in Midnight’s Children (1981), the House of the Black Stone in The Satanic Verses (1988), or the Ocean of the Stream of Stories in Haroun and the Sea of Stories (1990), multiplicity in Rushdie is valued over sameness, narrative over history.

Here, I focus especially on Rushdie’s 2008 novel The Enchantress of Florence, where we again find these features of multiplicity. One of the major figures, or metaphoric/metonymic motifs, of hybridity for Rushdie is the