SALMAN RUSHDIE’S EAST, WEST: PALIMPSESTS OF FICTION AND REALITY

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The theory and practice of both postcolonial and immigrant literatures are clearly among the most impressive results of the interworkings of historical events in this century. The position of the immigrant writer and the discourse of those who write conscious of a spatial, temporal and linguistic alienation from their native lands have come to occupy an important place in literary and cultural studies. One of the principal exponents of this discourse is Salman Rushdie, himself a product of the postcolonial and diasporic condition. His literary and critical endeavors are recurring meditations on the plight of those who, like himself, have had to deal with the change and continuity, strangeness and familiarity, characteristic of our increasingly complex, multicultural world. Paradigmatic of much of this literature, his creative writing and criticism outline the pivotal themes of the transcultural situation. In particular, the essay “Imaginary Homelands” may be considered the literary manifesto of the immigrant writer as it enumerates and analyzes the primary concerns and unique vision of those who have undergone some of the most dramatic experiences of the twentieth century.

Immigrant writers, Rushdie claims in his essay, possess an identity that is “at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy. If literature is in part the business of finding new angles at which to enter reality, then once again our distance, our long geographical perspective, may provide us with such angles” (1992, 15). These writers, he continues, write from a double perspective because the experience of being both insiders and outsiders in a society has endowed them with “stereoscopic vision” in place of “whole sight” (1992, 19). This mode of perception, which focuses from different angles to create a unified image, merges diverse realities and adds the dimension of depth. In this manner, Rushdie furnishes the possibility of an alternative discourse, a way of “ redescribing a world [as] the necessary first step towards changing it,” one that is a natural
result of this “century of wandering”, when traditional cultures and a Eurocentered world view are being challenged, drawn more and more into conflict and confrontation. The immigrant artist must, he believes, take the risk of pushing creativity to “the limits of what is possible, in the attempt to increase the sum of what it is possible to think” (1992, 15). And it is precisely the immigrant writer’s position, he implies, that privileges one to create the corresponding new literary form: “the mingling of fantasy and naturalism . . . [that] offers a way of echoing in the form of our work the issues faced by all of us: how to build a new, ‘modern’ world out of a legend-haunted civilization, an old culture which we have brought into the heart of a newer one” (1992, 19).

One of the alternative discourses Rushdie proposes is that which arises from the generation of palimpsests, a natural result of the immigrant condition. Palimpsests, writing effaced by further discourse, has been defined by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin as “a kind of parchment on which successive generations have inscribed and reinscribed the process of history” (1995, 392). This illustrates the immigrant writer’s task, which is most often the intense reworking of questions that ultimately refer to issues as oppositionality, marginality, boundaries, displacement, and authenticity: a process rather than a structure, requiring constant variation and review. The pluralistic ideas that arise from the process of rewriting history and, ultimately, culture and identity, are palpable consequences of the stereoscopic vision the writer experiences. Cultural displacement, as well as the constant intermingling of diverse manners of perception, which has forced the immigrant writer to accept “the provisional nature of all truths, all certainties” (Rushdie 1992, 12) has also obliged towards an engagement in a re-definition and re-description of even the nature of reality: “to find new ways of describing himself, of being human” (Rushdie 1992, 278). Maria Degabriele has termed this aspect of Rushdie’s work “trafficking in culture between nations,” a metaphor for the complex, multidirectional exchange characteristic of his writing (1993, 60). Rushdie seems to consider this cultural displacement an essentially positive and liberating experience; the fact that he “straddles two stools” of culture frees him from a unilateral vision of both the world and his art and permits him to further encompass the two stools of fiction and reality.

Rushdie’s narrative repeatedly attempts to approach and explain the phenomenon of this double perception: his novels, in one way or another, explore the relationship between fiction and reality as well as the palimpsests created when the immigrant writer or character reflects on the temporal or spatial past. At odds with an empiricist vision of