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A Portrait of the Writer as a Translator:  
Salman Rushdie and the Challenges of  
Post-colonial Translation

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**Abstract**

In a context where post-colonial translation has emerged as a strong interface between post-colonial studies and translation studies, the present paper examines the case of Salman Rushdie as a post-colonial translator. Drawing on concepts and ideas put forth by the two above-mentioned paradigms, the paper will argue that the strategies used by Rushdie in his attempts to write about the importance of redressing the balance of power and of resisting Orientalising practices are similar to those used by translators of post-colonial literature. The writing of post-colonial literature becomes an act of (re)translation, while translating post-colonial literature should aim at resisting domestication and at creating a target text that remains 'foreign' enough for the reader. While there is no doubt that through its post-colonial and global concerns Rushdie's entire work fits this frame, the analysis will focus only on two works, *Midnight's Children* and *Two Years, Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights*, since they seem to bracket Rushdie's efforts in this respect.

**Keywords:** post-colonial studies, translation studies, post-colonial translation, renegotiation of power, hybridity, types of translation, Orientalism

In his essay "Imaginary Homelands," Salman Rushdie talks about the importance of English for the British Indian writer, and in the process famously revisits the etymological meaning of 'translation,' offering one of the best analogies for his work: "(The word 'translation' comes, etymologically, from the Latin for 'bearing across'. Having been borne across the world, we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion

that something can also be gained.)” (16). The fact that the statement was made parenthetically should not be overlooked. It seems to be an aside and it is bracketed out, marginalised, much as a migrant’s life is often bracketed and marginalised and much as a translator’s work is bracketed and marginalised. Rushdie’s etymological wink results in one of the most enduring metaphors used in the critical approaches to his work, that of the ‘translated man’, the migrant, constantly negotiating the cultural spaces of his journey/s. (It should not be overlooked either that ‘metaphor’ too has a similar etymological story to tell, originating in the Greek *metapherein*, which is to carry/ bear over/ across.) In true Rushdiean fashion, however, the statement has proved to be prescient of another important coming together that has marked the past two decades or so, namely that of post-colonial theory<sup>1</sup> and translation studies.

If in their 1990 edited volume *Translation, History and Culture*, Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere were heralding the “cultural turn” in translation studies, in 1999 Bo Pettersson talks confidently about the “postcolonial turn.” What his article makes clear is that by the end of the twentieth century the concepts (and respective fields) of post-colonial literature and translation have merged sufficiently to justify a more serious (re)consideration of the theory and practice of post-colonial translation.

Salman Rushdie’s work, which spans more than four decades now, provides a fertile ground of intersection for all these preoccupations. His texts have been repeatedly claimed by both postmodernism and post-colonialism, he has been both proof for and against why post-colonialism is and is not an adequate paradigm, and his work has been translated into more than forty languages. Starting from the metaphors of the ‘translated man’ and of ‘post-colonial literature as translation’, and drawing on both post-colonial and translation studies, this paper will put forth the image of Salman Rushdie as a protean translator, whose work is a constant process of (self)translation meant to redress the balance of power in the hybrid space of post-colonial renegotiations. The analysis will look at various types of translation that the texts engage in but also at some of the challenges of translating these works into other languages.

Post-colonialism<sup>2</sup> as translation/ Translation as post-colonialism

As already mentioned above, in the past two decades the field of translation studies has paid increasing attention to the specific role translation plays in a post-colonial context. Seminal in this respect was *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice* (1999) edited by Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi, a volume that puts forth the idea that post-colonial literature/ culture *is* translation, and that we should not talk about postcolonial literature/ texts in translation but about postcolonial literature/ texts *as* translation. Thus, as the editors state in their "Introduction," "to speak of post-colonial translation is little short of a tautology," since "the word translation seems to have come full circle and reverted from its figurative literary meaning of an interlingual transaction to its etymological physical meaning of locational disrapture; translation itself seems to have been translated back to its origins" (12-13). This is, of course, the same sentiment articulated by Rushdie in his "Imaginary Homelands."

In their "Introduction" to *Changing the Terms. Translation in the Postcolonial Era*, editors Sherry Simon and Paul St-Pierre reach a similar conclusion. They emphasise how translation becomes an instrument of power, an Orientalising tool, in a colonial context, both in relation to translation from English into the native languages and the other way around. As a result, "[t]ranslation was part of the violence (...) through which the colonial subject was constructed" (11). However, they also point out that this view was conditioned by the very limited language available to talk in more complex terms about intercultural contact and how the expansion of this language also leads to a more nuanced discussion of this topic. In this respect, the process of translation provides the perfect ground for revealing the "intricate process of cultural contact, intrusion, fusion and disjunction" (Young quoted in Simon and St-Pierre, 12). Consequently, in their view as well, the intersection between post-colonial theory and translation studies should enable a reconsideration of the relationship between translation and power practices.

Homi Bhabha also echoes these ideas when he identifies a “transnational and translational” hybridity (5) and when he reiterates the view of migration as translation. Both post-colonial literature and translation inhabit what Bhabha has famously defined as the “third space” (36-37). Paraphrasing and expanding on Bhabha’s discussion, it is when one understands that all “cultural statements” (37) and translations are constructed in this space, that one can begin to understand not only that any claim to “purity” is untenable but also that this applies to the texts (in a wide sense) involved in translation as well. For too long it has been claimed that the ‘original’ will always be superior to the translated text and that no matter the expertise of the translator something will always get lost in translation. In other words, it has been maintained that the ‘original’ will always hold and exercise more (cultural) power than the inferior translation, which comes into the world unequipped to wield any instruments of power. If one starts from the assumption that a post-colonial text is already translated at the moment of its creation – that, in other words, this text is the result of a process of creative translation – then not only *it* can be “appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew” (Bhabha 37) but translation itself as well. To build on Bhabha again, such a recognition “may open the way to conceptualizing an *international* culture based (...) on the inscription and articulation of culture’s *hybridity*” (38, emphases in the original). This *inter-* is “the cutting edge of translation and negotiation” and “carries the burden of the meaning of culture” (38). This can be seen as a ‘carrying across’, or a perpetual translation, of a meaning that is constantly being relocated as a result of the (power) negotiations between the enablers (source cultures), producers (writer and translators), and consumers (target cultures).

The way in which translation is viewed by these theorists (and the way in which it is discussed in the previous paragraph) seems to be verging on the metaphorical. It is, however, very important to articulate the fact that included in this is also a literal process of translation. As noticed by various scholars, post-colonial writers do perform acts of actual interlingual translation in their writing. Unusual word formations and nonstandard sentence structure are visible traces of this process. In his introduction to Amos Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (a work that

represented an important moment in the revaluation of the English language as used by what would now be termed post-colonial writers), Michael Thelwell relevantly states that the novel is “a cultural hybrid” and that its “stories are translations – more accurately transliterations – of conventional folktales” (188). In “Writing translation: The strange case of the Indian-English novel,” G.J.V. Prasad seems to have no doubt that it is the case of “all Indian English writers that the texts they create are ‘translated’, the very act of their writing being one of translation” (41).

Based on this, and taking my cue from scholars such as Maria Tymoczko, I view translation as replicating the mechanisms of post-colonial literature. In “Postcolonial writing and literary translation,” the essay that opens the volume edited by Bassnett and Trivedi, Maria Tymoczko makes a point of clearly departing from the metaphorical view on translation. Instead, she says, “interlingual literary translation provides an *analogue* for post-colonial writing” (20, emphasis in the original). Despite the obvious differences between the two (which Tymoczko reviews and deconstructs persuasively), there are enough points of intersection or of overlap to justify the analogy. The main points of convergence that Tymoczko identifies, and that are crucial for approaches such as the current article, are “the transmission of elements from one culture to another across a cultural and/or linguistic gap” and the “similar constraints on the process of relocation” (22) that affect such texts. Just as translators constantly select and omit in their efforts to transpose, post-colonial writers are bound to select and omit, as “not everything in a post-colonial cultural metatext can be transposed in a literary format” (23) and, consequently, just like translations, which are generally simpler (though longer) than the source, post-colonial texts are – “of necessity”, Tymoczko remarks (23) – simplified versions of their cultural contexts. For this, she adds, post-colonial writers are just as criticised as translators.

When talking about translation as analogous to post-colonial literature, it is important to examine the way in which the actual, interlingual translation of post-colonial literature can significantly complicate the power dynamics at work in the source text. However selective and simplifying a post-colonial writer may be, and however problematic his/her choices, it is probably safe to assume that the

underlying intention of the choices made is to empower the post-colonial culture and to articulate a narrative of their own with means that will reflect, however partially, the source culture. When facilitating the 'carrying over' of the source text into their respective targets, translators face very difficult choices on various levels. They have to take decisions and make selections that will influence the reception of the translated text and will shape a view of the source culture. In this respect, any decision and act of selection is, inevitably, an exercise of power, very much like in the chase of the writers themselves. The translators' selections and decisions should not be based only on a linguistic expertise but on a cultural one as well, and, as I argued elsewhere (30-36), on familiarity with the specific features of the post-colonial paradigm. In the absence of this kind of familiarity, translators risk engaging in what could be seen as a renewed process of Orientalisation (as defined by Said), in which the Other and knowledge of the Other are constructed in ways that marginalise the source culture.

More than any other kind of literature, post-colonial literature calls for what Lawrence Venuti (taking his cue from Friedrich Schleiermacher, Walter Benjamin, and Antoine Berman) refers to as a foreignising approach to translation. Briefly put, this means a "linguistically marked" translation (72), which is necessary in order to acknowledge and 'carry across' cultural differences, and which is, in his view, the proper ethical stand. His is by no means a literalist approach in the rigid sense but an attempt to preserve the 'otherness' of the source text and culture. This, of course, requires a very delicate balance of strategies on the part of the translator and it is this very preservation of 'otherness' that has made Venuti and those of a similar mind vulnerable to criticism. (For a good summary of Venuti and a review of the criticism levelled against him, see Kjetil Myskia's "Foreignisation and resistance: Lawrence Venuti and his critics") Some of his critics, among whom Maria Tymoczko herself, claim that, although laudable in principle, Venuti's ideas remain too abstract and vague to work well or consistently in practice. In the absence of more clearly defined guidelines or standards, the paradoxical risk is that the translator will simply turn the text into a distant, exotic object/ Other, not unlike what Said describes in *Orientalism*. While such a risk is

undeniable, too thorough a domestication results in an annihilation of cultural difference and thus an appropriation of the source text that is somewhat reminiscent of colonial conquest. Wolfgang Iser insists that otherness has to be translated “without subsuming it under preconceived notions,” and that “a foreign culture is not simply subsumed under one’s own frame of reference; instead, the very frame is subjected to alterations in order to accommodate what does not fit” (qtd. in Ribeiro 190). As mentioned above, the translator’s familiarity not only with the culture of the post-colonial text but also with some of the main principles/ tenets of post-colonial theory can make a difference when it comes to striking the right balance regarding Venuti’s process of foreignization.

In what follows, I will focus specifically on the case of Salman Rushdie and examine some of his work as an illustration of the kind of translation post-colonial literature engages in. Also, given my own almost two decade long involvement in the translation of his work, I will briefly examine some of the ways in which translating Rushdie’s work can interfere in, or derail, the power dynamics established by the source texts.

### The translated and translating man

As a writer who was early on claimed by post-colonialism, Salman Rushdie places himself and is often placed at the centre of debates trying to (re)define the main features of this type of literature. There is a wide range of critical responses to this positioning (or labelling), from those who saw in him from the very beginning a possible answer to the question of how ‘to write back’ to those who spared little effort trying to discredit his approach as too indebted to the Western canon to truly give a voice to his culture of origin. His work, however, and his own evolving views on the cultural and ideological affiliations of the post-colonial writer demonstrate the protean nature of both writing and translation, as well as the need to resist entrenched dichotomies. It would be difficult to summarise these critical views in just a few paragraphs but several scholars offer very useful overviews of the various ways in which Rushdie has been received and read through the lenses of theory (among these scholars, Andrew Teverson and the contributors to the very useful volume

edited by Robert Eaglestone and Martin McQuillan). There is comparatively little critical output focusing specifically on Salman Rushdie and translation. Some of the books mentioned in the first part of the paper refer to him occasionally by means of illustration but, to the best of my knowledge, there is only one book dealing with Salman Rushdie and translation (Ramone) and none that offers an extensive analysis of Salman Rushdie in translation, which is understandable, perhaps, given that such a project would require not only familiarity with several languages but also a painstakingly close comparative analysis of the various translations. Jenni Ramone's book, however, provides a persuasive look into the ways in which Rushdie's work functions as translation, or as a vehicle for 'carrying across' cultural content. Ramone's approach is also primarily rooted in post-colonial and translation studies, though she employs other frameworks as well in the specific analyses of the various works.

Although Rushdie's fiction does not feature characters whose specific profession is that of translator, all the books include characters who actually fulfil this role. Two major 'texts' that Rushdie consistently translates in his novels are history and the self. History, of course, refers primarily to the post-colonial histories, while the self too is a post-colonial dynamic inscription. Needless to add, these big categories and their subcategories overlap to a great extent. The various books, though, do foreground various types of topics/ texts in translation, as well as various translation strategies. Novels such as *Midnight's Children*, *Shame*, and *The Moor's Last Sigh*, for example, translate the colonial history of India, with the first two focusing more closely on the period closer to independence and the *Moor* digging farther into the past to translate the palimpsest of colonial and post-colonial representation. *Shame* and *The Satanic Verses* choose to focus more closely on the religious dimension of the cultural transfer, while *East, West* and *Joseph Anton* translate genre as well. There is no doubt that Rushdie translates not only a generic post-colonial self in his work but also his own self. Works such as *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, *Luka and the Fire of Life*, and *Joseph Anton* offer different versions of the writer and of the way in which the world has



translated him as a result of the *fatwa*. The permutations can obviously continue.

In what follows, I will focus only on two of Salman Rushdie's texts, namely *Midnight's Children* and *Two Years, Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights*, and look at the way in which the different translation strategies used in them constantly empower the mongrel/hybrid Other, rendering it visible and enabling it to speak almost as a translator does, by channelling the voices of multitudes of Others. In analysing the texts, I will use two sets of definitions and functional frameworks for translation, one of Western and the other of Eastern provenance. I do not mean to fall back into the very dichotomies I argue post-colonial literature and translation should do away with, nor do I want to orientalise by appropriating through oversimplification a paradigm that is 'foreign'. Quite the contrary, by referring to them both I am hoping to reveal again how complementary these views on translation are.

One set of translation definitions and category is provided by Roman Jakobson, who usefully distinguishes between "intralingual," "interlingual," and "intersemiotic" translation. By "intralingual translation or *rewording*," Jakobson understands "an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language," while "interlingual translation or *translation proper*" represents "an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language" (qtd. in Venuti 114). The third category defined by Jakobson is "intersemiotic translation or *transmutation*," which he defines as an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems" (qtd. in Venuti 114).

The other set of translation definitions and categories is inherited from Sanskrit and is mentioned by Bassnett and Trivedi in their "Introduction" to *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, as well as by Vanamala Viswanatha and Sherry Simon in their essay "Shifting grounds of exchange," published in the same volume. The "three different translation/ rewriting strategies" are "*roopa-antar* (changing the shape), "*anu-vada* (something that follows after), and "*bhashanthara* (changing the language)" (169).<sup>3</sup> Rushdie's work displays all these categories, and specific devices he uses, such as intertextuality, the use of shape-shifting,

or the reliance on 'superpowers' when creating his characters, establish fairly convincing correspondences.

### Turning history's tables

Rushdie's interventionist methods when writing about historical events have endeared him greatly not only to post-colonial theorists but to postmodernists as well. Redressing history, bringing forth previously marginalised voices, undermining received historical narratives are all part of the province of postmodernism as well, not only post-colonialism. Both postmodern and post-colonial theorists posit that history is a narrative put together from a position of power with the purpose of preserving that power. As Leela Gandhi puts it, "'history' is the discourse through which the West has asserted its hegemony over the rest of the world" (70). These narratives have proved to be remarkably resistant to post-colonial challenges and what is currently happening in the world is probably proof that they have not only staying power but regenerating power as well. As Jenni Ramone points out, in translation studies terms, this would correspond to "the idea of the inherent superiority of the original" (117) or source text. When translating these versions of history in his texts, Rushdie does not simply put forth a new version. Instead, he undermines the power exerted by the "original" by proposing a constantly dynamic, reshaping, self-translating text, which essentially amounts to what Ramone calls translating "the historical mode itself" (117).

*Midnight's Children*, the famous winner of three Bookers and, essentially, the novel that put Rushdie on the (post-colonial) map, offers a 'history' of India's independence and partition. Temporally speaking, the text extends in two directions, exploring both the 'before' and the 'after' of August 1947. Needless to say, that independence is accompanied by partition, that breaking free is also breaking up, is an irony that is not wasted on Rushdie and accounts for some of the choices he makes in the text. The author talks at length about the genesis of *Midnight's Children* in his essay "Imaginary Homelands," mentioning, among other things, how he re-appropriates the (recent) past through memory, therefore in a

highly subjective and possibly deficient way, and how literature can “give the lie to official facts” (14).

This highly subjective and possibly deficient way is what Rushdie chooses for Saleem Sinai, his narrator/ translator in *Midnight's Children*. Born in perfect simultaneity with the new nation, Saleem learns over time (though never fully accepts) that his destiny is inextricably linked to that of India. As he says at the very beginning of his story, “I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country” (3). At least two elements in this statement are worth a brief mention at this point. “Mysteriously” can be seen as an attribute not only of Saleem’s strong bond with history but also as a way to raise more general doubts about one’s placement in and relationship with history. This, in turn, becomes hugely relevant for any process of translation, be that the writer’s translation of their culture/ circumstances or an actual translator’s efforts to transpose the source text into a target language and for a target audience. The second element worth noting is the plural Saleem uses when referring to his life. The fact that he talks about “my destinies” is an important early move in Rushdie’s efforts to draw attention to the inherent multiplicity of any (his)story and to the artificiality and possibly even danger of reduction at any cost. This too can function as a warning against the reductionist tendencies of translation, which may run counter to Iser’s urge not to subsume.

Although not a translator in the standard sense of the word, Saleem functions as one in the sense of ‘channelling’ retellings of both the colonial past and the post-colonial present. He is also ‘channelling,’ ‘carrying across’ or translating the voices of the other children of midnight. His ability to ‘hear’ and render them is not unlike that of the translator who internalises the different voices of the text and then chooses how to pass them on. Not unlike a translator’s is also Saleem’s realisation, when the Midnight Children’s Conference disintegrates, that choices and decision have to be made, however temporarily.

It is extremely relevant as well that, as a re-teller/ translator of history, Saleem turns out to be not who he thought he was. The ‘switch-at-birth’ element is essential in a variety of ways, two of which play an important role in the current examination of the text through the lens of

translation. Insofar as the text as translation is concerned, this case of mistaken identity undermines the claims of authority associated with sources of historical discourse. When thinking about who Saleem is actually switched with, it also becomes clear that Rushdie is playing on the creator-destructer dichotomy so important in the Hindu tradition, as well as complicating Saleem's provenance. Rather than the son of Amina and Ahmed Sinai, he turns out to be the result of an illicit encounter between William Methwold, the Englishman from whom the Sinais buy their house, and Vanita, the sacrificial wife of Wee Willie Winkie. When he shifts and gives this special midnight child an English father and a Hindu mother, Rushdie actually translates the new nation as a blurred, secretive continuation of the colonial relationship. William Methwold claims to be the descendant of the seventeenth century Methwold, an East India Company officer, who had an early vision of Bombay. As the British prepare to leave India, Methwold sells his estates on one condition, namely that nothing should be touched, in other words, that his version of colonial life, should continue unchanged, until the exact, official hour of independence. With this particular translation, or form of transference, William Methwold writes another act of colonial history: despite their initial complaints about this condition and almost without realising, the new occupants of the estates fall into the rhythms of the Englishman's life, which could amount to a kind of willing self-(re)colonisation or self-(re)translation. They "repeat," they "follow after," without managing a dramatic break but mixing, combining even more. Their almost automatic switch to their "imitation Oxford draws" (109) is further proof of their linguistic and cultural flexibility, and of their already hybrid identities. On the other hand, the Englishman is already hybridised as well. Not only is he deeply inscribed in the very layout and existence of Bombay, but he has actually created a new hybrid, mongrel life by his relationship with Vanita. The new nation is, in fact, old, disentanglement is not possible, the languages are inescapably mixed, and history becomes but a continuous retranslation of experience, an exercise in synchrony rather than diachrony.

Saleem's use of intertextuality in the way in which he constructs his narrative corresponds to two of the three translation types that Roman

Jakobson defines, namely the “intralingual” and the “interlingual” translation, but it also counts as repetition/ following after and shape-shifting. Saleem engages in both as he blends into his own story narratives of the Hindu and Muslim tradition, as well as narratives from the Western canon. The interlingual translation is also visible at the level of the lexical and syntactical structure of the text, and in this respect Rushdie uses Padma, Saleem’s listener and wife-to-be, as a translator as well. As Prasad points out in his analysis of *Midnight’s Children*, the lexical and grammatical deviations in Padma’s speech are traces of translation “from Hindustani/ Urdu, which Rushdie knows” (53). Interestingly, Prasad sees in this a “carefully constructed translation” (53), which renders visible the process of translating and, possibly, its intentions as well. The question of the in/visibility of the translation and translator is, of course, the crux of Lawrence Venuti’s approach, and I will revisit it as I bring the different strands of the analysis together.

*Midnight’s Children* contains plenty of instances of ‘zero translation,’ or words left in their original languages. In many ways, this lack of translation can be seen as the most assertive kind of power grab in the delicate redressing of power dynamics which is one of the main intentions of a post-colonial text. In some cases, they may be words so specific to the respective culture that they are untranslatable, though ‘untranslatability’ is also a risky gambit in the (cultural) power struggle. There seems to be a tendency to almost dismiss these instances of non-translation as attempts to provide local colour or flavour. I find the latter view somewhat problematic in terms of the implied intentionality it might suggest, namely that it is a relatively innocent ‘colouring’ meant for the reader’s entertainment, which might have slight Orientalising overtones. That, of course, does not have to be the case, but I have come across it many times as a practitioner in my interactions with various types of audiences (general readers, students, editors, reviewers, etc.) and I have grown a little weary of it. The danger in taking this too lightly is to overlook the very serious intentions and effects this particular translation strategy may have. I am in total agreement with Prasad when he says that such strategies might reveal these writers’ “intent is to make things difficult for the monolingual (English) reader. Far from using Indian

words and expressions for local colour, to create an exotic ethnographic text, they attempt to make the process of reading as difficult as that of writing” (54). The point, then, of such strategies is to try to even out – again, however briefly – the spread and density of power.

Saleem Sinai’s narrative begins as his life is ending. A translation, or a target text, begins as the source text is finished. Saleem’s body cracks, disintegrates, under the pressure of histories – history lived, history imagined, and history translated – and he has to bring the stories out into the world before the time is out. Unlike Scheherazade, a crucially important intertext, he does not have a thousand and one nights, nor can he entertain any hope of saving himself. All he can do at this point is “work fast” to get those stories out, “if I am to end up meaning – yes, meaning – something. I admit it: above all things, I fear absurdity” (*Midnight’s Children* 4). The imperative of meaning remains both for the translation that Saleem’s narrative is and for the translations into other languages that will follow (*anu-vada* and *bhashanthara*). In “Imaginary Homelands,” Rushdie remarks that the novel was unjustly perceived as “despairing” (16). He counters that by referring precisely to the way in which the story is told – and which, as I have briefly sketched, is so much like translation – “multitudinous, hinting at the infinite possibilities of the country,” reflecting “the Indian talent for non-stop self-regeneration” (16). Saleem himself says, “I have been a swallower of lives, and to know me, just the one of me, you’ll have to swallow the lot as well” (*Midnight’s Children* 4).

Without a doubt, just as Saleem the narrator-translator swallows these lives, which then teem inside him, the interlingual translator too has to swallow these multitudes and offer one version through which the audience might know, or swallow, the lot as well. Just as Rushdie does, the balance between the familiar and the foreign has to be carefully kept and, if anything, tipped in favour of the foreign, through which the reader might benefit from being “mysteriously handcuffed,” just like Saleem. If in the text itself Rushdie is trying to redress the balance of power between the former colony and the former coloniser and to begin to challenge the effects of centuries of cultural supremacy, too strong a domestication in the act of translation would be Orientalising, forcing the source culture

into yet another position of submission. More than with any other type of text, the translation of post-colonial literature needs to render the translator and translating itself visible (Venuti), and leave traces of the source text's coming into being.

That Rushdie himself is considering these aspects was made obvious yet again by a request he had regarding *Two Years, Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Days*. I have mentioned this on previous occasions, both in a translation footnote and an article on post-colonial translation (26), but it is worth repeating precisely to reinforce how important it is for translation professionals to be aware of the potential Orientalising dangers inherent in certain translation decisions or strategies. In his message to translators and editors, Rushdie draws attention to the fact that he deliberately used the words 'jinn', 'jinni' and 'jinnia' in the text because they are "more accurate and less Orientalist" than the alternative 'djinn'. As a result, the target text had to depart from the current lexical norms and accommodate a slightly 'foreign' version, which, however, meets the source more appropriately in that third space of a more equal cultural and historical renegotiation.

*Two Years, Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Days* (henceforth 2.8.28), published in 2015, presents another version of translating the multitudes and, to date, closes the 'translating history' bracket in Rushdie's work, as defined within the limits of this article. Although published at considerable distance in time, space, and personal circumstances, I would like to argue that 2.8.28 is, nevertheless, a response from the other side of the millennium threshold to some of the questions raised by *Midnight's Children*. I find it very intriguing, and slightly disappointing, that the novel has not received more critical attention. Apart from several reviews in some of the usual literary magazines, the scholarly reaction has been virtually non-existent. The reviews themselves have been mixed. In *The New York Times*, Marcel Theroux, while commending Rushdie for not being "a writer who tiptoed stealthily into the reader's imagination, avoiding the creaking floorboards of incredulity", complains about what he considers to be the too wide scope of the novel and claims that "if a book is everything it risks being a formless nothing" and calls it a "conceit" that the novel is told from a

vantage point in the future. In her review in the *Financial Times*, Alice Albinia thinks that the book “has some witty flourishes but lacks emotional heft” and – mistakenly, in my opinion – that Rushdie’s inclination is “towards amusement and diversion rather than satirical demolition,” missing overall the heavier and more ambitious intentions of the novel. Among the most positive reactions was Ursula Le Guin’s in *The Guardian*, who, despite a slight dissatisfaction regarding Rushdie’s portrayal of the female protagonist, identifies well one of the main points at stake in the novel, namely the constantly readjusting balance of ‘good’ and ‘evil’, ‘light’ and ‘darkness’, etc., and the need to transcend the either/or dichotomy. Overall, the book seems to have baffled, or even disappointed the inhabitants of Rushdie-land, on the one hand, and to confirm some of the main accusations (self-indulgence, exhaustion, etc.) for the other camp.

The novel, I think, fell prey to what we could probably call ‘Rushdie exhaustion’, a pre-existing condition instilling a bias in the readers that they will have to read ‘more of the same’, and thus it deserves close reconsideration. Alternatively, it can be seen as another case of mistranslation of the author and his work, similar to (though on a smaller scale) *The Satanic Verses*. As briefly hinted above, I see 2.8.28 as a consistent link in the chain of Rushdie’s preoccupation with history and as the other side of the coin of the translation process initiated in *Midnight’s Children*. The historical span of 2.8.28 is more ambitious than that of *Midnight’s Children*. The novel is narrated from a point situated about a thousand years in the future and focuses on “strangenesses” that unfold “eight hundred and more years” (19) after the time (and controversies) of Ibn Rushd. Some of the main concerns remain, though, such as translating ‘multitudes’ through intertextuality and shape-shifting. Hybridisation is also a major focus, the longer time span making it and its role even more obvious than in *Midnight’s Children*.

The novel’s intertextual anchoring is clear from the very title and intertextuality remains one of the main translation strategies Rushdie resorts to. *Two Years, Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* offers a translation in utopian/ dystopian key of the famous *One Thousand and One Nights* and its “stories told against death, to civilize a barbarian”



(2.8.28 11). Ibn Rushd, one of the father figures in the text, is said to be fascinated by some of these stories, in particular the story of the fisherman and the jinni, which he appreciates for

its technical beauty, the way stories were enfolded within other stories and contained, folded within themselves, yet other stories, so that the story became a true mirror of life, (...) in which all our stories contain the stories of others and are themselves contained within larger, grander narratives, the histories of our families, or homelands, or beliefs. (11)

This passage, which comes from the opening pages of the novel, makes clear the same preoccupation with the embeddedness of narratives, their coexistence and interdependence, which is ensured by a continuous process of mutual (re)translation. However, if *Midnight's Children* did not question the translatability of these stories and focused, rather, on transcending dichotomies of authority/ power (whether political or cultural), 2.8.28 takes a somewhat darker view and offers a stark warning about the dangers of pursuing translatability to its ultimate end, that of a final version, which then reinstates the dichotomies Rushdie's previous work had tried to do away with.

The extension of the time span allows for a more complex process of migration and, therefore, translation. The past anchor of the narrative is not an immediately obvious colonial history or historiography. Instead, the text is rooted in the great philosophical quarrel between Ibn Rushd, the famous medieval commentator of Aristotle, and Ghazali, the great critic of Islamic philosophy, who had died fifteen years before Ibn Rushd's birth. The quarrel in question is, in fact, rooted in the different ways in which the two men choose to translate God and the Qur'an, the translation of God already provided by the Prophet. In many of the reviews of the novel this quarrel has been over-simplistically presented as one between reason and religion, between rationality and fanaticism. In fact, Rushdie is trying to present this precisely as an attempt to go beyond such (polar) opposites. Ibn Rushd, whose name, incidentally, the writer's family adopted,<sup>4</sup> "had tried to reconcile the words 'reason,' 'logic' and 'science' with the words 'God,' 'faith' and 'Qur'an,'" but he had failed, despite what he had thought to be a compelling demonstration based on the "Qur'anic

quotation that God must exist because of the garden of earthly delights he had provided for mankind" (9). As a keen, if amateur, gardener (and this becomes relevant later on), Ibn Rushd sees in this proof of a God of a "kindly, liberal nature" (9). On the other hand, the image of God proposed by Ghazali is based on fear: "Fear is a part of God," "[o]ne may say that fear is the echo of God" (126).

While on exile in the village of Lucena, Ibn Rushd fathers a 'multitude' of children without earlobes by a young girl, who is, in fact, a most powerful jinnia and who introduces herself as "Dunia". When Aristotle's translator asks her why she chose a name that means "the world," her answer offers a possible clue for the reading of the novel: "'Because a world will flow from me and those who flow from me will spread across the world.'" (6) This magic lot of children is reminiscent of the children of midnight and, just like them, they are also hybrid and come to realise they have superpowers.

The spreading across the world is, in fact, a migration during which Dunia's and Ibn Rushd's descendants 'colonise' the world and are 'colonised' by it in a fluid manner that seems to erase the rigidity of borders and the violence of difference:

the children of Dunia's children [became] a family that was no longer exactly a family, a tribe that was no longer exactly a tribe; (...) a family without a place but with family in every place, a village without a location, but winding in and out of every location on the globe, like rootless plants, mosses or lichens or creeping orchids, who must lean upon others, being unable to stand alone. (14)

The fluidity and malleability are deceptive, though, or they represent just one side of the coin. Ghazali's metaphorical descendants "multiplied and inherited the kingdom" (15). Rather than tie himself more specifically to more traditional representations of East and West, Rushdie goes global in 2.8.28, trying to chart colliding trajectories that culminate in an apocalyptic and somewhat allegorical translation of the calamities of our contemporary world. The cataclysmic storm that hits the city of the narrator's ancestors (New York) essentially wipes out life as they had known it and marks the beginning of the "strangenesses," which then last for "two years, eight months and twenty-eight months" (20), in other

words, just as long as Ibn Rushd's relationship with Dunia and as long as Scheherazade's attempt to save her life and the life of others. The slits in the world that had allowed communication with Peristan, the supernatural world of the jinn, had long been sealed but now have begun to crack, and through these cracks the jinn, both light and dark, squeeze into the human world again, just as this world is about to disintegrate. This is, too, when the earlobe-less descendants of the ill-fated philosopher and Dunia or "the World" take centre stage and attempt to rescue what is left of it.

If I have insisted so much on the opening chapters of the book, it is not only because they set an elaborate stage for a dramatic showdown between the forces good and evil but also because they weave together so many of the threads of Rushdie's previous works, in different and more portentous ways, though. By transposing/ translating the conflict onto a larger stage (both temporal and spatial), Rushdie reflects the shift from an earlier post-colonial frame to a wider conversation on globalisation, though the main terms are the same (power, submission, annihilation, etc.) and the conversation seems to be slipping back into dangerously dichotomous terms. It is no accident that one of the protagonists of the "strangenesses," Mr Geronimo, is an uprooted gardener, an exile from Bombay (which he refuses to call Mumbai). This is relevant not only because, as briefly mentioned above, the garden of delights was Ibn Rushd's preferred translation for God's attitude towards humankind but also because 'cultivating one's garden' seems to have failed as a means of being in the world. Slowly but surely, Geronimo begins to float, somehow reminiscent of the way in which Saleem too feels his grip on the world slip and his sense of reality dim when in the powers of Parvati-the-witch. Geronimo's detachment from the ground he really liked to have beneath his feet signifies both his own transformation and the detachment of the new world that comes into being from the old one. In Rushdie's work, the new always comes into the world violently, through some act of destruction, and 2.8.28 is no exception to this.

Shape-shifting plays an even more important role in 2.8.28 and, alongside intertextuality, represents the other main translation strategy. The jinn are, of course, creatures capable of endless and violent shape-shifting, but, as Jimmy Kapoor, another bastard Rushdi of the Duniazat,

puts it, “the world itself is shape-shifting, looks like” (68). Not only are Dunia’s descendants hybrid in a most extreme way, but so is the entire world, especially once the wormholes open and the traffic between the two world accelerates. Changes happen at such speed in the narrative that there is hardly enough time for a coherent image to coalesce.

There is no doubt about what battle 2.8.28 translates, nor is it difficult to identify the thick political intertext that the novel taps into. What could be seen as a somewhat unexpected twist, especially from a writer like Rushdie, who has almost paid with his life for having drawn the ire of unreason, is the conclusion of the novel. The ending of *Midnight’s Children* has its own ominous overtones when Saleem envisages the fate of his descendants (forever cases of mistaken identity) as being continuously trampled by history. However, “it is the privilege and the curse of midnight’s children to be both masters and victims of their times” (533), which signals the continuation of the process of constantly redefining one’s position in the world in a way that is not ‘either/or’ but ‘both’ and, possibly, more. In 2.8.28, we full-heartedly root for the good guys to win, especially as we identify more and more translations of contemporary horrors. The aftermath of the big clash is uncanny, though, and gives off a whiff of mortality and abandonment that Rushdie’s previous works, even at their most harried and desperate, did not have.

From their vantage point in the future, the narrator assures us that winning the War of the Worlds set in motion the process by which the world has finally become better. We are told that Mr Geronimo and Alexandra Bliss Fariña, the lady philosopher inhabiting La Incoerenza, the residence become final battleground, not only find ‘bliss’ in each other’s arms but also write – “*in their own language*, in spite of Alexandra’s suggestion that it might sound better in Esperanto” (283, my emphasis) – a text that will become the best-known of these times, “*In Coherence*, a plea for a world ruled by reason, tolerance, magnanimity, knowledge, and restraint” (283). Despite Ghazali’s predictions, fear did not win, and the light in our natures won over the darkness. Among the great things accomplished, the narrator mentions the eradication of differences based on “race, place, tongue, and custom” (285), as well as the fact that “[w]e

are one,” united by the very things that used to separate. However, there seems to be a despondent, or even sinister, undertone to the narrator’s efforts to paint this perfect picture. This entire utopian paradise has come at a cost, namely the loss of the ability to dream. This, Rushdie seems to suggest, may not be the right or the desirable answer. This world that follows, that comes after, shows that tension, unreason, even power grabs might, after all, be necessary. Pursuing absolute translatability involves making a final, absolute choice, which may not be preferable, and not only because the choice may well turn out to be the ‘wrong’ one. What is important and worth preserving is the process of self-examination and self-(re)definition involved by the constant re-negotiation of the difficulties and of the language of coexistence. In the perfect world that follows ours in Rushdie’s narrative, things are good but people long for the return of dream. Worse still, sometimes “we long for nightmares” (286).

### Instead of conclusions

To draw final conclusions in this particular case would probably be as unproductive as trying to offer a ‘definitive’ translation. Provisionally, though, there are several things worth mentioning as a means of going forward as well as summing up.

Looking at post-colonial literature as translation and at translation as post-colonial practice helps to make visible the complicated web of power relations involved in the creation of any text (whether this text is a ‘source’ or a ‘target’ text, to resort to this inadequate terminology). Just as the field of post-colonial literature continues to metamorphose, so does our theoretical and practical understanding of the translation processes involved. What has gained significant traction in the past two decades or so is the need to reject the assimilating and domesticating practices of the past. After all, this could be another way to look at the conclusion of 2.8.28 – a warning against a return to assimilation and domestication.

The trajectory of Salman Rushdie’s work can be seen as following various translation patterns very much in tune with the specific circumstances of the translator/ author. What needs to be done is a more detailed exploration of this work so as to build on the existent analyses

(such as Ramone's) but with a more functional focus as well. Still missing is a comparative analysis of various translations of his work into different languages, which could provide useful insights regarding the particular ways in which Rushdie's own process of translation is perceived in different cultures and the preferred interlingual strategies used by different translators.

Narrowing down even more, the actual interlingual translator must continue to try to see foreignisation not only as acceptable but as desirable as well. Anything else runs the risk of recolonising texts that are precisely trying to escape the straightjacket of allegedly superior cultures. Just like Shalimar the Clown, the translator has to walk the tightrope of cultural negotiations, while this rope is swinging, and currently swinging wildly.

### Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Although many of the sources I cite here spell post-colonial as one word, I have chosen to stick with the hyphenated version in this paper in an attempt to suggest both the 'colonial' and the 'post,' as well as the space in between. When quoting, I will preserve the spelling in the source.

<sup>2</sup> My understanding of post-colonial literature and the way in which I use the post-colonial frame here are rooted in Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin's seminal *The Empire Writes Back*, though I will engage with more recent critiques calling for reconsiderations of the field in the age of globalisation. Although I will be focusing on a British-Indian (American too now?) writer, I will use the term post-colonial "to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2).

<sup>3</sup> Bassnett and Trivedi focus only on *anuvada* or *anuvad*, for which they offer a more elaborate definition, via Monier-Williams' Sanskrit dictionary: "saying after or again, repeating by way of explanation, explanatory repetition or reiteration with corroboration or illustration, explanatory reference to anything already said" (Bassnett and Trivedi 9).

<sup>4</sup> This could be seen as another instance of 'self-translation' on Rushdie's part, along with previous self-representations in texts such as *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, *Luka and the Fire of Life*, or his autobiography in the third person, *Joseph Anton*.

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