

**Other Worlds, Other Selves:  
Science Fiction in Salman Rushdie's  
*The Ground Beneath Her Feet***

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Salman Rushdie's fiction is often classified as magic realism, a category that Brian Attebery in "The Politics (If Any) of Fantasy" claims is identical to fantasy. Attebery argues that the only distinction between the two genres is that the former is produced in "Other places, the places that the industrialized world tends to see as backward" (7). Critics from the industrialized world create a distinction between the genres because they assume that "Fantasy is deliberate, a choice" but "people from those Other places obviously don't know the difference between the real and the fantastic, so it all gets jumbled together in their work" (7). Attebery goes on to suggest that this apparent confusion is a strength of magic realism over fantasy. Where the latter invokes myths and legends from the past to comment on the present—Tolkien's use of beings from medieval folklore is a prime example—the former "can count all the more clearly the cost of entering the twentieth century: it is being paid right now as the villages are abandoned and the magical world view that makes all things related and alive gives way to a world of dead commodities" (7). In the postcolonial fantasy genre, the simultaneity of the different worlds allows them to comment on each other in a more immediate way than does the escapism that characterizes more mainstream fantasy.

Rushdie himself has suggested a connection between the concerns of fantasy and those of postcolonial fiction in his assertion that "Fantasy, or the mingling of fantasy and naturalism, is one way of dealing with the problems of incompatible views of the world through which we all move ("Imaginary" 19). Rushdie occupies a position between worlds as an expatriate Indian writer living first in England and now in the United States. He believes that the exiled writer always deals "in broken mirrors,

some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost” but that “[T]he broken mirror may actually be as valuable as the one which is supposedly unflawed” (“Imaginary” 11). Because every person’s version of reality is created from “shards of memory” (12), those imagined realities always distort the world they claim to represent. To mirror the distorting effect of memory, exacerbated by the disjunctions between Rushdie’s worlds, he consciously creates disjunctions between the worlds he writes in his novels, and the world in which he lives. His creation of fantastic worlds in his fiction mirrors the different “worlds” that exist on this planet: the Eastern World and the Western World; the Old World and the New World; the Third World and the Industrialized World.

Rushdie’s preoccupation with alternate worlds is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in his novel *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*. In this novel, he creates a fictional world that, while it seems at first to be identical to our own, differs significantly from his readers’ version of reality in many matters of history. For example, in Rushdie’s fictional world “President Bobby Kennedy and his elder brother and predecessor, ex-President Jack” are assassinated together in 1971 (225); East and West Pakistan stay together; Nixon never makes it to the White House; and the great Jesse Garon Parker—managed by “the sinister figure of ‘Colonel’ Tom Presley” (91)—sings “Heartbreak Hotel.” Alongside this world, Rushdie creates yet another alternate dimension that more closely resembles the world we know; this world, where “Lou Reed’s a *man* [...] and Charles Manson’s a mass murderer” seems like a bizarre fantasy to most of the characters in the novel (350). Much like the alternate dimensions presented in the television series *Sliders*, the novel’s two worlds share a timeline, some personae (but not all), and some events, but are marked by fundamental differences. These sites of cognitive dissonance seem at first to be a simple postmodern reminder of the constructed nature of both fictional and social worlds. Rushdie, however, uses these speculative fiction techniques for postcolonial as well as postmodern purposes. The cultural outsiders who cross the boundaries between the worlds open doors for communication and new forms of artistic expression, but these doors also lead to the permanent destruction of one cosmic world, and a permanent unsettling of the other. Rushdie uses the

meeting of these two cosmic worlds to emphasize both the creative possibilities and the dangers inherent in all cross-cultural encounters.

Before moving into the substance of my argument, it is first necessary to demonstrate the importance of looking at the different worlds and selves of *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* in terms of speculative fiction, particularly the sub-genre of science fiction. Not only is the novel littered with references to Western fantasy classics such as J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and Enid Blyton's *The Faraway Tree*, it also contains allusions to popular science fiction such as *Star Trek* and *Back to the Future*, and science fiction writers such as Jules Verne and Kilgore Trout (who, in Rushdie's fictional world, takes the place of his creator, Kurt Vonnegut). Most early reviews have remained silent about the science fiction aspect of the novel. In doing so, they fail to recognize, as well, that science fiction has long played an influential role in Rushdie's writing. In *Grimus*, for example, Rushdie posits a world that consists of an infinite number of different dimensions, both inner and outer, in which humans can visit different planets and versions of reality with the aid of a stone rose. *East, West* includes several stories that make use of science fiction. *Star Trek* is an obvious intertext of "Chekov and Zulu," in which Rushdie aligns two Sikhs working for the British government with two supporting characters from Gene Roddenberry's original *Star Trek* series. "At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers" uses a dystopian futuristic setting to investigate shifting concepts of home. In "The Harmony of the Spheres," a paranoid schizophrenic accuses his Indian friend of being "an invader from Mars, one of many such dangerous beings who had sneaked into Britain when certain essential forms of vigilance had been relaxed" (127).

Such science fiction elements are also central to *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*. Rushdie's constant references to science fiction and fantasy invite the reader to see the novel in terms of that genre, and several of his characters draw specific attention to the science fiction elements of their lives. When Rai, the narrator, encounters a representative from the other dimension he comments, "This is what it feels like to be in one of those first-contact sci-fi movies" (506). Another character predicts "some sort of science fiction encounter between variant and incompatible versions

of the world” (426). All these explicit connections between Rushdie’s fiction and science fiction force us to reevaluate what Shaul Bassi calls Rushdie’s “special effects” (48), and to question the labelling of these literary devices as magic realism.

Science fiction claims to operate within the “hard facts” of science, and to extrapolate future advancements based on present scientific knowledge. Fantasy and magic realism, on the other hand, are distinct from realism in their use of supposedly magical or fantastic elements that are inexplicable in the terms of physics and chemistry. By purposely evoking science fiction, as well as fantasy, Rushdie prevents his readers from falling into a Manichean reasoning that interprets the speculative aspects of his fiction as a symptom of his status as a writer from the exotic, mystical East. In *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, the otherworld is “not paradise” and is “not so very unlike” the world in which the characters live (349). Instead, Rushdie presents the existence of the two parallel universes as “some physics beyond our present capacity to comprehend” (350). This insistence on science, rather than myth, to explain the otherworld removes some of the magic from Rushdie’s magic realism. Instead, it suggests that the seemingly mystical elements that characterize postcolonial magic realism stem not from an anachronistic belief in the supernatural, but rather from an openness to realities that Western science has not yet developed models to understand.

Rushdie’s use of science fiction devices not only challenges readers’ assumptions about the genres available to postcolonial writers, but also subverts the cultural norms often perpetuated by mainstream works in that genre. Although speculative fiction’s use of alternate and multiple realities and its depictions of otherness and alienation seem to parallel the concerns of postcolonialism, science fiction, in particular, either ignores the problems that exist between different human cultural groups or perpetuates the prejudices of the dominant culture. Writers of science fiction often portray humans as a homogenous group, and displace otherness onto alien species or artificial life forms. Such displacements sometimes do attempt to critique racism by making racial differences appear unimportant (Scholes and Rabkin 188). For example, Ursula



LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, and Robert Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* have non-white protagonists whose racial identities are not an issue, and are mentioned only in passing. Similarly, the crews of the starships and space stations in the numerous *Star Trek* series are all integrated in terms of race, gender, and even species.

Despite the good intentions behind these attempts to downplay racial and cultural difference, when science fiction authors homogenize humans, the norm to which all conform often becomes mainstream Western culture. The racial identities of LeGuin's Genly Ai and Heinlein's Johnnie Rico are so muted that many readers visualize the characters as white—a tendency emphasized by the decision to cast a Caucasian actor as Johnnie in the 1997 film adaptation of Heinlein's novel. When racial characteristics do remain intact, they often reinscribe the stereotypes and biases of the society in which they are created. In "Chekov and Zulu," Rushdie's Chekov describes the *Enterprise* characters as "the Asiatic-looking Russky and the Chink. Not the leaders, as you'll appreciate, but the ultimate professional servants" (151). Chekov's use of derogatory racial and cultural terms, and his insistence on both the subordinate and the Eastern identities of the *Enterprise* characters points out the Orientalism inherent in the original series.

Furthermore, the casting of otherness onto non-human beings maintains racist stereotypes, but hides them so that they are latent rather than overt. In her introduction to *Into Darkness Peering: Race and Color in the Fantastic*, Elisabeth Anne Leonard comments on how "ubiquitous the pairing between darkness and evil" is in the fantasy genre (2). The same generalization can be made about science fiction. Ursula LeGuin suggests that most "Galactic Empires" of early science fiction were "taken straight from the British Empire of 1880" and that other planets are "conceived of as warring nation-states, or as colonies to be exploited, or to be nudged by the benevolent Imperium of Earth toward self-development—the White Man's Burden all over again" (98). She also points to ways in which science fiction writers construct aliens either as irredeemably evil or as "wise and kindly beings" who occupy "a pedestal in a white nightgown and a virtuous smirk—exactly as the 'good woman'

did in the Victorian Age” (98-99) or, I might add, as the noble savage does in many colonial texts.

Certainly, *Star Trek* provides an excellent example of the difficulties for science fiction in presenting the other. The various *Star Trek* series re-enact American imperialism and the myth of Manifest Destiny. Gene Roddenberry pitched the original series as a “wagon train to the stars,” and all the shows, movies, and books depict the Confederation of Planets spreading the American dream across the galaxy. The series replicates the tenets of colonization, as epitomized in the mission statement of the original series: “to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no man has gone before.” The extreme characteristics ascribed to alien species (the rampant consumerism of the Ferengi, the militaristic code of honour of the Klingons, the dispassionate logic of the Vulcans, the assimilative practices of the Borg) parallel the Manichean allegory of colonialism, in which negative human characteristics are displaced onto the other. It takes very little critical skill to align these alien species in *Star Trek* with different enemy others identified by the American empire (the Ferengi as Japanese businessmen, the Borg as communists, etc). Such displacement perpetuates stereotypes and establishes American culture as an ideal norm.

Whereas most science fiction reinscribes the cultural and racial norms of mainstream, Western society, Rushdie uses the techniques of the popular genre to approach these issues from the point of view of the colonized world, and to unsettle the norms of the dominant culture. The complexities of the cross-cultural and cross-dimensional encounters he presents in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* are played out in a manner that evokes the complex issues of identity and difference that are the mainstay of much postcolonial theory. The central characters of the novel, Vina and Ormus, are rock stars of Indian heritage who represent the meeting of the Eastern and Western worlds. Ormus is the songwriter for their band, VTO, and much of his material comes from the conflict he experiences between his own world and the otherworld, which he alone can see. VTO’s greatest album, *Quakershaker*, both describes and

somehow seems to reinforce the earthquakes that are a result of the two worlds coming into contact, and which eventually claim Vina's life.

Ormus is the main site of movement between the two worlds. When he is young, his stillborn twin Gayomart visits him in his dreams, and leads him into the other dimension. Ormus is also visited by Maria, a woman from the otherworld who claims that she is his true soulmate. Maria resembles Vina in appearance, personality, and life experiences with Ormus (or some other Ormus from the otherworld), but these resemblances are not exact duplications. The doubling of Ormus with Gayomart and Vina with Maria is further complicated by the fact that Ormus and Vina also have doubles in their own dimension. Rai, the narrator of the novel, presents himself as Ormus's doppelgänger, in part because he has an ongoing affair with Vina. After Vina's death, a young Vina impersonator named Mira takes her place in both VTO and Rai's bed. The mirroring characters, of both the speculative and the more realistic variety, parallel the mirroring of the different worlds in the novel.

Rushdie uses the two incompatible versions of the universe as a metaphor for the differences between cultural worlds, and the movements between them as a metaphor for cross-cultural encounters between colonizers and colonized. A woman from the otherworld who appears on Rai's videotape explains that her dimension's exploration of Rai's world is essentially an exploration of "the idea of otherness, of a radical alienness with which we can have no true contact, let alone rapport" (506). Here, the novel seems to be mirroring the popular science fiction conceit in which otherness becomes a species and planetary concern, rather than a cultural one. Rushdie does not, however, allow this science fictional otherness to erase the differences between East and West in the world through which the characters move. Instead, the four different worlds (East and West; world and otherworld) overlap, and the dimensional differences parallel and intensify the cultural differences. Each of the worlds occupied by Rushdie's protagonists is colonized. Not only has the West colonized the East in this world (as in ours), but the characters from the otherworld also seem able to move between the two

dimensions with impunity. Maria appears and disappears in Ormus's room at will: "A crack seems to open in the air itself, and she steps through it and is gone" (317). This apparent magic attributed later to scientific advances in the otherworld places Rai, Ormus, Vina, and their entire world, in the position of the colonized. They do not understand the technology of the newcomers, which both renders them powerless to prevent the otherworld's encroachment into their dimension, and makes the otherworld seem magical. They are not sure what effect these explorers will have on their own reality, and they are afraid that the contact will lead to the destruction of their way of life.

The crossing of boundaries between the cultural worlds of East and West is marked by a ripping in the fabric that separates the world from the otherworld, emphasizing the connection between the two pairs of opposing worlds. When Ormus leaves India for England, he believes that he can shed "his old skin without a second thought" and cross "that frontier as if it didn't exist, like a shape-shifter, like a snake" (250). But over the unfixed boundary where East and West meet and collide:

he feels a certain resistance in the air. Something fighting back against the aircraft's forward movement. As if there's a stretchy translucent membrane across the sky, an ectoplasmic barrier, a Wall. [...] And as he passes that unseen frontier he sees the tear in the sky, and for a terror-stricken instant glimpses miracles through the gash, visions for which he can find no words, the mysteries at the heart of things, Eleusinian, unspeakable, bright. He intuits that every bone in his body is being irradiated by something pouring through the sky-rip, a mutation is occurring at the level of the cell, of the gene, or the particle. The person who arrives won't be the one who left, or not quite. (253)

Using language borrowed from clichés of science fiction, Rushdie demonstrates that, in leaving India, Ormus has taken the ground from beneath his own feet, and so allowed for movement between worlds and the further unsettling of his own existence. The unsettling of his reality

by this cultural displacement allows Maria to appear; she confronts him for the first time after he has crossed the cultural frontier. Her presence proves that Ormus's passage from East to West also allows for the movement between the cosmic planes.

Rushdie points to the fundamental connections between the different worlds in his novel through his use of twins. The doppelgänger motif has been a mainstay of science fiction since Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and is best characterized by Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. The literal displacement of the negative aspects of Dr. Jekyll's personality onto Mr. Hyde parallels the way Europeans repudiate their "most immoral impulses" and "most shameful desires" by projecting or transferring them onto their colonial others (Fanon 190). In both cases, the "dark" other is really an extension of the self; it is this identification, rather than any real difference, that leads to the fear of the other. Similarly, the pairings of numerous characters in Rushdie's novel emphasize the strong bonds between the apparently opposed worlds. Ormus first gains access to the otherworld by chasing Gayomart down the corridors of his unconscious. Vina has an otherworld counterpart in Maria. Even Rai, who lacks the mythic dimensions of his companions, has a "dead twin" in a murdered photographer from whom he steals a roll of film that changes his life (243). As the characters encounter their doubles, their personae and the worlds that surround them are unsettled, emphasizing the instability of identity outside its specific cultural context.

The twins in the novel differ, however, from the usual doppelgänger motif in that none of them enacts a simplistic good twin/evil twin dichotomy. The Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde scenario is played out most exactly with Ormus's older twin brothers, Cyrus and Virus. The other pairings of the novel are all morally neutral and the simplistic mirror images of the Manichean allegory become, in Rushdie's hands, a fun-house maze of mirrors through which identity is chased as elusively as when Ormus chases Gayomart. For example, Ormus's stillborn twin links him to another King of Rock n' Roll. In our version of the world, Elvis Presley had a stillborn twin named Jessie Garon. In *The Ground Beneath Her*

*Feet*, this twin is the one that survives; his surname is switched with that of Elvis's manager, further complicating the doubling process. Ormus is accused of being an Eastern copy of Jessie Garon Parker, but he denies it: "On Gayo's lip-curved features he modelled his own sensualist's scowl; and Gayomart's elusive songs, those devil-tunes wafting up from satanic darkness, became Ormus's own. In Gayo, Ormus found the Other into which he dreamed of metamorphosing, the dark self that first fuelled his art" (99). The two sets of twins—Ormus and Gayomart; Jessie and Elvis—all mirror each other until the idea of an original self, as opposed to a shifting subject position, disappears.

In "Imaginary Homelands," Rushdie suggests that Indian writers in Britain "are capable of writing from a kind of double perspective: because they, we, are at one and the same time insiders and outsiders in this society. This stereoscopic vision is perhaps what we can offer in place of 'whole sight'" ("Imaginary" 19). Sir Darius, Ormus's father, ascribes a similar ability to outsiders: "The only people who see the whole picture,' he murmured, 'are the ones who step outside the frame'" (*The Ground Beneath* 43). Ormus's own vision problems add to his outsider status, and help him to "step outside the frame." After a car accident, he loses his link to Gayomart, who—like Dr. Jekyll's Mr. Hyde—appears to be loose in the world, and out of his control. When Gayomart escapes, the "small purplish bruise, like the shadow of an eyeball" (35) that has marked Ormus's left eyelid also fades away. Instead, Ormus experiences a kind of double vision. He sees his own reality out of his right eye, and the otherworld out of his left; his vision sets him apart from the other characters in the novel, and shows him the limited nature of his own world.

While stereoscopic vision allows the world to be seen in three dimensions, since each eye (or "I") sees the world from a slightly different angle, Ormus's double vision emphasizes the disjunction between the two realities. He is seeing two different and incompatible versions of the world that cannot come together to form a coherent image and, instead, lead to confusion. As Rai points out, Sir Darius's theory about

the importance of the outsider perspective has not been proven: "If he was wrong, then the lost are merely lost. Stepping outside of the frame, they simply cease to exist" (203). Ormus's double vision has moral and cultural implications that cut him off from his own reality. Maria tempts Ormus, saying, "*Your right eye, your left eye, stare into different versions and so on. At such a moment the frontier between right and wrong action also dissolves*" (325-6). The connection Maria makes between Ormus's science fictional double vision and his moral sense parallels Frantz Fanon's connection between the "two frames of reference within which" the colonized person "has had to place himself" and the destruction of that person's "metaphysics, or, less pretentiously, his customs and the sources on which they were based" (110). Because Ormus lives in both worlds at once, he cannot function properly in either, and eventually blocks out the otherworld with an eyepatch in an attempt to maintain a unified subjectivity.

The multiple selves and worlds in Rushdie's science fiction point to the multiple, constructed, and unstable nature of cultural worlds. The title, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, points to the uncertainty of the reality that holds us up. Rushdie demonstrates the ways in which different characters create different ground on which to stand, but at the same time points to the instability of that ground, which can give way to earthquakes of both the literal and the figurative type. Rai's father investigates the literal instability of "The ground, the ground beneath our feet" (54). He knows "a thing or two about the unsolidity of solid ground. The tunnels of pipe and cable, the sunken graveyards, the layered uncertainty of the past. The gaps in the earth through which our history seeps and is at once lost, and retained in metamorphosed form. The underworlds at which we dare not guess" (54). The literal underground gaps soften the ground so that when earthquakes hit, it is more likely to give way. These gaps also represent the figurative and metaphorical gaps that undermine the characters' (and our own) cultural certainties.

Just as solid ground is fiction, so each reality is, to the other one, a fictional world, a novel. Maria comes to Rai in a dream and says "that she

could read me as if I were a book. She said if she wanted to she could close me and put me back on her shelf and then my story would never finish, it would stop dead in the middle of a sentence" (448). This seems at first to be a metafictional acknowledgement that Rai is a character in Rushdie's novel. Like Maria, the reader sees Rai as fiction; s/he knows that Rushdie has created this world, and the intertextual references to William Methwold and Homi Catrack—both of whom are characters from Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*—only strengthen this awareness. Like Ormus, we believe that his world is "no more than a vision in some other accidental individual's damaged eye" and will "fall away like a shell" when we close the book, to reveal "the great granite truth of the other-world" which we associate with our own reality (437). Maria's world is not, however, our world. Despite its illusion of realism, it is as much a part of Rushdie's fictional construction as is Rai's.

More importantly, the characters of the novel see the reader's own world as speculative fiction. Rai describes a "fantasy-thriller" novel, "*The Watergate Affair*, in which the future President Nixon (President Nixon! that's how wild a fantasy it is) has to leave office after trying to bug the Democrats' offices, an accusation that's finally proved true, in a wildly implausible twist, when it turns out that Nixon also bugged himself" (280). The incredulity and amusement with which Rai views this novel mirror the reader's reaction to the less believable inventions of Rushdie's novel, such as a Sikh record producer named Yul Singh. All worlds contain improbable events, but people grow used to the improbable events of their own worlds, and so accept them without question. The displacement of much of what we assume to be history onto the science fiction alternate reality of the otherworld has a defamiliarizing effect on the reader, and parallels the displacement Western readers might feel when being forced to look at the West through the eyes of Eastern characters.

The construction of other worlds as speculative fiction mirrors the inability of members of particular cultures to see any other culture's reality as valid. Rai comments on Americans' inability to see beyond their own narrow cultural perspectives: "The rest of the planet is perceived here



as essentially fictional, and what is most distressing about the war in Indochina is that this basically imaginary country is depriving American youngsters of their very real lives” (366). Similarly, when Ormus first arrives in the West he finds England to be an unstable, imaginary country in which his own footprints are the only means by which he can construct solid ground on which to stand. The literal instability of the constructed worlds in Rushdie’s novel parallels the concerns of post-colonial theory. Edward Said suggests that the “Orient was almost a European invention” (*Orientalism* 1) and that Europeans read the Orient as a text, without acknowledging that it gains “some of its identity from its historical moment interacting with the attentions, judgements, scholarship and performance of its readers” (“Reconsidered” 214). Rushdie’s unsettling of the numerous worlds in his novel multiplies this process and suggests that all worlds create their others by seeing them as fictions, created by the author and controlled by the reader.

Although he uses metafictional and historiographic techniques, Rushdie does not posit that all is socially constructed. Ormus compares the different levels of reality to movie screens, and his own reality to:

a huge screen like at a drive-in or just hanging in space like a curtain, and then suppose there were slashes in the screen, a mad knifeman ran into the cinema and hacked at that curtain, so now there are these great rips going right across everything, across you, across the window, across the wing out there, across the stars, and you can see that behind the screen there’s a whole other set of things going on, maybe another whole I don’t know level, or maybe another movie screen with another movie playing, and there are people in that movie looking the other way through the rips and maybe seeing us. And beyond that movie another movie and another and another until who can guess. (348)

The two dimensions of the novel, and the third in which it is read, are all culturally constructed, but these screens obscure some larger reality. They are in this way similar to the Hindu concept of *maya*, which Joseph

Campbell defines as a “cerebral shortsightedness” that makes us aware of the “illusion superimposed upon reality” but prevents us from seeing that reality itself (13). Although both Rushdie and his narrator are fervently opposed to organized religions and creeds, the novel supports the idea that all the different screens of culturally constructed reality are, in fact, obscuring some larger truth. Occasionally the movie screen is torn by one of “[F]ive mysteries”—love, birth, art, death, and music. Then, “the bolts of the universe fly open and we are given a glimpse of what is hidden; an eff of the ineffable. Glory bursts upon us in such hours: the dark glory of earthquakes, the slippery wonder of new life, the radiance of Vina’s singing” (20). The ineffable, inexplicable world that bursts through the screens—whether it is read as mythical and therefore belonging to the realm of fantasy or magic realism, or as “some physics beyond our present capacity to comprehend” (350) and thus science fiction—separates Rushdie’s speculative fiction from much Western post-modernism, which suggests that all is culturally constructed.

Ormus is able to see more than one culturally constructed world, and to glimpse the reality that lies beyond them, because he is an outsider, a position which Maria describes in terms familiar to readers of speculative fiction: “*there are certain individuals in whom the irreconcilability of being is made apparent, in whom the contradictoriness of the real rages like thermonuclear war; and such is the gravitational force of these individuals that space and time are dragged towards them and deformed. There are rifts, tears, slippages, incompatibilities*” (327). Rai suggests that natural outsiders are isolated further because “those who value stability, who fear transience, uncertainty, change, have erected a powerful system of stigmas and taboos against rootlessness” (73). Despite such distrust, the outsider still has an important function in society. Outcasts, freaks, extra-terrestrials, and other boundary crossers are celebrated “in the waking dreams our societies permit, in our myths, our arts, our songs” (73), because they assist in the transformation of a world that “is not cyclical, not eternal or immutable, but endlessly transforms itself, and never goes back” (145).

Ormus and Vina's complex position between East and West causes them to become such mythical outsiders. They are of Indian heritage, and they meet and come of age in India, but Vina is born in America, and is raised in several American homes before moving to India; similarly, Ormus is raised by an Anglophile father whose interest in Aryan mythology emphasizes the common roots of Eastern and Western cultures. Vina, under the early influence of Von Daniken's *Chariots of the Gods*, claims that her parents were extra-terrestrials. The more mundane—though equally *alienating*—version of her past is that she is of mixed race: Indian and Greek. Her multiple parents, names and family situations create in her “a rag-bag of selves, torn fragments of people she might have become,” inspiring Rai's comparison of her to “one of Columbus's sailors, close to mutiny, fearing that at any moment she might plunge off the edge of the earth” (122). Vina's transitory nature leads, like Columbus's voyage, to changes in the worlds between which she moves.

Ormus's connections to the otherworld through his dead twin, his relationship with Maria, and his double vision—all of which reflect his complex position between East and West—place him in a situation where he can claim to be part of both worlds, in both the cosmic and the cultural sense, but where he is not fully accepted by either. He wants to erase boundaries altogether, especially the boundary between East and West. He hopes “that it might be possible for human beings—for himself—to transcend the frontier of the skin, not to cross the colour line but to rub it out” (480). Such boundary crossing and disavowals of difference can, as Homi Bhabha has pointed out, turn “the colonial subject into a misfit—a grotesque mimicry or ‘doubling’ that threatens to split the soul and whole, undifferentiated skin of the ego” (80). Ormus's constant effort to cross boundaries—to find and touch Gayomart, to leave the East for the West, to explore the otherworld—all lead to his increasing alienation from all worlds. Vina questions Ormus's “universalist premises” but the global reaction to her death “indeed transcended all frontiers: of race, skin, religion, language, history, nation, class” (480). When she crosses the frontier from life to death, Vina's self is fractured

into numerous doubled images; she is mirrored in a myriad of impersonators, and in a photographic project set up by Rai. This project, in which Vina's image in a mirror is replaced with "the head of a woman very like Vina, but not her" (504), demonstrates the way her identity changes once it becomes public property. She is no longer *herself*, but an object constructed by others: her friends and lovers, the media and her fans. Crossing boundaries changes the world, but deprives her of her own identity.

Rushdie suggests that his own "plural and partial" identity, which results from his own passage from East to West, has placed him on "ambiguous and shifting" ground; this ground is not, however, "an unfruitful 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" ("Imaginary" 15). Just as Rushdie's position as a "translated" man ("Imaginary" 17) allows him to create his fiction, so Vina and Ormus's shifting subject positions allow them to become the greatest Rock 'n Roll band in the history of their world. Music—which Rai points to as one of the five mysteries that allow humans to experience the reality that is hidden by our culturally constructed worlds—provides the means by which Vina and Ormus straddle the chasm between worlds. Music is the first medium through which Ormus gains access to the otherworld—he hears his dead twin Gayomart singing songs two years before they become hits in his dimension. Music offers Vina "the tantalizing possibility of being borne on the waves of sound through the curtain of *maya* that supposedly limits our knowing, through the gates of perception to the divine melody beyond" (123). The music that Vina and Ormus make in VTO springs from the conflicts Ormus finds between his world and the otherworld, and the eruptions that evolve out of those conflicts. Ormus "seeks not only to sing Apollo's pure, clean song but also to move to Dionysus's dirty rhythm" and to make his music "[W]here reason and light meet madness and darkness, where science meets art and peace meets battle; where the adult meets the child, where life faces death and scorns it" (392). VTO's music crosses the boundaries between different

planes of existence, touches the transcendental, and points to new ways of looking at the world. In fact, it creates new realities.

The hybridity that allows Ormus and Vina to write their songs can also be read as pollution. Despite the Indian heritage of the band, many Indian people see VTO's music as "precisely one of those viruses with which the almighty West has infected the East, one of the great weapons of cultural imperialism, against which all right-minded persons must fight and fight again" (95). Science fiction has a similar reputation as a low art form that epitomizes the cultural trash produced and exported by the United States. As his characters transform Rock Music, so that it occupies a similar liminal space to their own, so Rushdie transforms the genre of science fiction so that it plays between East and West. While a good case could be made for the art forms as an important facet of American cultural imperialism, neither pop music nor science fiction is necessarily Western in origin. Rai points out that contemporary popular music has appropriated different sounds and styles from around the globe "as Picasso once ransacked Africa's visual motherlode, as the empires of the West once ransacked the world" (536). Similarly, science fiction's obsession with otherness could be said to emerge from the interest imperial centres always have in those they colonize. The genre came of age in Britain during the nineteenth century, the height of the British Empire; the United States became the main producer of science fiction in the twentieth century, as it took over as the main imperial power. The paradoxical position of science fiction and popular music as both stolen artifacts and imperial impositions demonstrates the complexities of the cross-pollination that is a necessary result of cross-cultural encounters. Rai's reference to Picasso is a reminder that the cross-cultural encounters of colonization contributed to the development of modernism and, later, postmodernism. In fact, the Western world would not exist in its present form without the influence of the colonies it set out to recreate in its own image.

This paradoxical situation also leads us to the dangers of border crossing, which can lead not only to "kinship [...] with the gods" (386-87) but also to "opposed destinies of immortality and destruction" (387). In

the novel, the sites of interchange between the two dimensions upset the space–time continuum of both worlds. Although border crossing has the creative possibility of ripping cultural constructions to reveal some truth, the erasure of boundaries is more sinister. As the boundaries between the two worlds of the novel soften, Ormus realizes the danger of erasing the difference between self and other:

If the forking paths are coming together, if a point of confluence is ahead, what does this mean for life on the earth he knows? If such a decompartmentalization were to occur, and all verities suddenly failed, could we survive the force of the event? Ought we to be building bunkers, arming ourselves, donning badges that identify us as fellow members of this reality and not the feared (perhaps soon the hated) other? (388-89)

A large portion of the construction of the subject position comes from the culturally constructed distinction between the self and the other. Although the breakdown of that boundary could lead to increased communication and artistry, it will also lead either to the annihilation of the individual or to the necessity of creating artificial markers that point to differences which no longer exist.

Movements between East and West lead to cultural disruptions that parallel the earthquakes triggered by the meeting of the two dimensions. All three main characters experience “disorientation” because of their shifts in cultural space. This disorientation is a “loss of the East. Ask any navigator: the east is what you sail by. Lose the east and you lose your bearings, your certainties, your knowledge of what is and what may be, perhaps even your life. Where was that star you followed to that manger? That’s right. The east orients” (176). The directions here disorient the reader, who thinks of the North Star as the one to sail by, and the star the Magi followed as being in the west. Rai’s personal disorientation mirrors a larger unsettling of the colonized world in the novel. The earthquakes that mark the clash between the two cosmic worlds have a more devastating effect in the so-called developing nations; some people even see them as political or military tools of domination, deployed by the West to unsettle its others.

In the end, the contact between the different dimensions leads to the complete destruction of one of them. Surprisingly, given Ormus's constant refrain that his world "shouldn't be this way," it is the otherworld, the world which naïve readers might identify as the real one, that eventually collapses into primordial chaos. By destroying the world that resembles his readers' reality, Rushdie unsettles the ground beneath our feet, and makes us question the validity of our own, culturally defined, versions of reality. As well, since the otherworld had been the colonizing world, its annihilation suggests that cross-cultural encounters are as dangerous for the colonizer as for the colonized. As Homi Bhabha has pointed out, "the suggestion that colonial power and discourse is possessed entirely by the colonizer [...] is a historical and theoretical simplification" (77). By unsettling such simplistic models of colonial power, Rushdie points to the importance of living in one's own world, and not ascribing too much power to another. Ormus's madness lies in believing Maria's assertions about the primacy of her reality, in privileging "another version of the world over his own" (516). His obsessive interest in the otherworld parallels his adolescent dreams of America, and his father's dreams of England. If they are to maintain their cultural identity, even as their cultures change, colonized people must maintain the primacy of their own realities—must see themselves as their own centre—and refuse to accept the colonizers' view of the world as more real.

In its final chapters, the novel shifts from the science fiction alienness of the otherworld to apparently realistic doubling. The otherworld collapses, Gayomart disappears, and Rai takes his place as Ormus's "flesh-and-blood" doppelgänger (499). Similarly, Vina dies and is replaced, not by Maria, but by Mira, a Vina impersonator whose name echoes the word "mirror" and brings together the vowels of Vina and the consonants of Maria. Ormus, Vina, Gayomart and Maria all depart in mythic style, leaving Rai and Mira to settle down to "ordinary human life" (575). Mira separates herself from Vina by emphasizing her dislike of the speculative fiction loved by her predecessor: "*I hate Tolkein, you know?, And the fucking Faraway Tree, they should chop it down*" (533). Rai's final assessment of his place rejects the fantastic and tries again for solid ground:

I'm looking at Mira and Tara, my islands in the storm, and I feel like arguing with the angry earth's decision to wipe us out, if indeed such a decision has been made. Here's goodness, right? The mayhem continues, I don't deny it, but we're capable also of this. Goodness drinking o.j. and munching muffins. Here's ordinary human love beneath my feet. Fall away, if you must, contemptuous earth; melt, rocks, and shiver, stones. I'll stand my ground, right here. This I've discovered and worked for and earned. This is mine. (575)

Rai's belief in solid ground is not naïve romanticism. Rushdie creates numerous speculative worlds to prove that realistic worlds are just as socially constructed, and that the only truths are outside of those constructions. By insisting on a solid ground which the science fiction elements of the novel deny, Rushdie is pointing to a strategy for living in an unsettled postmodern, postcolonial world: stand what ground you have, even as you acknowledge that it might melt away at any moment; and while you respect the validity of other people's realities, never let anyone else tell you that your world is not the real one.

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