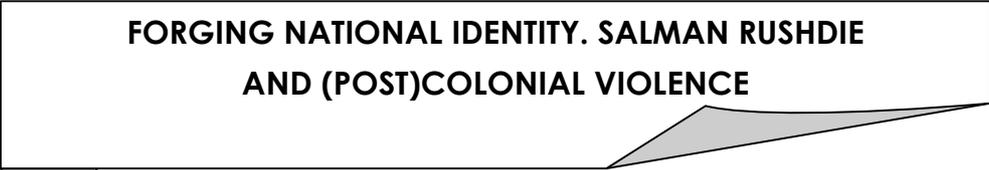
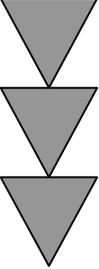


Cultural and Literary Studies



**FORGING NATIONAL IDENTITY. SALMAN RUSHDIE  
AND (POST)COLONIAL VIOLENCE**



*Roxana MARINESCU*

---

---

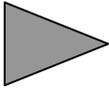
***Abstract***

---

---

*This article deals with the issue of violence in its colonial stages in South-Asia and also in its everyday postcolonial manifestations, as reflected in three novels by Salman Rushdie: *Midnight's Children*, *Shame* and *Shalimar the Clown*. The symbolic violation of the National Body by the Imperial transgressor leads to national identity forging in the case of three territorial units once part of the British Empire: India, Pakistan and Kashmir. Violence is regarded as the basis of this quest for national identity; it is a dimension of people's existence, not something external to society and culture. Moreover, it is a cultural construct, a potential in essence that is given shape and content by specific people (victims and perpetrators, as well as witnesses) caught in conflicts that they can no longer control, within the context of their particular histories. Also, it is an "intricately layered phenomenon", with each participant and witness bringing their own perspectives, which can vary dramatically.*

***Keywords:*** post colonialism, violence, national identity, national body



---

---

## Introduction

---

---

Violence in its colonial stages in South-Asia and also in its everyday postcolonial manifestations is the focus of this article, in which I will show how the symbolic violation of the National Body by the Imperial transgressor leading to national identity forging are masterfully depicted by Salman Rushdie in a set of novels which can be read in the national key. According to David Theo Goldberg (75-93), quoting in his turn John Comaroff (1988), colonialism was about managing heterogeneity, dealing with difference through imposition and restriction, regulation and repression; colonial states acted relying on an assumed population heterogeneity, and tried to externalize difference. By contrast, in the second part of the twentieth century, the regulative force of colonialism broke down and the unsettling capacity of hybridity could no longer be kept marginal by modern forms of control – the heterogeneous and the hybrid have come to challenge modernity's centres. This unsettling capacity has been at the same time celebrated and embraced, and also fiercely resisted. It has become a contested domain: epistemologically, aesthetically, culturally, politically (Schwarz & Ray, 1995: 82-83). When the so-called “marginal people” come into the historical or ethnographic space defined by Western imagination, their distinct histories quickly vanish, and they are unable to invent their local futures.

According to Nordstrom and Robben (1995: 1-7), violence is a dimension of people's existence, not something external to society and culture that just happens to people, it is “an inescapable fact of life of every country, nation and person, whether or not they are personally touched by personal violence”. (Nordstrom and Robben, 1995: 1). Moreover, it is a cultural construct, “flexible and transformative”, a potential in essence that is given shape and content by specific people (victims and perpetrators, as well as witnesses) caught in conflicts that they can no longer control, within the context of their particular histories (Nordstrom and Robben, 1995: 1-7). Also, it is an “intricately layered phenomenon”, with each participant and witness bringing their own perspectives, which can vary dramatically:

*There is the political reality: the doctrines, deeds and behind-the-scenes machinations of power brokers. There is the military reality: the strategies, tactics, and loyalties of commanders; the camaraderie actions, and briefings of soldiers.*

*There is the intellectual reality, forged in coffee shops and the halls of academia, as well as the journalist's world of gossip and frontline vignettes. There is also the psychological reality: the fear, the anxiety, and the regression and repression among refugees and prisoners of war. And then there is the reality of life on the front lines: the stories and actions of people as disparate as perpetrators and casualties, advisers and arms merchants, mercenaries and doctors, criminals and relief workers.* (Nordstrom and Robben, 1995: 4)

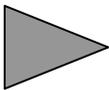
*Midnight's Children* is the novel of India, the birth of the new nation, and the subsequent historical events in its recent past are linked with the destinies of the miraculous one thousand and one children born at midnight, at the same moment with India's independence, as part of a process called by Rushdie "the chutnfication of history" (Rushdie 1984: 443). This is an imperfect process of pickling history, in order to give it immortality, the spices being feelings, and the result somewhat distorted, by a subjective reading of people's memories. "We must live, I'm afraid, with the shadows of imperfection" (Rushdie 1984: 442), claims the narrator of the story, Saleem Sinai, the owner of a physical but also a metaphorical pickle factory, through the eyes (and mostly the nose) of whom we witness the events. One jar, though, must be left untouched, and that is the future, impossible to predict.

*Shame* is the novel of the recent history of Pakistan, the birth of this country being, in the same way as that of India, a dream dreamt by at least a part of its nation. Moving in between several worlds and thus requiring a constant act of translation, sometimes subtracting and sometimes adding new meanings to the original notions, *Shame* revolves around the idea of shame/*sharam*, in its multiple forms, and weaves its meanings in layers (like one of the female characters who weaves eighteen shawls "of memory", which depict the crimes of her husband, part of the violent history of her country) to create the image of a fantastic Pakistan/Peccavistan forged by the imagination of its generals into a land of shameless acts of violence, a land which is based on feelings of guilt and which includes episodes of defending one's personal and national honour.

In the same vein, *Shalimar the Clown*, the latest of Rushdie's novels, deals with yet another territory – Kashmir - left to deal with its own dreams of national autonomy, although torn between Indo-Pakistani violent territorial disputes. The love pact

between the American ambassador and a local Kashmiri dancer can be interpreted as a foreign aggression over the local territory, also violently claimed both by the freedom fighters/terrorist groups and by the Indian army in a long-lasting and seemingly victorious fight over Kashmiryat, “the belief that at the heart of Kashmiri culture there was a common bond that transcended all other differences” (Rushdie 2006: 110).

The symbolic repeated rape of the Mother country is depicted in the three novels, with the image of the local transgressor(s) superimposed over that of the foreign coloniser. It is as if the original violation of the National Body is endlessly repeated in a not yet completed process of imagining its respective national identities. This can be seen in the search for (or invention and re-invention of) a direct line of ancestry; all three novels present blurred parental images or multiple parental instances, as if procreation is a collective and violent process, which cannot be granted to only two genitors, but to a clan or a group.



---

---

### **Personal and national identity. Roots and ancestors**

---

---

Sometimes the rape of the Mother country is depicted in military terms, as in *Shame*, juxtaposed with the episodes of military raping of the local people: during his courtship the future general Raza Hyder brings items of clothing and beautification to his wife-to-be in order to replace her wardrobe lost in a bombing attack, and these “saturation bombing techniques are designed to force an early surrender” (Rushdie 1983: 66). And surrender she does, to be taken to his family home and be placed in a common bedroom of forty wives waiting for their “invading husbands” (Rushdie 1983: 73) in the dark. For her, this is an attempt to escape the shame and dishonour thought by the family to be automatically attributed to any woman sleeping regularly with her husband. In this arrangement, guarded by the family matron, in full darkness, they can’t really know who the fathers of their children are, but this does not seem to matter in the face of the pretence that “all conceptions are immaculate and all births virgin” (Rushdie 1983: 74).

The fathers also seem to be irrelevant in the conceptions of Omar Khayyam Shakil and of his brother Babar of the same novel, here the issue of the three mothers taking precedence. The triple maternal line can be symbolically assimilated with

the corresponding South-Asian regions, their territories violated by armies with irrelevant identities, in a process which subsequently leads to the birth of peripheral countries, in the same way as Omar (but also Babar) is “a creature of the edge, a peripheral man”, “not even the hero of his own life, a man born and raised in the condition of being out of things” (Rushdie 1983: 24). However, we learn that heredity counts, it is an oppressive notion (cf. Rushdie 1983: 24), therefore Omar develops misogynist tendencies at an early age, and “all his subsequent dealings with women were acts of revenge against the memory of his mothers” (Rushdie 1983: 40). Not having a known one, Omar picks himself a father, embodied by the catholic teacher at his school, with whom he later shares parental suspicions over the child of a school mate. “Choose yourself a father and you choose your inheritance” (Rushdie 1983: 49), seems to be the slogan we can apply to countries as well.

The issue of the double father is also present in the conception of Raza Hyder’s second daughter, Naveed or Good News; shame, guilt and honour contribute to his acceptance of the prematurely born child. The reverse is also true, if there is not known ancestry, at times, there is no clear future either, the nation destroys its own valuable children, thus subverting its own progress. Speaks another character of the novel, Iskander Harappa, president of the country, to his daughter:

*As a nation we have a positive genius for self-destruction (...). We nibble away at ourselves, we eat our children, we pull down anyone who climbs up.* (Rushdie, 1983: 184)

The invention of parents for oneself is compared in *Midnight’s Children* with the invention of nations; as Saleem Sinai is the collective product of several mothers and fathers, so is India, whose birth we witness in the story as the product of its people’s fantasy. Saleem talks about the “gift of inventing new parents for myself whenever necessary” (Rushdie, 1984: 108), and indeed apart from the couple procreating him and the one bringing him up, there is also his *ayah*, the instrument of his destiny, who exchanged him at birth for another baby, and his two aunts who temporarily adopt him in different periods of his life. As for his fathers, there is Amina’s former husband who impregnated her in a dream; Methold, the Englishman (his real mother’s lover); his uncle, General Zulfikar, who calls him “son” in disappointment over his own; and Professor Schaapsteker, who claims

him as son, as he once saved him from death (“You must think of me as another father. Did I not give you your life when it was lost?” Rushdie 1984: 251). From all, Saleem feels free to choose, and by making different choices in different periods of his life, he becomes the creator of his own destiny:

*Child of an unknown union, I have had more mothers than most women have children; giving birth to parents has been one of my strangest talents – a form of reverse fertility beyond the control of contraception, and even of the Widow herself.* (Rushdie, 1984: 237)

This isn’t only Saleem’s case, all the children of midnight, born at the time of India’s independence, were in a way the products of their time:

*In fact, all over the new India, the dream we all shared, children were being born who were only partially the offspring of their parents – the children of midnight were also the children of the time: fathered, you understand, by history. It can happen. Especially in a country which is itself a sort of a dream.* (Rushdie 1984: 117)

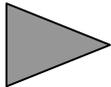
The story continues with Saleem’s son, again the son of two fathers (both children of the midnight), who emerges with the Emergency period (which for India meant, among other things, the suspension of civil rights and censorship of the press), suggesting the perpetuity of the same process.

The voice of the narrator sometimes clarifies comments or raises question marks for us: “How many things people notions we bring with us into the world, how many possibilities and also restrictions of possibility!” (Rushdie 1984: 108). It is in the very same way that nations sometimes select from their ancestry or invent ancestors to underline one or another aspect of their identity and suit their momentary purpose, as “There are as many versions of India as Indians” (Rushdie 1984: 261):

*Reality is a question of perspective. The further you get from the past, the more concrete and plausible it seems – but as you approach the present, it inevitably seems more and more incredible.* (Rushdie 1984: 164)

The metonymic superimposition of the parental line over the national one is clear in the portrait of Indira Gandhi, the “mother of the nation” or Bharat-Mata, as she

was called, or “the Widow”, as she is also called in the novel. All the women characters in the novel and the Indian deities are brought together “as the dynamic aspect of maya, as cosmic energy, which is represented as the female organ” (Rushdie 1984: 392). Rushdie plays with the two images, and ironically announces: “India is Indira and Indira is India” (Rushdie 1984: 406), to reverse the terms a few pages later “Indira is India and India is Indira” (Rushdie 1984: 412), in a successful attempt at critically describing the recent period in Indian history in which dramatic home policies, such as the Emergency, the civic beautification or the sterilization programmes created for her not so motherly an image in the collective consciousness.




---



---

### Violated Mother Country

---



---

India/Kashmira of *Shalimar the Clown* also has two mothers and two fathers, the pact between her natural parents being the symbolic half acknowledged - half denied union/violation of the region of Kashmir, currently politically divided among three states: India, Pakistan and China. The love story between the two innocent children, Bhoomi-Boonyi and Noman-Shalimar, brings about the idyllic Kashmiri image: Muslims and Hindus together, the two main attractions of the region, dancing and cooking, embodied by the two families. As her father puts it: “Who tonight are the Hindus? Who tonight are the Muslims? Here in Kashmir, our stories sit happily side by side on the same double bill, we eat from the same dishes, we laugh at the same jokes” (Rushdie 2006: 71). Later this love story is perverted by the arrival of the foreigner, Ambassador Max Ophuls, and by the liberation movement/terrorist groups, who symbolically lead to the decay and finally to the violent destruction of the body of the mother country, Boonyi herself. The symbolic ruination starts with her desire to escape from the restrictive village life, and to aim at a higher status for herself, a status, as suggested by Rushdie, not validated by talent (she was not a very good dancer) or by other skills or intelligence.

Therefore, doomed to fail, Bhoomi (meaning “the earth”) as her real name was, or Boonyi (the name of a beloved tree of Kashmir) as she likes to call herself, will close a pact with the symbolic transgressor/coloniser, the American ambassador, a pact with two unspoken clauses: “one regarding the giving of love and the other concerning the withholding of it”:

*My body will be yours to command and it will be my joy to obey (...). Don't ask for my heart, because I am tearing it out and breaking it with little bits and throwing it away so I will be heartless, but you will not know it because I will be the perfect counterfeit of a loving woman and you will receive from me a perfect forgery of love. (Rushdie 2006: 194)*

Boonyi's desire of disciplining her body in order to obtain a higher social status, and her failure to do so, followed by the physical self-inflicted violence over it, can be read from a Foucauldian perspective. Disciplining the physical bodies of individuals and at the same time the social body is a process analyzed in depth by Michel Foucault, according to whom the production of the subject by the human sciences as an object of knowledge enabled a new form of political control; the individual is not considered a pre-given entity, which is seized on by the exercise of power; he/she is the product of a relation of powers exercised over bodies. In *Discipline and Punish* (1975) Foucault shows how discipline takes effect through the body-control of the movement and of the timing and space of activities, so that the body could be conditioned to become more obedient as it becomes more useful. Discipline "makes" individuals and at the same time "normalizes" them, while at the same time tying each individual to an identity; the individual is not repressed or altered by our social order, it is carefully fabricated in it. Every person's identity is a site of struggle between conflicting discourses. There are three criteria that a tactics of power must fulfil in order to assure the ordering of human multiplicities: to obtain the exercise of power at the lowest possible cost; to bring the effects of this social power to their maximum intensity and extent; to link this "economic" growth of power with the output of the educational, military, industrial or medical apparatuses. Discipline is the unitary technique by which the body is reduced as a political force at the least cost and maximized as a useful force (cf. Robinson, 1984: 210).

We read in the words of Bhoomi/Boonyi, describing the perfect dichotomy body-spirit, the symbolic division between what needs to be done in order to attain an aim and the hidden desires or emotions that lag behind; there is sometimes in the policies of countries the same dichotomy of lying with the enemy in spite of its spiritual affinities. It is the case of Kashmir, as Rushdie seems to suggest, in a reading of the story in which the American ambassador is the equivalent of the Indian armed forces, and Kashmir itself is the cheated husband Noman ("no man")/

Shalimar the clown (“abode of joy”) who had sworn revenge. Boonyi’s own words to the ambassador, explaining the situation in her country, but constantly mistaking the pronouns, are revelatory for the metaphoric interpretation of the character:

*She would use the Indian presence in the valley a surrogate for the American occupation of her body, so “Yes, that’s it”, she cried, “the ‘Indian armed forces’ raping and pillaging. How can you not know it? How can you not comprehend the humiliation of it, the shame of having your boots march all over my private fields?”* (Rushdie 2006: 197)

The situation is twisted by the media and complicated by the realities of the divided loyalties of the region. When it becomes known, the story gets to the papers, and the wilful confusion between Kashmir and India becomes a theme of the novel (mirrored in the name of the daughter born of this union: Kashmira Noman/India Ophuls), and also a bargaining element:

*A Kashmiri girl ruined and destroyed by a powerful American gave the Indian government the opportunity to look like it would stand up and defend Kashmir against marauders of all types – to defend the honour of Kashmir as stoutly as it would defend that of any other integral part of India (...). The new president, Zakir Hussain, was making angry statements in private about the godless American’s exploitation of an innocent Hindu girl (...). He [the ambassador] was no longer the well-beloved lover of India, but her heartless ravisher.* (Rushdie 2006: 206)

Relevant for the reading of this novel is the analysis of the way in which the violence of the colonial project is represented, analysis made by Ali Behdad (1997: 201-207). Behdad moves away from the by now classical readings of the relationship between coloniser and colonised as a “Manichean allegory”, in which the former is a master exploiting the latter, his slave, to propose a vision of colonialism as “a violent ritual of erotic dissolution”, the aim of colonial eroticism being “to create a sense of political continuity by subjecting the colonized to a violent process of dissolution in which he or she is subsumed in the hegemonic power of the Empire” (Behdad, 1997: 202). Colonialism works through violence and violation, and within this project they are not opposed to reason, but complete the colonialist logic.

*The aim is to achieve a state of dissolution that produces continuity between the two, at the cost of robbing the colonized of his or her difference. The colonizer views himself as the “active” agent and forces the colonized into the “passive” role, which must be dissolved as a separate entity to create the sense of colonial continuity. Dissolution can be achieved either through cold-blooded militarism – discipline, torture and pain- or through a benevolence and humanism that embodies pleasure, desire, sexuality. (De Vries and Weber, 1997: 203)*

In the first situation, the cold-blooded militarism, the coloniser (in our case, this role is surprisingly played by the Indian army in Kashmir) occupies the position of torturer, the active role of sacrificing, who sets himself to destroy the self-contained but discontinuous body of the colonized. Colonial torture is an attempt to penetrate the body of the other, and in so doing it creates a sense of continuity between master and victim. The body of the colonised is characterized by difference, and this difference is the precondition for colonial dissolution. In the second situation (in the novel, the sexual encounter between Max Ophuls and Boonyi), in which the coloniser assumes the benevolent position of the healer, erasing the marks of the torture inflicted by his militarist counterpart, the body of the colonised offers him the erotic vehicle for achieving the same state of dissolution. In this process the coloniser can pass over to the other’s side, can transgress to his victim’s body, by overcoming the limitations of colonial law. Torture, according to this benevolent coloniser, is a useful lesson about a rudimentary aspect of our humanity: the very physicality of our bodies. The body is ultimately the site where the desire to dominate is articulated.

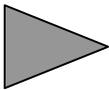
In the novel, Boonyi proceeds to the self-destruction of her body and soul, resorting to tobacco, opium and food. Again, by making her portrait Rushdie implicitly suggests the image of an all-encompassing enormous Mother Country:

*Her appetite had grown to subcontinental size. It crossed all frontiers of language and custom. She was vegetarian and non-vegetarian, fish-and-meat-eating, Hindu, Christian and Muslim, a democratic, secularist omnivore. (Rushdie 2006: 202)*

Later, her child is taken away from her by Peggy-Mata, “the mother of the motherless” (Rushdie 2006: 186), the symbolic figure of the foreign mother, the wife of the coloniser who can take care of the local children better than their own mothers. Boonyi goes back to her village and her husband, the one who does not

matter (Noman) but also the one who, like a clown, sadly brings joy to the people (Shalimar the Clown), to find out she had been ritually and officially killed by her friends and family. Her father explains her new status as a time to let go of anger and achieve humility (“She had to let go of everything and be as nothing” Rushdie 2006: 226), to control her senses and be free of time. The words mirroring the ones at the beginning of the novel, praising the Kashmiriyat, the harmonic principle of general cultural and religious understanding, considered to be the basis of Kashmiri society, come from the same character, Boonyi’s father: he started questioning...

*...the idea that human beings were essentially good, that if men could be helped to strip away imperfections their ideal selves would stand revealed, shining in the light, for all to see. He was even questioning the anticomunalist principles embodied in the notion of Kashmiriyat, and beginning to wonder if discord were not a more powerful principle than harmony. Communal violence everywhere was an intimate crime. When it burst out one was not murdered by strangers. It was your neighbours, the people with whom you had shared the high and low points of life, the people whose children your own children had been playing with just yesterday. These were the people in whom the fire of hatred would suddenly light up, who would hammer on your door in the middle of the night with burning torches in their hands. Maybe Kashmiriyat was an illusion (...) Maybe tyranny, forced conversions, temple-smashing, iconoclasm, persecution and genocide were the norms and peaceful coexistence was an illusion. (Rushdie 2006: 238-239)*




---



---

## Conclusion

---



---

The “violence prone areas”, a phrase coined by Veena Das and Arthur Kleinman (Das et al., 2000: 1) to describe a new political geography of the world is applicable in this context. The term suggests that the more traditional spatial divisions, comprising metropolitan centres and peripheral colonies, or super powers and satellite states are now linguistically obsolete. Violence in these areas, in its turn, seems to belong to a new moment and cannot be understood through earlier theories of contractual violence or a classification of just and unjust wars. The reason is that it has occurred between social actors who lived in the same local worlds and knew or thought they knew each other. Some acts of violence in these places, according to Das and Kleinman, are remnants of old conflicts, others a sign of the distortion of local moral worlds by forces (national or global) which

originate outside these worlds and over which local communities can exercise little control. The questions to be asked are how violence is produced and consumed in these areas and how the actors of violence deal with it on a day-by-day basis, how they engage in acts of violence and how they are transformed by this engagement. The site of violence is the space of the ordinary, and all its actors belong to it in equal measure. Violence not only includes explicit acts of bodily harm, but also subtler forms, perpetrated by institutions of science, the state or international organizations, the global media, transnational flows in finances and people. The forms of violence are widely dispersed: they take the face of ethnic wars, civil wars, technological violence of organized science, state or international impositions of policies and programmes (Das et al., 2000: 1)

It is this general image of global violence that is the most persistent in *Shalimar the Clown*, and the pessimism towards the direction the world is taking refers not only to Kashmir; violence and war zones seem to be everywhere else, from the second World War (of which Ambassador Max Ophuls and his wife Peggy are heroes), to the times of terrorist attacks on the United States. The universality of violence and the transgression of physical borders is the final message, and – sadly – it can be a metaphor of our world: “Everywhere was a mirror of everywhere else. Executions, police brutality, explosions, riots: Los Angeles was beginning to look like wartime Strassbourg; like Kashmir” (Rushdie 2006: 355).

---



---

**References and bibliography**

---



---

**Primary Sources:**

- Rushdie, S.** 1983. *Shame*. London: Jonathan Cape.  
**Rushdie, S.** 1984. *Midnight's Children*. London: Jonathan Cape  
**Rushdie, S.** 2006. *Shalimar the Clown*. London: Vintage

**Secondary Sources:**

- Behdad, A.** 1997. "Eroticism, Colonialism and Violence" in De Vries, H. and Weber, S *Violence, Identity and Self-Determination* (eds.). Stanford: Stanford University Press
- Das, V.** 2000. "The Act of Witnessing. Violence, Poisonous Knowledge, and Subjectivity" in Das, V., Kleinman, A., Ramphela, M. and Reynold, P (eds.). *Violence and Subjectivity*. London, Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press
- Das, V.** 2002. "Anthropological Knowledge and Collective Violence. The Riots in Delhi, November, 1984" in Benthall, J. (ed.). *The Best of Anthropology Today*. London: Routledge
- De Vries, H and Weber, S.** (eds.) 1997. *Violence, Identity and Self-Determination*. Stanford: Stanford University Press
- Goldberg, D. T.** 2000. "Heterogeneity and Hybridity: Colonial Legacy, Postcolonial Heresy" in Schwarz, H. and Ray, S. (eds.). *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*. London: Blackwell Publishers
- Robben, A. and Nordstrom, C.** 1995. "Introduction" in Nordstrom, C. and Robben, A. (eds.). *Fieldwork Under Fire. Contemporary Studies of Violence and Survival*. London, Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press
- Robinson, P.** (ed.). 1984. *The Foucault Reader*. London: Penguin
- Schwarz, H. and Ray, S.** 1995. "Postcolonial Discourse: The Raw and the Cooked" in *Ariel. A Review of International English Literature*. Vol. 26. Number 1

**The author**

**Roxana Marinescu** is a Lecturer in English for Business Communication at the Academy of Economic Studies Bucharest; as a teacher trainer in British Cultural Studies, Gender Studies, Human Rights and Education for Democratic Citizenship, she was a course director and facilitator at national and international courses, conferences and summer schools. Also she is a materials designer for academic courses and textbooks on cultural studies, business communication in English, human rights and education for democratic citizenship. Currently she is a PhD candidate with the University of Bucharest, with a thesis at the cross-roads between British Cultural Studies and British Literature: "Violated Bodies: A Cross Cultural Reading of the English-Language Fiction by Authors of South-Asian Origin".