

SALMAN RUSHDIE AND NORTHERN IRELAND

Salman Rushdie and Multiple Identities

Roxana-Elisabeta Marinescu
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Northern Ireland: Border Country

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Introduction

Think Salman Rushdie. Think Northern Ireland. In addition to being able to attract Roxana Marinescu's creative curiosity, what do they have in common? Think borders and think multiple identities. Identity is about what makes something what it is. Borders define where things begin and end. They are for defining who is in and who is out. And so with identities: they define what does and doesn't make someone who she or he is.

So, what does and doesn't make Rushdie who he is? When is he this and when is he that? And why? And as for Rushdie, so for Northern Ireland. What does and doesn't make it the country it is? Where has it come from? Where is it now? Where may it go?

These are only some of the questions Marinescu has raised and tentatively answered and suggested we think about. Her prose is clear and supple. Her insights move from being focused to being kaleidoscopic. Her arguments are flawless. She digs deeply into both her subjects, while suggesting there is more for her readers to find and enjoy.

Salman Rushdie and Multiple Identities

The Rushdie book is a sandwich: three chapters between an introduction and a conclusion. The conclusion is a postscript on how Rushdie and his books have come and are coming to Romania. The introduction identifies and interrogates the concept of identities. It also tackles theoretical issues that the concept raises: issues about how identity is constructed in the tension between the personal and the

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social, as well as between the conscious and the unconscious. And in these tensions, always there are two things that studying Rushdie illustrates: the ability to imagine and the ability to speak: to myself and to others; about myself and about others; in fiction and in fact. Marinescu has danced through these heavy issues with a sure and light step. It would be good if she decides to produce a longer and more exhaustive treatment of these topics. But she has given us sufficient to understand the two chapters that follow her introduction.

The first chapter is about identity disrupted by language, by migration, by destiny, or by fantasy. Rushdie's life and work illustrate these themes. What he's written, and what he's done, and what's been done to him (fatwa) have shaped who he has been at different times and in different places. And these things aren't neatly separated and tidily organised. And so Marinescu's way of presenting them does two things. It gives us a coherent and credible story of who is and who isn't Salman Rushdie. It also gives us material for creating alternative versions of who he is and he isn't. I found the section on the power that English has extremely interesting and instructive. Because a language isn't neutral, this section also raises questions for all of us whose first language isn't English; questions about how it has shaped and is shaping how we think about things and what we value. In Rushdie's case, some of the most insightful reflections about identity arise from stories about the impact that a change of name or an act of self-naming has on an individual. And the chapter ends with exploring the many places where fact is seduced by fiction. In Marinescu's words, "the world of fantasy is for Rushdie the other coin of reality they go hand in hand to create a multi-layered narrative and to depict characters' identity from a multitude of perspectives."

The third chapter is about gendered and violated identities. It ends with a section on various forms of violence: from the many things between grinding forms that humiliate to explosive forms that kill. Some of these forms resonate with what was discussed earlier: gender hybrids (acquiring gender painfully or painlessly), marriage (becoming a wife in India and in the West), and gendered violence (rape, suttee, circumcision). These pages are about the dark side of identity acquisition and identity transformation; about the places where culture (nurture) violates nature.

The second chapter is about national and collective identities. The words in its sub-headings are reliable pointers to its problems and perspectives. History, war and violence engage with Rushdie's philosophy of history. These words return us to questions about what ambiguity, misconceptions, prejudice and ignorance do to things like a sense of our "mother country", our way of imaging "her" ideal condition, our willingness or refusal to mimic other ethnicities and cultures, and our explorations of trans-national and cross-border identity, "the chutneyfication of history" and the celebration of "migration, transformation and impurity".

Northern Ireland: Border Country

One way of describing this book is to say it's what the Rushdie book is about, but applied to a nation instead of an individual. It "examines how the borders that people create for themselves and their communities, willingly and unwillingly, bring about not only segregation and discomfort, but violence and terror." As with Rushdie, so with Northern Ireland. It's about what could have been avoided, but wasn't. It's about what could have been overcome, but which the players weren't strong enough to manage to change. Another general observation says it provides material for a case study of Rushdie's philosophy of history. Also for his understanding of social analysis and social change as an unforgiving mixture of fact, fiction, and foolishness; with a powerful injection of ignorance.

We have a prologue that sets the scene for Marinescu's analysis and an epilogue that puts her thoughts to bed. In between the beginning and the end, she takes us on six journeys across the time and the place that is Northern Ireland. Each has its own special landmarks and insights. None has any lessons except the ones related to the way fact and fiction and foolishness play with each other and with ignorance to shape the identities of individuals, communities and the nation.

The first journey tries to be factual rather than fictional. It tells us where the country is. But this description relates it to the Republic of Ireland and to Great Britain and to the sea. And so, very soon, geography begins to be pushed aside by history. And so, myths and interpretations and modern representations push facts aside to create more interesting scenarios than the ones that have been through a reality washer. And perhaps the most interesting "factual" feature is the census. Marinescu demonstrates that a census isn't simply about counting heads. The questions that are asked are sometimes biased and misleading; and so what is "objective" quickly becomes "subjective" information for power and control. This is why the publication of the 2011 census data in October 2013 will be interesting to analyse, not because they will be "objective", but because all the European countries will have been distorted by the same subjective lens.

The next three journeys - chapters two to four - are into Northern Ireland's heart of darkness. The questions that are faced are challenging. What makes a nation a nation rather than something else? And the same for a community? Again, as for an individual so for a collective: what is violence? In theory? In "the troubles", when bullets ripped into the flesh of men, women and children? In what sense, if any, can peace-keeping be neutral?

The last two journeys look at Northern Ireland from within and from without. In the views from within, photographs are used to make points about symbolic representations of identity. Flags and peace lines are evaluated as ways of trying to demarcate us and them. And Marinescu's account of issues involving the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum uncovers a slippery fish: which identities are genuine and which are faked? In the views from without, the usual ambiguous powers are

out on parade: the media, the hidden agendas, the puppets on a string, as well as the puppet makers. And on the last lap, there are three perspectives on "the troubles". Here Marinescu guides her readers fairly through the thinking of the Provos (the Provisional IRA), the Loyalists (political and paramilitary) and the Brits (the silent - and sometimes secret - political and paramilitary activities of the British authorities). Most of what happened during "the troubles" no longer happens. But the book ends on a sober note. Because "the troubles" were about identity, the fundamental question still is about who's what. Some have an answer about which they have no doubts. Others are less sure and more hesitant. And so, there's no firm conclusion to Marinescu's reflections. Thinking mainly of those who have a tentative sense of identity, she points to a future in which "trying to decode (this hesitation will be) a fascinating endeavour, but also a never-ending process."

Conclusion

Both books are enjoyable for discussion, as well as for reading. Both books would benefit from having an index so that it's easier to return to memorable and provocative ideas: like Rushdie's belief that sometimes translations have improved his and other originals.

Roxana Marinescu is an associate professor with the Bucharest University of Economic Studies and the editor of *Synergy*. It will be a pleasure to read and review any future books by her on identity or anything else. The highest praise for these two books is to note that she has seen what the great Clausewitz did not see when he produced his classic work on war. And what he didn't see is that, more often than not, violence and war are about creating or defending personal (Salman Rushdie like) identities or national (Northern Ireland like) identities. This is a highly significant achievement by her.

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