

REAL AND MAGICAL SPACES IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*: THE KASHMIR VALLEY AND THE SUNDARBANS¹

Amalia MĂRĂȘESCU

National University of Science and Technology Politehnica of
Bucharest

University Centre of Pitești

E-mail: amalia.marasescu@gmail.com

Abstract:

The paper deals with two real regions in India that acquire a magical quality in Salman Rushdie's novel, Midnight's Children, the Kashmir Valley, where the narrator-protagonist's family history begins, and the Sundarbans, where Saleem regains his memory. It begins with Rushdie's assertion that the spaces and places in the novel are as fictional as they are real, described during a time when the writer no longer lived in India. The paper then introduces Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia which shares key characteristics with the two spaces analysed: both are isolated, yet penetrable, function in relation to surrounding space, and reach their full potential when characters break with traditional time. The main analysis focuses on the realistic elements of the Kashmir Valley and the Sundarbans before highlighting the magical aspects that transform them. In the

¹ Article History: Received: 23.07.2024. Revised: 04.10.2024. Accepted: 07.10.2024. Published: 15.11.2024. Distributed under the terms and conditions of the [Creative Commons Attribution License CC BY-NC 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/). Citation: MĂRĂȘESCU, A. (2024). REAL AND MAGICAL SPACES IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*: THE KASHMIR VALLEY AND THE SUNDARBANS. *Incurșuni în imaginar 15. Magical Realism in Literature*. Vol. 15. Nr. 1. pp. 227-254, <https://doi.org/10.29302/InImag.2024.15.1.9> No funding was received either for the research presented in the article or for the creation of the article.

REALISMUL MAGIC ÎN LITERATURĂ

Kashmir Valley, the landscape is personified, resisting intrusion, particularly from Doctor Aadam Aziz, who returns with a new worldview after studying in Germany. The valley's timelessness, its association with Paradise, and its extraordinary inhabitants – exemplified by Tai the boatman – are also explored. The Sundarbans similarly resists change, rejecting four strangers – Saleem Sinai, Ayooba Baloch, Farooq Rashid and Shaheed Dar – after initially attempting to assimilate them. Its symbolic association with a tomb, the theme of symbolic death followed by a rebirth and the exaggerated features of the forest are also discussed. The paper concludes by drawing parallels between the two spaces, both of which possess agency, resist intrusion, and function as atemporal havens where unconventional solutions to crises are sought.

Keywords: Paradise; rebirth; magical space; initiation; rejection of intrusion.

1. Introduction: Spatiality in *Midnight's Children* and Foucault's Concept of *Heterotopia*

The term *magical realism* was coined and used for the first time in 1925 by Franz Roh who connected it to the work of certain German painters of the period. It reappeared in the United States of America in the early 1940's, still connected to painting. It began to be associated with fiction gradually, and by the 1980's it became a well-established label for those literary works that mingled and juxtaposed the realistic and the fantastic or bizarre in such a way that neither dominated and that the reader accepted the coexistence of contradictory codes. Jorge Luis Borges' *Historia universal de la infamia* (1935) has often been regarded as the first work of magical realism (Cuddon, 1977/1999, pp. 487-488). Many of the definitions of the trend are derived from its Latin American variant, states Ursula Kluwick. Still, she argues

further, as one of its most important representatives outside Latin America and one of the most distinguished postcolonial writers, Salman Rushdie writes his own brand of magical realism. Poised between the postmodern and the postcolonial, Kluwick contends, Rushdie's magical realist novels (*Midnight's Children*, *Shame*, *The Satanic Verses*, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, *Shalimar the Clown*, *The Enchantress of Florence*) confront readers with unsolvable riddles, remaining open to interpretation because in them the realist and the supernatural codes are in an irreconcilable opposition (Kluwick, 2013, pp. 1-2).

Ever since its publication in 1981, *Midnight's Children* has been the subject of critical acclaim and the recipient of numerous awards. In 1981, it won the Booker Prize for Fiction, the Arts Council Writers' Award, and the English-Speaking Union Literary Award. In 1993, it received the James Tait Prize and the Booker of Bookers, and in 2008, it was awarded the Best of Booker, the last two marking the 25th and 40th anniversaries of the Booker Prize respectively, and reflecting both critic and public admiration (Fenwick, 2005/2008). Various aspects of the novel have been analysed in numerous books, dissertations and articles, including works by: Ursula Kluwick (2013), Katrin Röder (2018), Yuying Liang (2020), Konika Mukherjee (2021), and Delia-Maria Radu (2022), who discuss the novel through the lenses of magical realism and postcolonialism. While these studies provide important insights, they often present a broader view of spatiality in *Midnight's Children*. Therefore, this paper aims to offer a focused analysis of the Kashmir Valley and the Sundarbans, two significant spaces in *Midnight's Children*, examining why they may be considered magical, and exploring their similarities in function within the novel and in the characters' lives.

REALISMUL MAGIC ÎN LITERATURĂ

A first observation to be made about the spaces under discussion, as well as the other spaces and places in the novel, is that they are as much fictional as they are real. In his essay, *Imaginary Homelands* (1992), Rushdie wrote that his novel was born out of a “sense of loss” and an “urge to reclaim” the past, feelings often experienced by writers who are “exiles or emigrants or expatriates” (p. 10), like himself. At the time of writing, Rushdie was living far from India, the setting of his story. Due to the limitations of memory, no matter how hard one tries, it is impossible to precisely reclaim what has been lost. As a result, writers like Rushdie “create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind” (p. 10). Consequently, in *Midnight’s Children*, “my India was just that: ‘my’ India, a version and no more than one version of all the hundreds of millions of possible versions. I tried to make it as imaginatively true as I could, but imaginative truth is simultaneously honourable and suspect [...]” (p. 10). That is why Saleem the narrator is “suspect in his narration”, and “his vision is fragmentary” (p. 10).

In his seminal article *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias* (1967), Michel Foucault argues that, while the 19th century was primarily concerned with history and time, “[t]he present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space” (1967/1984, p. 1). Space, according to Foucault, is not homogeneous and empty, but is rather defined by a set of relations “that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another” (Foucault, 1967/1984, p. 3). Among these sites, he singles out heterotopias, defined as

places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like

REALISMUL MAGIC ÎN LITERATURĂ

counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. (Foucault, 1967/1984, pp. 3-4)

These places “are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about” (Foucault, 1967/1984, p. 4) and are common to all cultures, though they take different forms in each. Foucault describes two types of heterotopias: crisis heterotopias, associated with “primitive” societies and reserved for individuals undergoing critical stages (e.g., adolescents, pregnant women), and heterotopias of deviation, such as psychiatric hospitals, prisons, and retirement homes, which accommodate those whose behaviour deviates from societal norms.

One heterotopia can have various functions within a certain society, as illustrated by the example of a cemetery, and a single heterotopia can juxtapose several incompatible spaces in one place, such as a theatre, a cinema or a garden. Heterotopias function most effectively when they involve a break from traditional time, as seen in museums, libraries, fairgrounds or vacation villages. They are simultaneously isolated and penetrable, as in the case of American motel rooms. Foucault also notes that heterotopias serve a function in relation to the rest of space, either exposing the surrounding space as more illusory than themselves (heterotopias of illusion, like brothels) or offering a perfect space (heterotopias of compensation, such as colonies). The heterotopia *par excellence* is, according to Foucault, the ship, which

encapsulates isolation, mobility, and function within society.

2. The Kashmir Valley: A Realistic Portrayal

The Vale of Kashmir or the Kashmir Valley is an ancient lake basin situated in Jammu and Kashmir, a union territory (i.e. an administrative unit) in northern India. It is surrounded by mountains which, alongside the lakes – Wular, Dal and Nagin – attract many tourists. Srinagar, the summer capital of the union territory, lies at the centre of the valley. Historically, the valley served as a resort for the Mughal Emperors, with Jahangir being the most renowned, having constructed gardens and buildings there for his empress (Britannica.com).

Both the vale and its main landmarks can be found in Rushdie's novel. The valley features early in the narration, as the setting where the plot of the novel begins "in the early spring of 1915" (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 4), when Saleem's grandfather Aadam Aziz was 25 years old and had just returned from Germany. Lake Dal and Nageen are waters that are crossed by Tai the boatman. The city on the lake is also mentioned, and so are the mountains, which closed in around it during winter and "were now retreating to their hill-stations for the warm season" (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 5). By the end of the episode, when Aadam left the region "for the last time", the "mountains crowded round and stared" (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 34).²

² In order to be consistent with the use of tenses in the quotations that support the ideas expressed in the paper, I shall retell the events in the novel in past tenses, while the interpretation of the events and other additional considerations made about them will be written in the present.

3. The Kashmir Valley as a Magical Space: Its Personality, Resistance to Change, and People. The Kashmir Valley as a Symbolic Paradise

The fact that the region is a magical territory is evident, first and foremost, in that it seems endowed with a personality of its own and a volition of its own, actively resenting the intrusion of anything that is different or strange. The mountains retreated, crowded and stared, while the valley curved up towards the character and punched him in the nose. While these are personifications, they also stand for much more than that. The vale struck Aadam when he attempted to pray, but he no longer did it convincingly, as he no longer truly believed. While uttering the words of the prayer, he thought of Heidelberg and of his friends there. Immediately after the land hit him in the nose – a most prominent part of his body, and therefore likely to be hit if its possessor did not perform his actions with appropriate attention – Aadam felt “as though the old place resented his educated, stethoscoped return. Beneath the winter ice, it had been coldly neutral, but now there was no doubt; the years in Germany had returned him to a hostile environment” (Rushdie, 1981/2023, pp. 5-6). The environment rejected the unfamiliar doctor, who returned home with a new worldview. One that did not encourage praying to an entity that may not exist and supported the opinion that India “had been ‘discovered’ by the Europeans” (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 6).

To Aadam, the territory appeared both new and old, changed and unchanged at the same time. It was unchanged because the landscape had been essentially the same since the Mughal Empire. What had changed, however, was Aadam’s perception of it, as “[i]nstead of the beauty of the tiny valley circled by giant teeth, he noticed the narrowness, the proximity of the horizon; and felt sad,

REALISMUL MAGIC ÎN LITERATURĂ

to be at home and feel so utterly enclosed” (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 5). Having become acquainted with another culture and another way of seeing the world in the five years he had spent studying medicine in Heidelberg, Germany, Aadam now felt entrapped in the little valley that was his home. But there were also physical changes that he had to confront. Besides the fact that the world was “new again” (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 5), since it was spring, the season of renewal, the established order of things had changed in his home: his father had suffered a stroke and his mother had been forced to leave home to run their small gemstone business. A change occurred in his innermost soul after the punch in the nose which led to his losing his faith. Another significant change would soon follow, as he would meet the young woman who would become his wife, Naseem Ghani.

Secondly, the valley can be considered magical because it is explicitly associated with Paradise. Later in his life Aadam would try to remember “his childhood springs in Paradise” (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 6). This Paradise is isolated, due to the mountains surrounding it, but it is also accessible, to its inhabitants returning after time away or to tourists who visit during the warm months. However, this access seems to be purely physical, as demonstrated by Aadam’s rejection by his native place and his departure. “ ‘Paradise’ “, Ramsey-Kurtz explains, “implies inclusion and exclusion, bliss and discontent, innocence and guilt, ignorance and knowledge, harmony and conflict, life and death, transience and permanence, materiality and transcendence, beginning and end [...]” (2011, pp. VII-VIII). These words apply to both spaces discussed here.

Thirdly, the land is magical due to its people. Singled out among them is Tai, the boatman, “a quirky, enduring familiar spirit of the valley” (Rushdie, 1981/2023,

REALISMUL MAGIC ÎN LITERATURĂ

p. 11), the owner of the oldest *shikara* on the lakes and the first to cross them when the ice melted. Tai made his living as a ferryman, transporting goods (hay, goats, vegetables, wood) and people for money, which renders him analogous to Charon, the mythical boatman who ferried the spirits of the dead across the River Styx to the realm of Hades. Tai also called for Aadam and transported him to meet his future bride.

Tai was as old as the hills and lived in apparent squalor and poverty:

Nobody could remember when Tai had been young. He had been plying this same boat, standing in the same hunched position, across the Dal and Nageen Lakes ... for ever. As far as anyone knew. He lived somewhere in the insanitary bowels of the old wooden-house quarter and his wife grew lotus-roots and other curious vegetables on one of the many 'floating gardens' liting on the surface of the spring and summer water. Tai himself cheerily admitted he had no idea of his age. Neither did his wife – he was, she said, already leathery when they married. His face was a sculpture of wind on water: ripples made of hide. He had two golden teeth and no others. In the town, he had few friends. (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 10)

Actually, his only friend seems to be Aadam who, with the recklessness of childhood, once dared to ask Tai how old he was. Consequently, he had to face the old man's rage. For an instant the boatman remained silent – a silence "noisier than a waterfall" (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 12), but then he regained his capacity to speak, which he used mainly to insult his companion, but also to answer the question, though not very precisely:

REALISMUL MAGIC ÎN LITERATURĂ

I have watched the mountains being born; I have seen Emperors die. [...] I saw that Isa, that Christ, when he came to Kashmir. [...] Once I knew where there was a grave with pierced feet carved on the tombstone, which bled once a year. Even my memory is going now; but I know, although I can't read. (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 13)

His image is contradictory, combining elements that are often at odds with one another. He cheerily admitted he had no idea how old he was, but he got angry when Aadam asked him about his age. His memory was failing and he could not read, but he claimed to know many things. Being described as a sculpture of wind on water, his face combined two of the four elements: air and water, contrasting symbols – the air being active and masculine, the water passive and feminine (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1969/1993, vol. 1, pp. 72-73, 107-116 respectively).

People considered Tai both crazy and rich. Crazy because of his ceaseless chatter, often directed at himself. Although people laughed at his monologues, they did so with a sense of awe and fear –

Awe, because the old half-wit knew the lakes and hills better than any of his detractors; fear, because of his claim to an antiquity so immense it defied numbering, and moreover hung so lightly round his chicken's neck that it hadn't prevented him from winning a highly desirable wife and fathering four sons upon her ... and a few more, the story went, on other lakeside wives. (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 11)

He was also considered rich. Tai's wealth was the source of much speculation, with his golden teeth

REALISMUL MAGIC ÎN LITERATURĂ

sparkling and fuelling rumours that he had money or perhaps more golden teeth, hidden away.

His excessive fertility likens him to a primordial god fathering humanity, while his excessive talk conceals more than it reveals. His speech was colourful, punctuated with jocular insults aimed at Aadam. It was difficult to discern what was real and what was invented in it. As a child, Aadam was fascinated by Tai's constant talk. To Aadam, it was "magical talk", while Tai's *shikara* was a "magical boat", crossing the "enchanted waters of the morning" (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 12).

The child was drawn to the old man despite his parents' disapproval. They would bathe him in boiling water after each meeting to get rid of the germs he might have picked up from the filthy Tai whom, like all adults, they considered a crazy liar. Maybe the child was attracted to him because old people become like children themselves and Tai met Aadam's need to spend time and hear stories from somebody of the same mind as himself. Or perhaps, with the innocence of childhood, Aadam was the only one who could see the extraordinary in Tai, who was not afraid to share his secrets with somebody unlikely to misuse them.

What developed between them was a sort of mentor – apprentice relationship, with Aadam learning many things from Tai, starting from the secrets of the lake, which the boatman knew better than anybody: "where you could swim without being pulled down by weeds; the eleven varieties of water-snake; where the frogs spawned; how to cook a lotus-root" (Rushdie, 1981/2023, pp. 14-15). The old man taught his young friend other lessons too. He told Aadam about European women who came to that region to drown themselves or about the nose being

REALISMUL MAGIC ÎN LITERATURĂ

the place where the outside world meets the world inside you. If they don't get on, you feel it here. Then you rub your nose with embarrassment to make the itch go away. [...] When it warns you, look out or you'll be finished. Follow your nose and you'll go far. (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 15)

Tai also shared with the future doctor stories of men coming to Kashmir “to enjoy life, or to end it, or both” (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 13). The first case was, Tai said, Jesus, described as bald and gluttonous, who supposedly came to Kashmir “to live it up a little” (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 13) after having finished his work. The second case was Ilse Lubin, one of Aadam's German friends, and Aadam himself.

Tai's knowledge of the world, the way he presents this knowledge and his general appearance and reputation remind us of Vasile Lovinescu's view that what is highest in the initiatic hierarchy, important on a superior level, becomes the lowest on our level in order to have a common measure with this world in which it has descended and to be able to draw it upwards through momentary similarity (Lovinescu, 1989, p. 214). Thus, Tai appears as an initiate and Aadam as his apprentice, who, as the chosen one, is the only person who can recognize the old man's uniqueness.

As a genuine spirit of the valley, the old boatman also rejected what he perceived as a foreign element. His hostility was especially directed towards the doctor's bag, which Tai saw as the embodiment of evil and always abused: “We haven't got enough bags at home that you must bring back that thing made of a pig's skin that makes one unclean just by looking at it? And inside, God knows what all” (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 18). Aadam realized that, to Tai, the bag represented “Abroad; [...] the alien thing,

the invader, progress” (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 19). Unfamiliar with the instruments used by doctors, Tai strongly resented the fact that his former friend now had to smell with the stethoscope instead of using his impressive nose. To emphasize the distance between himself and Aadam, Tai called him “Doctor Sahib” (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 20) or “that German Aziz” (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 30), highlighting the fact that he perceived Aadam as foreign. In a valley with many lakes, where even the poorest people washed, Tai refused to bathe or to change his clothes for three years, while the doctor remained in the region, and blamed this on Aadam, thus ruining the latter’s relationship with the locals. Moreover, when Tai contracted a skin disease he refused medical help from his former friend, yet miraculously recovered after the latter left the valley, moving to Agra with his wife.

Aadam eventually returned to the valley to die there, but nobody knew when or where Tai died. Rumour had it that he met his end in 1947, when, infuriated by India and Pakistan’s struggle over the valley, he went to tell both sides what he thought and was shot. However, the story had remained unconfirmed, hinting at Tai’s possible immortality.

4. The Sundarbans: A Realistic Portrayal

Located in northeastern India and southern Bangladesh, the Sundarbans is a region of saltwater swamp and forest which forms the lower part of the Padma (Ganges) – Brahmaputra River delta. It has a total area of approximately 10,000 square km, both land and water. The estuaries, rivers and creeks enclose flat, forested islands. Mangrove forests abound in the area, which is also home to many aquatic and terrestrial species

of plants and animals, some of them endangered (Britannica.com).

In the novel, the Padma-Ganga River is mentioned by name, and the region's flora and fauna appear, though in a form that differs from what one would find in a geography or botany book.

5. The Sundarbans as a Magical Space. Its Personality, Resistance to Change, and Attempts at Assimilation. The Sundarbans as a Symbolic Tomb of Failed Rebirth

Like the Kashmir Valley, the Sundarbans is magical, first of all, because it has a personality and a will of its own. And also like the Kashmir Valley, it resents intrusion. This time the intruders are not its own inhabitants returning home after years with a new worldview, but strangers running after or rather away from something. The human protagonists of the Sundarbans episode are Saleem Sinai himself and his CUTIA unit, including Ayooba Baloch, Farooq Rashid and Shaheed Dar – three persons and one dog working with the purpose of rooting out undesirable people supporting the secession of Bangladesh from Pakistan. The dog is Saleem, great at tracking, capable of following any trail, even in water, but otherwise numb after having lost his family and memory during the India-Pakistan war in 1965. The year is now 1971 and the team reaches the jungle by boat, following somebody that has kept eluding them. The team is guided by the man-dog not chasing anyone, actually, but running away from the conflict.

The Sundarbans is not explicitly associated with Paradise, but with a tomb or a labyrinth. “The jungle closed behind them like a tomb” (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 503). The four young men faced “the sepulchral greenness of the forest” (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 503) and

REALISMUL MAGIC ÎN LITERATURĂ

“incomprehensibly labyrinthine saltwater channels overtowered by the cathedral-arching trees” (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 503). Once in the jungle, Ayooba Baloch was sure that “he would never see the sun again” (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 503). All these elements suggest a symbolic death, which hints at a process of initiation. We expect this death of the characters to be followed by a rebirth and by the acquisition of a new status, that of initiate and/ or adult, by the four young men.

The episode is summarized by Ursula Kluwick as follows:

The jungle seems bizarrely alive and, what is more, determined to torture the intruders in the manner of an evil and revengeful spirit: they are bombarded by its fruits; almost drowned by the extraordinary force of the monsoon it unleashes on their heads; have their blood sucked by the jungle’s creatures; are tortured by apparitions and phantoms of the past, as well as lulled and assailed by nostalgia; plagued by the voices of their victims and deafened by the mud with which they seek to block their ears against these lamentations; seduced in the temple of Kali by ghosts which feed on their dreams; and, once the jungle is done with them, literally washed out of the forest on a huge tidal wave. (2013, pp. 19-20)

This is an accurate rendering of what happens literally in the Sundarbans. But the events also have a figurative, deeper meaning.

The space is not inhabited by people of its own, unless we consider as belonging to the Sundarbans the peasant who caught his wife with Saleem and who was shot by Ayooba because he was threatening their guide. Though he lives in a region adjacent to the forest proper,

Kuhelika Ghosh contends we should view him as part of the ecosystem of the jungle (2023, p. 15). The other people the reader sees in the Sundarbans are the four intruders: Ayooba and Farooq, both 16 and a half; Shaheed, probably a year younger than the first two; and Saleem, 7 years older than them. Since “there hung around him an air of great antiquity” (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 487), they nicknamed him *buddha*, meaning “old man”. This might lead the reader to conclude that Saleem was their leader. To a certain extent he was, as he was the dog and the others were supposed to follow him; he was leading them while following the undesirable people. But the one who would actually be their leader in the Sundarbans episode was Shaheed, who seems the only one capable of thinking under the circumstances. Shaheed would order them to take their boat to shore, instruct them to build a shelter, tie the boat to a sundri-trunk and go further into the jungle. He is reminiscent of the youngest of the three emperor’s sons whom fairy tales commonly feature, the one who is the bravest and cleverest and who manages to succeed in passing all trials and getting the girl (though this will not happen in Rushdie’s novel).

As far as the *buddha* is concerned, Saleem made the distinction between *buddha*, “pronounced with the Ds hard and plosive” and Buddha, “with soft-tongued Ds, meaning he-who-achieved-enlightenment-under-the-bodhi-tree...” (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 487). The latter Buddha was present and absent at the same time, with his body in one place and his spirit elsewhere, challenging the line between being alive and being dead. But that was also the case of *buddha*, as he was with the others physically, but was always lost in his own thoughts and quite difficult to establish a relationship with. In addition to that, we also find Saleem sitting cross-legged beneath a tree, not a bodhi tree, but a chinar. The similarities between him and

REALISMUL MAGIC ÎN LITERATURĂ

Buddha might suggest that he is already initiated. The chinar tree is not unimportant for the Kashmiris. A majestic tree that can be found all over Jammu and Kashmir, a permanence of everyday life and religious ceremonies since ancient times, the chinar holds a special place in the culture of the region and it is symbolic of “permanence, comfort, emotions recollected, unity of people, etc.” (Jammu and Kashmir Forest Department, 2021).

What is interesting to note in the episode is that Saleem, who is the narrator of the novel, not remembering his past and his name, does not use his name here. He calls himself “the buddha” and uses the third person instead of the first. He even insists that it was not “I” that did certain things, but “he, the buddha”, “not-Saleem” (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 502). Later, he will use both the first and the third person pronouns or will hesitate between them to suggest confusion: Shaheed “ordered us, them, to row our, their, sinking boat to shore” (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 504) or “What [...] failed to emerge from my lips? Padma: the buddha had forgotten his name” (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 509).

If the components of the Kashmir Valley are personified, everything about the Sundarbans is hyperbolized, rendering it a huge, chaotic space, threatening to engulf the four people. Yet the jungle only seems chaotic; at a closer look we notice that the chaos is only apparent and we should not understand it as a complete breakdown of stability, but as “a removal of the fixed to open up new patterns of understanding and experiences” (Upstone, 2009/2016). Afraid that they would not find a way out, Ayooba “wept like a monsoon” (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 503). He “cried without stopping for three entire hours or days or weeks, until the rain began and made his tears unnecessary” (Rushdie,

1981/2023, p. 503). Then, normal things happen but they are also exaggerated to a certain extent. "The Sundarbans began to grow in the rain." (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 503), "gaining in size, power and ferocity" (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 504). Of course, vegetation grows when the monsoon starts after months of drought, but under the four people's eyes everything gets a lot larger than it used to be and a lot larger than they would be willing to accept. The roots of the mangrove trees became "thicker than elephants' trunks", the mangroves were getting so tall that "the birds at the top must have been able to sing to God". The leaves swelled in the rain until "the entire forest seemed to be thatched". The huge nipa-fruits "fell from dizzying heights to explode like bombs in the water" (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 504). One created such turbulence that the boat capsized. While some of these may be considered the exaggerated perceptions of some scared young men, the capsizing of the boat because of a falling fruit is something else.

Besides the excessive growth, another element that renders the Sundarbans magical is the way time passes by. The same mixture of distorted perceptions and actual distortions can be noticed. On the one hand, the region is out of time: the jungle "is so thick that history has hardly ever found the way in" (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 501). Then, the reader is told that "in the Sundarbans time followed unknown laws" (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 512). Besides that, once there, the four lost track of time, which is normal in their circumstances. It seemed to them that they had come there "centuries ago" (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 510). Actually, they lived there for seven months. Seven is a sacred number, symbolizing change and the totality of space and time, being the number of cyclic ending and renewal (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1969/1993, vol. 3, pp. 289-296). Seven is four plus three. There are three young men without the buddha and four with him. Three is the

REALISMUL MAGIC ÎN LITERATURĂ

number of the sky, a perfect number, standing for the perfection of manifestation. The number is present in the religions of many peoples, governing urban and military organization and appearing in rites, legends and fairytales. To give just some examples, there are three phases of existence (appearance, evolution, destruction), three social classes (catering for the sacred, war and work), three phases of time (past, present, future), three magi. The world itself is triple – made of sky, earth and air. The Hindus believe in a triple divine manifestation – Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1969/1993, vol. 3, pp. 367-372). Four is the number of the earth, standing for the solid, the tangible. It is a totalizing symbol of plenitude and universality. Among others, there are four cardinal points, four winds, four elements, four seasons, four stages of mystic accomplishment (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1969/1993, vol. 3, pp. 28-33). The significance of the numbers throws our characters in a mythical or rather atemporal realm turning them into exemplary heroes that are supposed to end a phase of their existence and reach another, superior one, achieving perfection on at least one level.

As mentioned previously, the region resents intrusion and fights against the intruders. Actually, it tries to assimilate them, converting them from intruders into its own components. In order to achieve this, it subjects them to various trials that better them and lead them both towards becoming one with it and towards becoming men.

The jungle crawls with creatures, but they seem to be only feeble versions of what they should be: there are pale pink scorpions, transparent leeches and flies, blind snakes, and the whole jungle is a livid green world. It is like a latent world that has to feed in order to come to life and it feeds on the four. The colourless leeches became red when full of the boys' blood. The leeches exploded on

REALISMUL MAGIC ÎN LITERATURĂ

their bodies because they could not stop sucking and the blood trickled on the forest floor, being absorbed by the jungle. Transparent giant flies became red as they fed on the liquid of the nipa-fruits that fell and smashed on the ground. Nothing is wasted, everything is absorbed by the jungle and its creatures. It is like a living organism whose parts interconnect. In this respect it can be likened to a Garden of Eden, all its creatures living in harmony with one another. There is no fight for survival recorded. The only enemies are the four soldiers, seen as enemies only until they try to blend in.

The first time they ate nipa-fruits and mashed earthworms they got a terribly violent diarrhoea. But they managed to survive it, as well as the ensuing fevers and chills. They got accustomed to the food, improved their shelter and acquired “the skills of survival, such as the power of strangling snakes and throwing sharpened sticks so accurately that they spread multicoloured birds through their gizzards” (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 506). In a realistic key this is adaptation. In a magical key it is their assimilation by the jungle.

After this “physical” assimilation took place, the forest started sending them “new punishments” (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 507) each night, experiences that addressed several of their senses: they saw “the accusing eyes of the wives of the men they had tracked down and seized” (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 507), they heard the lamentations of the families they had deprived of their “undesirable” members, the buddha felt “the forest closing in upon him like a vice” (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 507), preventing him from breathing, Ayooba found himself unable to move one of his arms after a vision. This can be seen as the region’s reaction to the harm inflicted by the soldiers. The forest “functions as a kind of living consciousness” (Ghosh, 2023, p. 12). Desperate to silence the voices, the three boys put

REALISMUL MAGIC ÎN LITERATURĂ

the mud of the rainforest into their ears, becoming deaf as a consequence of infections. Ayooba was incapacitated by the phantom of the man he had killed, that leaked a colourless fluid on his arm. This may be proof that the respective man may be considered as part of the region.

After that the four became nostalgic and started regressing towards infancy but that regression led them to having visions of members of their families, experiences which helped them understand the world better and overcome their childish habits. Ayooba saw his mother and ceased to suck his thumb. Farooq had a vision of his brother, was convinced of the death of his father and stopped asking why and crying when hungry. Shaheed also saw the face of an ancestor and regained his sense of responsibility, shattered by his soldierly habit of obeying orders without questioning them. So, guided by the jungle, they go through a maturation process: “so it seemed that the magical jungle, having tormented them with their misdeeds, was leading them by the hand towards a new adulthood” (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 508). The buddha went through another process. He did not put mud into his ears and was not nostalgic. But one afternoon, while he was sitting cross-legged under a tree, he was bit by a blind, translucent serpent and remembered his past, though not his first name.

Now the four young men are supposed to be ready for the final stage of their assimilation. This takes place in a temple of Kali situated in the centre of a “glade filled with the gentle melodies of songbirds” (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 511). The temple is in the centre of two circles: the glade and the forest. Assimilating it to the house and the cave, the reader can consider it a feminine symbol, as is the forest, which indicates a rebirth of the four. Now they are in the uterus, from which they will emerge renewed. In addition to that, any temple is in the centre of

the world and is a reflection of the divine world and of the cosmos, but also of the human being. Going to the temple is a symbol of spiritual achievement, a return to the centre of the being and a means to reach the hierarchy of superior states (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1969/1993, vol. 3, pp. 347 - 350). Moreover, the birds stand for angels and their songs are incantations, mantras (Lovinescu, 1989, pp. 219).

The fact that something may go wrong is signalled by the irony with which the narrator presents the temple whose “walls danced with friezes of men and women, who were depicted coupling in postures of unsurpassable athleticism and, sometimes, of highly comic absurdity” (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 511). Therefore, instead of commanding respect, the temple rather made them laugh. In addition to that, they did find inside “the towering statue of a black dancing goddess” (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 511), but the three boys did not recognize her. Only the buddha identified her as Kali, “fecund and awful, with the remnants of gold paint on her teeth” (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 511). The remnants of gold paint on Kali’s teeth remind us of Tai, and so does her association with sexuality.

The postures seen in the frieze of the walls were probably enacted by Saleem, Ayooba, Farooq and Shaheed in the company of four extremely beautiful young girls who visited them at midnight and initiated them into love. As they felt caresses, kisses and love-bites

they realized that this this this was what they had needed, what they had longed for without knowing it, that having passed through the childish regressions and child-like sorrows of their earlier jungle-days, having survived the onset of memory and responsibility and the greater pains of renewed

REALISMUL MAGIC ÎN LITERATURĂ

accusations, they were leaving infancy behind for ever [...]. (Rushdie, 1981/2023, pp. 511-512)

The girls came every night and the young men found themselves unwilling to leave the temple but to find food. It seems that their assimilation by the jungle is now completed.

Something goes wrong, however, with their initiation. One day they looked at each other and realized they were becoming transparent. It was the buddha, the older and probably already initiated one, who realized then that the creatures of the jungle were not transparent because of the absence of sunlight, as they had believed, but because the jungle had deprived them of their imagination. They looked more carefully at the temple and saw it with different eyes, noticing not just the cracks in the rock but also,

in a murky corner of the abandoned shrine, [...] the remnants of what might have been four small fires – ancient ashes, scorch-marks on stone – or perhaps four funeral pyres; and in the centre of each of the four, a small, blackened, fire-eaten heap of uncrushed bones. (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 512-513)

This enhanced perception is reminiscent of Aadam's and produces a more violent reaction than in him. Scared by the discovery that their lovers were actually dead, the four ran out of the temple to the boat, when a wave came, taking them out of the jungle and into a tree, which destroyed their watercraft and left them in a drowned rice-paddy. Their punishment for refusing to become part of the jungle went further than that. Soon after they came out of the jungle, Ayooba, Farooq and

Shaheed were killed, one after the other. The buddha was the only one allowed to live.

6. Conclusions

The way in which the episodes taking place in the two spaces analysed end, alongside other episodes in the novel, might lead the readers to the conclusion that they are dealing with a pessimistic work. But Rushdie does not share this opinion: "The story of Saleem does indeed lead him to despair. But the story is told in a manner designed to echo, as closely as my ability allowed, the Indian talent for non-stop self-regeneration." (Rushdie, 1992, p. 16) The survival of the main character and narrator in spite of the adversities faced (not only) in the Sundarbans, the solution of leaving found by Aadam Aziz, and Tai's (possible) immortality may be considered proofs of that capacity of self-regeneration.

As far as the spaces examined in the paper are concerned, as it can be easily noticed even from the length of the sections dealing with them, the realistic traits of the regions are far less well represented, offering only a foundation on which Rushdie builds a story laden with magic and symbolism.

The atemporality of the regions, suggesting a break with traditional time and evident from their having remained unchanged for centuries but also from their rejecting foreign elements, likens them to *heterotopias*. So does the fact that they function as havens for those facing moments of crisis, who come seeking solutions, although the solutions are not always conventional or expected. A third characteristic of *heterotopias* the Valley of Kashmir and the Sundarbans share is that they are both isolated and accessible.

The explanation offered by Saleem for the four young men's expulsion from the jungle was that "it seemed

REALISMUL MAGIC ÎN LITERATURĂ

as if the jungle, having tired of its playthings, were ejecting them unceremoniously from its territory” (Rushdie, 1981/2023, p. 513). This paper argues instead that what happens in the two episodes is that the humans try to colonize the spaces they find themselves in and transform them into places. In both cases there is a clash of wills and a question of who is the assimilator and who is the one assimilated. Nature triumphs in both episodes, and the deviant humans, whose assimilation failed, are rejected and must leave the spaces. Perhaps it is only natural to conclude that the rejection of Aadam, who actually belonged to the Vale of Kashmir, having been born and brought up there, and whose attempts at changing it were reduced to having the people there accept him as a doctor, is less violent than the rejection of the four, who have never belonged to the Sundarbans.

References:

Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. Vale of Kashmir. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Retrieved May 3, 2024, from <https://www.britannica.com/place/Vale-of-Kashmir>

Chevalier, J., & Gheerbrant, A. (1993). *Dicționar de simboluri. [Dictionary of symbols]* (Vols. 1–3). București: Artemis. (Original work published 1969)

Cuddon, J.A. (1999). *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. Penguin Books. (Original work published 1977)

Fenwick, M. (2008). Midnight’s Children. *The Literary Encyclopedia*. (Original work published 2005). Retrieved May 10, 2024, from <https://www.litencyc.com/php/sworks.php?rec=true&UID=3591>

REALISMUL MAGIC ÎN LITERATURĂ

Foucault, M. (1984, October). Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias (J. Miskowiec, Trans.). *Architecture/ Mouvement/ Continuité*. (Original work published 1967). Retrieved May 12, 2024, from <https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf>

Ghosh, K. (2023). Can the Sundarbans Speak? Multispecies Collectivity in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. *ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 54(1), 1-26. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ari.2023.0000>

Jammu and Kashmir Forest Department. (2021). *In the Shade of Chinar*. [https://www.jkforest.gov.in/assets/pdf/publications/Chinar%20Booklet%20-%20Print%20version%20-%20FINAL%20\(29.%20APRIL.%202021\)-compressed.pdf](https://www.jkforest.gov.in/assets/pdf/publications/Chinar%20Booklet%20-%20Print%20version%20-%20FINAL%20(29.%20APRIL.%202021)-compressed.pdf)

Kluwick, U. (2013). *Exploring Magic Realism in Salman Rushdie's Fiction*. Routledge.

Liang, Y. (2020). The Spatial Imperative: The Need to Read Space in Salman Rushdie's Novels. *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics*, 43(3), 117-129.

Lovinescu, V. (1989). *Creangă și creanga de aur. [Creangă and the Golden Bough]*. București: Cartea Românească

Mukherjee, K. (2021). The Liminal Space in Salman Rushdie's *The Midnight's Children*. *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, 6(5), 173-177. <https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.65.27>

Pletcher, K. Sundarbans. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Retrieved May 3, 2024, from <https://www.britannica.com/place/Sundarbans>

REALISMUL MAGIC ÎN LITERATURĂ

Radu, D.-M. (2022). On Inner/Outer Spaces Within Salman Rushdie's Fictional Worlds. *Analele Universității din Oradea. Fascicula Limba și Literatura Română*, 29(1), 41-49.

Ramsey-Kurz, H., & Ganapathy-Doré, G. (Eds.). (2011). *Projections of Paradise. Ideal Elsewheres in Postcolonial Migrant Literature*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

Röder, K. (2018). Heterotopias as Spaces of Resistance in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981). In Ch. Ehland & P. Fischer (Eds.), *Resistance and the City. Negotiating Urban Identities: Race, Class and Gender* (pp. 50-65), https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004369313_006

Rushdie, S. (1992). *Imaginary Homelands. Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*. London: Granta Books in association with Penguin Books.

Rushdie, S. (2023). *Midnight's Children*. Dublin: Vintage Classics. (Original work published 1981)

Upstone, S. (2016). *Spatial Politics in the Postcolonial Novel*. London and New York: Routledge. (Original work published 2009)

~~~~~  
**Amalia MĂRĂȘESCU** is associate professor, PhD, at the Language, Literature, History and Arts Department of the Faculty of Theology, Letters, History and Arts, National University of Science and Technology Politehnica of Bucharest, University Centre of Pitești, Romania. She holds a BA in English Language and Literature – Romanian Language and Literature from the Faculty of Letters, Philosophy and History of the West University of Timișoara, an MA in Translation Theory and Practice. English Language from the Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu and a PhD from the West University of Timișoara with the thesis *Mihail Sadoveanu și romanul mitico-istoric european (Mihail Sadoveanu and the Mythical-Historical European Novel)*.

## *REALISMUL MAGIC ÎN LITERATURĂ*

Amalia Mărășescu currently teaches Twentieth Century English Literature, English Language Teaching Methodology, Translation Studies and History of England. She has published eight books as sole author, three books as co-author, six translations from English into Romanian and more than forty articles.