

## The Plea for Freedom of Expression in Rushdie's Non-Fiction

Titus Pop

### *Abstract*

*Rushdie's non-fictional works, Imaginary Homelands and his more recent essay collection Step Across This Line offer enough evidence that Rushdie's lifelong preoccupation is an endless claim for a frontierless, hybrid world. In my paper, I intend to demonstrate that his non-fiction encapsulates his unitary vision—a plea for a free, borderless and cross-cultural world.*

Rushdie's endless plea, both in his fiction and in his non-fiction is for an in-between space of communication, for hybridity and freedom of expression. This paper attempts to demonstrate this claim with reference to Rushdie's non-fiction work. This work consists of three volumes of essays, journal collections and travel writings: *The Jaguar Smile*, *Imaginary Homelands* and *Step Across This Line*.

*The Jaguar Smile* was published in 1987 and it was written when Rushdie took a break from writing *The Satanic Verses* the year before and visited Nicaragua as a guest of the Sandinista Association of Cultural Workers. This visit took place shortly after "the International Court of Justice in the Hague had ruled that US aid to *la Contra*, the counterrevolutionary army the CIA had invented, assembled, organized, and armed, was in violation of international law. Rushdie is quite severe in his criticism of his hosts over the closure of the opposition newspaper, *La Prensa*, and is not by any means ready to accept, either face to face or in his subsequent written account, all the justifications they put forward for that and other questionable policies. He is honest, too, about how badly served Nicaraguans are by their government-controlled media and consequently how ill-informed they are about the rest of the world. He reports that, while listening to him and a visiting Russian novelist discuss Soljenitzyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*, Nicaraguan writers present were incredulous at what they were hearing: 'How could such things be?' they asked. (Rushdie, 2000: 99) Nevertheless, as one born in a nation that had thrown off the British yoke, Rushdie's natural sympathies lay with the Nicaraguans. He found that he actually liked and admired the members of the government he met as human beings. "For the first time in my life," he writes, "I realized with surprise, I had come across a government I could support, not *faute de mieux*, but because I wanted its efforts (at survival, at building the nation, and at transforming it) to succeed" (2000:70). All in all, his position is obvious—he defends freedom of expression and exposes the malpractices of the Nicaraguan government.

*Imaginary Homelands* brings many of the essays he wrote between 1981-1991 together with the several major statements he has written in the wake of *The Satanic Verses* to form an extraordinary intellectual autobiography. When reading the collection, what one may effortlessly notice is Rushdie's frequent and recurring claim for multiculturalism and plurality. Thus, in his third essay called 'The Riddle of Midnight: India, August 1987', he asserts his view on ideology. Vehemently opposing the ideologies of communalities that dominated the political scene in India after Independence, a position he first nuanced in his masterpiece *The Midnight's Children*, he writes: "My India has always been based on ideas of multiplicity, pluralism, hybridity, ideas to which the ideologies of the communalities are diametrically opposed" (1991: 32). Later, when commenting on the ill-fated Indira Gandhi, who had been butchered in 1984 by a fundamentalist, he reiterated his view:

A nation of seven hundred millions to make any kind of sense must base itself firmly on the concept of multiplicity, of plurality and tolerance of devolution and decentralization wherever possible. There can be no one way-religious, cultural or linguistic-of being an Indian. Let difference reign. (Rushdie 1991: 44)

In another essay entitled 'Commonwealth Literature does not exist' where he arguably opposes the label 'commonwealth literature' given to postcolonial literature by the 'Orientalist' scholars, Rushdie pleads for the need for the preeminence of hybridity over purity. After rejecting the so-called 'authenticity' plea required by the school of 'commonwealth literature', considering the quest for national authenticity as rather belonging to religious extremists, he calls for an eclectic cultural enterprise by bringing as an argument in favor of his claim the Indian culture which is a mixed culture:

A mélange of elements as disparate as ancient Mughal and contemporary Coca-Cola American. To say nothing of Muslim, Bhudist, Jain, Christian, Jewish, French, Portuguese, Marxist, Maoist, Trotskiist, Vietnamese, Capitalist, and of course Hindu elements. Eclecticism, the ability to take from the world what seems fitting and to leave the rest, has always been a hallmark of the Indian tradition, and today it is at the centre of the best work being done both in the visual arts and in literature. (1991: 67)

An important part of his non-fiction is dedicated to his continuous fight for freedom of expression. His claim is made obvious starting with the essay 'In Good Faith' where he takes a stand for oppressed artists such as the Polish journalist Richard Kaspuchinski (a banned Polish journalist who witnessed many revolutions), the Egyptian Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz; for oppressed peoples such as the Chinese, the Romanians during Ceausescu's regime or the Arab people. He notices, among other things, that art had an important role in triggering anti-communist revolutions. Thus, the Czech velvet revolution, he notices 'began in the theatres and was led by a writer (Vaclav Havel) (Rushdie, 1991:422) and explain that it was people's spiritual needs rather than the material needs that drove the communists from power.

In another essay he praises Andrey Shakharov (the famous Russian scientist who criticized the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan) for his courageous attitude and for his outrageous dissidence.

Rushdie's stand for freedom of expression is more obvious in his latest non-fiction collection 'Step Across this Line'. Rushdie is as engaged by Dorothy in Oz as by the destruction in 9/11, he is willing and able to pass between cultural registers and diverse subjects with an endless disregard for the relative value of the insights offered. There are speeches, columns, letters that denounce repression, censorship and more shakily, religion of all kinds.

Thus, two articles are headed against two important events which took place recently in Central Europe. The first one is the accession in the European Parliament of the Austrian Freedom Party led by Jorg Heider. The second one is the genocide which took place in Kosovo. Denouncing Heider's rise as a great danger for the newly consolidated European union, he compares the neo-Nazi to the protagonist in Bertold Brecht's play 'Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui', and ends with a call for the Europeans to 'set its house in order' unless they wish history to remember is as the reincarnation of Nazism.

In *August 1999: Kosovo*, Rushdie exposes the terrible atrocities performed by the Serbian Army ruled by the last tyrant of Europe, Slobodan Milosevic and defends NATO's intervention to stop the massacre.

One important part of the collection is a selection of Rushdie's various statements on the fatwa and its consequences-his forced seclusion, the at times fatal violence directed

towards translators and colleagues, the sour undercurrents in British sympathy towards his situation, his devotion to free speech at any cost. Rushdie is defiantly a secular humanist, convinced that religion's only interest lies in a power-driven, ideological control of believers. Just as he did in *Imaginary Homelands*, he defends freedom of speech by supporting the literary figures such as A. Miller, N.Gordimer, Coetzee or Edward Said.

In an essay which was initially a celebration speech on Arthur Miller's eightieth birthday, he gratifies Miller for supporting him during the fatwa years and highlights the need to re-imagine freedom: When Arthur Miller says that 'we must re-imagine liberty in every generation, especially when a certain number of people are always afraid of it', his words carry the weight of lived experience, of his own profound re-imaginings (Miller qtd. In Rushdie 2002:53)

He senses the greatest danger facing literature today-the attack on intellectual liberty. Resorting to Orwell who claimed that today the idea of intellectual liberty is under attack from two directions-'theoretical enemies, the apologists of totalitarianism' and 'practical enemies, monopoly and bureaucracy' (Orwell, qtd. in Rushdie, 2002:61), he writes:

The pressures of monopoly and bureaucracy, of corporatism and conservatism, limiting and narrowing the range and quality of what gets published, are known to every working writer. Of the pressures of intolerance and censorship, I personally have in these past years gained perhaps too much knowledge. There are many such struggles taking place in the world today: in Algeria, in China, in Iran, in Turkey, in Egypt, in Nigeria, writers are being censored, harassed, jailed and even murdered. Even in Europe and the United States the stormtroopers of various 'sensitivities' seek to limit our freedom of speech. It has never been more important to continue to defend those values which make the art of literature possible. (2002: 62)

He praises transnational literature for its serving as a 'means of holding a conversation with the world' (2002: 165) He brings evidence to support his point by considering some great literary names' travels as essential in their writing style:

James Joyce, Henry James, Samuel Becket, Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, Mavis Gallant, James Baldwin, Graham Greene, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, Jorge Louis Borges, Vladimir Nabokov, Muriel Spark, were or are wanderers, too. Literature has little or nothing to do with a writer's home address. (2002: 166)

In *Notes On Writing And The Nation*, Rushdie writes that "good writing assumes a frontierless nation" because "writers who serve frontiers have become border guards". More than that he concludes "The frontierless nation is nor a fantasy" (2002: 67). He also warns against the writers who write on behalf of a nation calling them 'new behalfists': 'Beware the writer who sets himself or herself up as the voice of a nation This includes nations of race, gender, sexual orientation, elective affinity. This is the New Behalfism.... It is the murder of thought. Beware!'(2002: 66)

His fight against fundamentalism and for freedom of expression is a recurring theme and it is clearly articulated in many essays. The bulk of his claim against oppression of thought and free speech is hosted by the second part of the volume entitled 'Messages from the Plague Years' which is a collection of speeches and articles he wrote during the long campaign against his fatwa. In these pieces Rushdie both directly campaigns against Khomeini's fatwa "the appalling Valentine I was sent in 1989" (264) and writes eloquently on "a Sarajevo of the mind, an imagined Sarajevo whose present ruination and torment exiles us all" (2002: 273).

The first speech of this part was delivered at the International Conference on Freedom of Expression in Washington DC in April 2002 and begins with a quoted passage from John Stuart Mill's essay *On Liberty* which applies directly to the controversial novel. Stuart Mill clearly stated that 'the evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is that it is robbing the human race, posterity and the existing generation...of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth' (Mill, qtd. in Rushdie, 2002: 232) Rushdie associates his situation with the examples Mill provides, namely two cases of great figures accused of blasphemy and heresy-that of Jesus and Socrates. Rushdie adds to these two cases a third one, that of Galileo Galilei observing that the three men are, "as is plain to everyone, the founders of the philosophical, moral and scientific traditions of the West" (2002: 232) More than that, he logically infers that "blasphemy and heresy, far from being the greatest evils, are the methods by which human thought has made its most vital advances" (2002: 232). The speech concludes with an apology of freedom:

Free societies are societies in motion, and with motion comes friction. Free people strike sparks, and those sparks are the best evidence of freedom's existence. Totalitarian societies seek to replace the many truths of freedom by the one truth of power, be it secular or religious; to halt the motion of society, to snuff out the spark. Unfreedom's primary purpose is invariably to shackle the mind. The creative process is rather like the processes of a free society. (2002: 233)

Later on, by quoting Nasreem Rehman, Rushdie reiterated his appeal to judgement and calmness: "we must stop thinking in binary, oppositional terms" (2002: 263).

In the article *The last Hostage* which is a part of his fatwa diary he calls free speech 'life itself'(242) In another speech he delivered at King's College Chapel at Cambridge in 1993, after having been embraced by a Saudi Muslim who told him he had embraced him because he was "a free man" , Rushdie, noticing the irony, remarks: "He meant that freedom of speech, freedom of the imagination, is that freedom which gives meaning to all the others" (2002: 251).

He takes a stand defending other oppressed writers. In a letter written in support of the Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasreen, who has been labeled by many critics as 'the female Rushdie', Rushdie expresses his appreciation towards the Bengali culture, a culture whose main tenet is freedom of thought:

Bengali culture-and I mean the culture of Bangladesh as well as Indian Bengal-has always prided itself on its openness, its freedom to think and argue, its intellectual disputatiousness, its lack of bigotry (...). Bengalis have always understood that that free expression is not only a Western value. It is one of their great treasures-the imagination and the word. (2002: 277)

The theme-essay calls on artists to use their own weapons in the wake of the Sept. 11 attack and its seeming power to change our view of the world. "Murder was not the point," he writes. "The creation of a meaning was the point."(2002: 433) And meaning is the artist's province, exercised not through the current impulse for cautious muzzling but through a permanent tradition of transgression. Freedom means freedom from any form of limitation on how one lives in this world And this is how Rushdie ends his theme essay: "The freedoms of art and the intellect are closely related to the general freedoms of society as a whole" (2002: 442).

References:

- RUSHDIE, S. 1991. *Imaginary Homelands, Essays and Criticism 1981–1991*. London: Granta Books.  
RUSHDIE, S. 2000. *The Jaguar Smile. A Nicaraguan Journey*. London: Vintage.  
RUSHDIE, S. 2002. *Step Across This Line. Collected Non-Fiction, 1992–2002*. London: Vintage.

*Titus Pop*  
*Orizont 160 Paleu*  
*Bihor*  
*Romania*  
*e-mail: titus20000ro@yahoo.com*