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## Salman Rushdie's *Quichotte*: Critiquing the Narrative Framework on the Travel across the Realm of Imagination

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### Abstract

The focus of the present paper is three dimensional. In the beginning, it critically establishes the foregrounded textual features in the well-known novels of Salman Rushdie which projects him as a unique postmodern fiction writer so far. Then, attention shifts to the in-depth analysis of *Quichotte* which is a 2019 novel by him written getting motivated by Miguel de Cervantes' classic novel *Don Quixote*, and it tells the story of an addled Indian American man who travels across America in pursuit of a celebrity television host with whom he has become preoccupied. The protagonist, Sam Du Champ, who is an Indian-born writer living in America and author of a number of unsuccessful spy thrillers writes a book as an bizarre attempt creating the character of Ismail Smile. Then, through a postmodern analysis of the contexts, conventions, intertextuality, language features, metalanguage, modes, and readerly perspective of the narrative, it examines how the narrative discourse addresses the reader; incorporates a story within a story; uses various techniques that emphasize the story's status as a fictional enterprise keeping the reader more engaged; departs from conventional ideas in terms of the form and function of a narrative; and makes the reader draw his or her own conclusions; and thus challenges the assumptions as a metafiction.

**Keywords:** Foregrounded, classic novel, postmodern analysis, readerly perspective, metafiction, hyperculture

### Introduction

#### Imaginary Travel Narratives: An Overview

In fact, there are novelists who write into the void, who travel irresponsibly or recklessly, who fail to do their research, or who find one landscape collapsing into another. For example, *Dracula* (1897) by Bram Stoker (1847- 1912) contains two acts of exploratory travel. At first, he uses the dramatic landscape of the Scottish Highlands to move over to Transylvania and then *Dracula's* castle. *À Rebours* (1884) by J.K. Huysmans (1848-1907) is a fanciful move towards armchair travel. Getting bored of life and charmed by Dickens, the aristocratic Des Esseintes shuts up his life in the French countryside, and then to London. *Dublinesque* by Enrique Vilas-Matas (1948-) is about the temptation to travel which is a genre of metafictional novel. Similarly, *A Voyage Out* (1915) by Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) speaks about Rachel Vinrace, the protagonist moves over the Euphrosyne to an unnamed South American country making a metaphorical journey. *A Way in the World* (1994) by VS Naipaul (1932-2018) narrates the account of the colonial legacy inducing by Woolf is picked up with a hesitant tone by Naipaul. His novel pursues the fortunes of several historical figures entangled with the history of Trinidad where there is a reference to Sir Walter Raleigh's El Dorado. *Invisible Cities* by Italo Calvino is also another fiction talking about Calvino's metafictional conceit, the Venetian traveller Marco Polo describes his travels to the emperor Kublai Khan.

Salman Rushdie (1947-) goes one step ahead of this movement. His works are very often found to adopt magic realism with the blends of historiographic metafiction. His fictions primarily deal with connections, disruptions, and migrations between Eastern and Western civilizations, typically set upon the India. Rushdie's magic realism is meant to re-enchant the world in the wake of modernity, it is also meant to re-enchant it in the wake of adolescence and adulthood.

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But again, with a bittersweet ambivalence, he seeks to incite two simultaneous and contradictory reactions. Swinging between the hard realities of the postcolonial third world and his world of utter illusion, Rushdie dares to drag a desk on the dais of the famous writers of the world. His *Quichotte* is a novel of completely new narrative and fictional approach as the author says on its spatio-temporal paradigm that, "It was the Age of Anything-Can-Happen..... Words could lose their meanings and acquire new ones." (*Quichotte*, 11). Moved by Miguel de Cervantes's classic novel *Don Quixote*, *Quichotte* is a metafiction or more befittingly, "a postmodern dystopian novel" (Toohey, 2019)<sup>[7]</sup> that tells the story of an addled Indian-American man who has picaresque mission across America in pursuit of a superstar television host with whom he has become preoccupied. *Don Quixote* (1605 and 1615) is a Spanish epic novel by Miguel de Cervantes. The plot speaks of the adventures of an associate of the lowest nobility from La Mancha named Alonso Quijano, who reads so many chivalric romances so that he either loses or pretends to have lost his mind in order to become a knight-errant to revive chivalry and serve his nation, under the name Don Quixote de la Mancha. So to say, *Quichotte* is a humorous postmodern remaking of *Don Quixote*.

### The Critical Dimensions of *Quichotte*

The central character, Sam DuChamp is an Indian-born writer coincidentally residing in America. He is the author of a number of vain spy thrillers. In order to write a book unlike any other, he endeavours and creates the character of Ismail Smile. Smile, who was born in Bombay, is a travelling pharmaceutical salesman who has suffered a stroke in old age. He begins infatuatedly watching reality television and becomes an inspired lover of Salma R, a former Bollywood star who hosts a daylight talk show in New York City. In spite of having never met her, he sends her love letters under the pen name "Quichotte". He begins a mission for her across America, driving in his Chevrolet Cruze with his fantasy-born son Sancho. Both of them experience contemporary problems of the United States, including racism, the opioid plague, domestic love, and also feel the impact of popular culture. The lives of the characters of *Quichotte* and the writer DuChamp entwine as the plot moves.

As a travelling salesman, he fights back to differentiate between reality and fantasy in this jagged re-creating of Don Quixote. He embarks on a mission. Once he lived at a number of temporary places across the United States of America. Thus, he becomes a traveller and simultaneously, with the advancing years and retreating mental powers, he accounts for his prolonged acquaintance with mindless television shows; that how he had spent far too much of his life in the yellow light of extravagant motel rooms watching an excess of it; and suffers a unusual form of mental smash up. Still then, in his mission of the virtual tour, he visits the strange and fantastic lands of America.

As a result of his preoccupation with the old days, the cathode-ray tube, and, in the new age of flat screens, through liquid-crystal, plasma, and organic light-emitting diode displays, he falls victim to psychological disorder. He cannot distinguish between truth and lies. At times, he finds to be smudged and indistinct, and thus finds at times himself incapable of distinguishing one from the other. He finds himself as a potential dweller of that unreal world away

from the screen to which he is so dedicated, and which, he believes that provides him moral, social, and practical guidelines. As time passes, he sinks ever deeper into the quicksand of what might be termed the unreal real; he tells himself becoming emotionally involved with many of the inhabitants of that other, brighter world and at an unknown point, he develops a completely unilateral ardour for a certain television personality, the beautiful, witty, and much admired Miss Salma R, an obsession which he characterizes, quite inappropriately, as love. In the name of this so-called love, he resolves, "...to zealously to pursue his 'beloved' right through the television screen into whatever exalted high-definition reality she and her kind inhabited, and, by deeds as well as grace, to win her heart." (*Quichotte*, 1)

While travelling along the road in his old gunmetal grey Chevy Cruze, he ponders over how much he loves Salma R. whom he would like to marry and become a father. Although he has never been able to maintain a relationship, still then, he is swayed all the way that in this "Age of Anything-Can-Happen," he will one day find and marry Miss Salma R., and she will give birth to numerous children. In the meantime, one day, during an outburst of favorable astrological omens, the "longed-for son, who looked to be about 15 years old, materialized in the Cruze's passenger seat." (*Quichotte*, 24). He appears in black and white, "...his natural colors desaturated in the manner that has become fashionable in much modern cinema." (*Quichotte*, 25). *Quichotte* names him Sancho.

Miss Salma leads a charming life. She comes from fame and money, and makes even more money and achieves even greater fame on her own, becoming the first Indian actress to make it big in America, to cross what is called "...the -wood bridge from Bolly- to Holly-, and then would transcend even Hollywood to become a brand, a television talk-show superstar and titanic cultural influence in America and India too." (*Quichotte*, 24)

Miss Salma R. is the exceptional woman (and total stranger) to whom *Quichotte* declares to be his undying devotion, comes from a dynasty of adored ladies. She is an expert in cyber-warfare and thus she rises rapidly through the veiled stratum of the hidden world. She plays the invisible woman, the U.S. chief of counter-terrorism, holding the rank of ambassador. Her work was so secret that her existence cannot be publicly confirmed, nor could her name be printed or her movements can be made public. She wears power suits and trademark aviator shades and speaks Arabic and Parsi as well as the new vocabularies of the cyberworld and has a dreadful relationship with the old white man at the head of the CIA who lusted after her in the most unpleasantly old-fashioned way. He denigrates her professional concern that cyber-terrorists could be the most significant new foes that America has to face, and when he is murdered in the season finale, she steps over his fallen body and takes his job.

On the roof of the old chocolate factory on Lafayette Street, there is a high-ceilinged modern penthouse, which could have housed a substantial family, in which Miss Salma R lives alone there. She takes care of her make-up greatly. She has casual lovers like a white boy named Anderson Thayer who claims descent from a Mayflower pilgrim and who is at least a dozen years younger than Salma, a smallish man with long red hair and a Zapata moustache who reminds her at times of Rumpelstiltskin from the Brothers Grimm and at other times of Yosemite Sam from Looney Tunes. Miss

Salma resembles Belinda of Alexander Pope's *Rape of the Lock*. She initiates a "...conversation with a major movie studio about making a big-budget Five Eyes movie which she would coproduce and in which she would lead the American defense against a ruthless foreign cyber-attack." (*Quichotte*, 64)

In the meantime, Quichotte takes a great decision at the Red Roof Inn in Gallup, New Mexico. Since he does not have a fixed residential concept, he makes road as his home and his car becomes his living room; its trunk is his wardrobe; and a sequence of Red Roof Inns, Motel 6's, Days Inns, and other hostelries provides him with beds and TVs. He prefers places with at least some premium cable channels, but if none are available he is happy with the ordinary network fare. Anyway, he has been a wanderer of a purer kind and has adventured far and wide simply to see what he could see; from Cape Horn and Tierra del Fuego; and then moves to:

...the ends of the earth where all the color drain out of the world so that things and people exist only in black-and-white, to the eastern wastes of Iran, from the cockroach-ridden town of Bam to the wild border city of Zahedan in the vanished time of the Shah, from Shark Bay in Australia, where he swam amidst the sentimentality of dolphins, to the great wildebeest migration across the incomprehensible Serengeti plain. He played Holi with the Bhojpuri speaking descendants of Indian indentured laborers in Mauritius and celebrated Bakr Eid with shawl weavers in the high mountain village of Aru near the Kolahoi glacier in Kashmir. However, at a certain point in early middle age the Interior Event change everything. When he comes to his senses after the Event he had loses ...all personal ambition and curiosity, found big cities oppressive, and craved only anonymity and solitude. (*Quichotte*, 12)

Quichotte's wealthy cousin, R. K. Smile, M.D., is a successful entrepreneur, who, after seeing a production of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* on TV, had refused to fire his relative, fearing that to do so would hasten the old fellow's demise. Dr. Smile's pharmaceutical business, always prosperous, has "...catapulted him to billionaire status because of his Georgia laboratories' perfection of a sublingual spray application of the pain medication fentanyl." (*Quichotte*, 13). He is the one to allow Quichotte to set up for journey both at real and fantastic levels.

"Thank you," Quichotte said, pocketing the check. "May I ask, will it be all right to bring my Salma with me when I visit? Once we get together, you see, we will be inseparable. And I am sure she will be happy to eat your wife's fine biryani." (*Quichotte*, 13)

Sancho the sidekick in Don Quixote is a darker skinned young mysteriously arrives on the spot. It seems that Sancho

is of approximately the same hue as Miss Salma R. So, he is a visitor from the future who travels back through time and space to answer his father's need for a son's companionship, and end his long solitude. He has gained a deep understanding of time travel from television, he remembers the Doctor, the British Time Lord, and guesses that Sancho might have arrived in some sort of TARDIS-like vehicle hidden in the dark sky behind the brilliance of the meteors. Quichotte observes there are two guiding principles of the universe. They are paranoia, that is the belief that the world had meaning, but that meaning was located at a concealed level, which was very possibly hostile to the overt, absurd level, which meant, in brief, you; and entropy, that is the belief that life was meaningless, that things fell apart and the heat-death of the universe was inevitable. (*Quichotte*, 18). He and Sancho enter the first valley of the quest, and Sancho meets an Italian insect. "When considering the matter of wooing a great lady," Quichotte says:

I ponder, naturally, the classics. And by the classics I mean, first of all, the show that breaks the ground and points the way, *The Dating Game*, ABC-TV, 1965, 'from Hollywood, the dating capital of the world.' We must ask ourselves when we summon up the memory of a masterpiece: what is the wisdom it offers us?' 'That we shouldn't go on dumb dating shows?' proposed Sancho, unhelpfully. (*Quichotte*, 52)

Meanwhile, things fall apart as well as people and countries fall apart. Their citizens and a zillion channels had nothing to hold them together. Garbage out there, and great stuff out there, too, and they both coexist at the same level of reality, both give off the same air of authority saying, "The true story is there's no true story anymore. There's no true anymore that anyone can agree on." (*Quichotte*, 70)

Then they travel to the past of the city of New York. They also travel one hundred and ninety miles further north they arrived in the town of Beautiful, Kansas (pop. 135,473), ranked by CNN and Money magazine as the twelfth-best city to live in the United States. In south Beautiful, on East 151st Street at Rey-Nard Shops, you could find one of the three locations of the popular Powers Bar & Grill chain. Quichotte had not intended to make a stop in Beautiful. After they left Tulsa Hiplan was to drive north on U.S. 169 and eventually turn toward "Lawrence, Kansas (pop. 95,358), a liberal-minded enclave in that conservative state, where he had booked a twin-bedded room at the inexpensive Motel 6." (*Quichotte*, 76)

#### As he writes a letter to Miss Salma

....that I believe that the entire purpose of the universe up to this point has been to bring about that moment in which you and I will unite in eternal delight, and once we have done so, the cosmos will have achieved its goal and will therefore peacefully end, and we will ascend together, beyond annihilation, into the sphere of the Timeless. (*Quichotte*, 91).

Then, a sequence of absurd events during a brief sojourn in New Jersey takes place. Quichotte then reaches a big city; many revelations; and Sancho has a big Mishap. Quichotte, driving the Cruze out of the Lincoln Tunnel into Manhattan, feels like a snail coming out of its shell. Quichotte then enters to the Central Park through Inventor's Gate, touched the brim of his hat in a gesture of respect toward the statue of Samuel Morse.

Quichotte comes to the park today to meet the wizard who would work the magic he needs. He hasn't enjoyed the TV series about the youth of Merlin a few years ago. Thus, he is looking for "...an adult sorcerer today, not a callow boy who needed to grow up. Everyone wanted youth now. How tedious that was! Young Indiana Jones. Young Han Solo. Young Sherlock Holmes. Young Dumbledore. Any minute now there would be a mini-series about the young Methuselah." (*Quichotte*, 157)

In the meantime, from Atlanta, there comes a dramatic news of the arrest of the pharmaceuticals billionaire Dr. R. K. Smile, chairman and CEO of Smile Pharmaceuticals Inc. and prominent arts philanthropist, on charges of running a nationwide ring of doctors prepared to prescribe powerful opioids 'off-label,' that is, to people not suffering from conditions specified on the label—often people in excellent health. The charges call him 'one of the most unscrupulous contributors to the current epidemic of opioid misuse.' Sources say it is likely that further arrests will follow as investigators pursue other members of the alleged ring. Additionally, there are separate accusations by seven women employed by SPI of sexually inappropriate behavior by Dr. Smile, who is allegedly known to many of his female employees as 'Little Big Hands.' Dr. Smile, speaking through his lawyers, has denied all the accusations and expressed his determination to clear his name." Further arrests will follow. The words hit Quichotte hard. That he should end up a common criminal at his advanced age. The shame of it might kill him. (*Quichotte*, 166)

With this arrest, the deterioration of Quichotte thus gets accelerated.

He goes from high definition to early analog and now his only hope, all his

hope, was that the woman he loved would open her arms and heart and love—

love itself!—would burst through his body and make him whole. A woman's love could do that.

A good woman's love. It could save your life, even if you had not loved your

father as you should have, even if you were lost to him, so far away; even then, her

love could let you live. (*Quichotte*, 176)

Salman Rushdie's *Quichotte* and Cervantes' *Don Quixote* are deliberations on the relationship between fantasy and fiction. The authors endeavour towards achieving transformational power of art through narrative excellence and societal change. They question regarding personal and collective identities. However, Cervantes gives a panoramic view of Spain's transition from feudal system to trade and commerce whereas Rushdie focal point is on a particular group like the Indian immigrants in an America which he depicts as an evenly inane, racist, obsessed with consumption and drenched in opioid.

The disparity in point of views is manifested in Rushdie's handling of characters drawn from his own creative sources. This is evident from his choice of characters. Don Quixote's beloved Dulcinea is a fantasy, but enthused by a neighbourhood- farm girl, which is nevertheless a fabrication of his imagination. Salma R., in contrast, is an addict and a manipulator who at first sees Quichotte as an eccentric personality; then as a supplier of drugs; and finally escapes a collapsing world. Similarly, Cervantes' Sancho Panza is a down-to-earth rustic who, in spite of nurturing certain fantasies, is more concerned with a good meal than with his master's utopian yearnings. His pragmatism and shrewdness contrast often having great comic effect embedded with Don Quixote's idealism. He is a lovable character, unlike Quichotte's ridiculous, insensitive, irritating teenage son, Sancho.

In Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, the unreliable narrator's allusions to multiple authorial sources and conflicting narratives raise issues about textual authenticity and authority. In *Quichotte*, Rushdie chisels these questions quite successfully. However, his real philosophical-literary concern seems to be the relationship between author and character.

In the wake of globalization, *Quichotte* forms cultural forms of expression which have become increasingly detached from their places of origin, circulating in a hyper-domain of culture where there is no real difference anymore between indigenous and foreign, near and far, the familiar and the exotic. Diverse cultural contents are brought together side by side, like the fusion food that makes free use of all that the hypercultural pool of spices, ingredients and ways of preparing food has to offer. Culture is becoming un-bound, un-restricted, un-ravelled: a hyperculture. It is a profoundly rhizomatic culture of intense hybridization, fusion and co-appropriation. Hypercultural tourists travel in the hyperspace of events, a space of cultural sightseeing. They experience culture as cul-tour.

Holly (2019) <sup>[9]</sup> opines on the novel that it is:

...many things beyond just a Don Quixote retelling. It's a satire on our contemporary

fake-news, post-truth, Trumpian cultural moment, where the concept of reality itself is coming

apart. It's a sci-fi novel, a spy novel, a road trip novel, a work of magical realism. It's a climate

change parable, and an immigrant story in an era of anti-immigration feeling. It's a love story that

turns into a family drama. It's a fast-spinning postmodern double Catherine wheel –

impossible not to be dazzled by, but also making a lot of choking smoke.

(independent.co.uk)

The multiplicity of narrative paradigms is apparent in the novel. However, the presentation of the series of anecdotes related to the protagonist is highly inventive. In this context, says Matthew Strecher (1999) <sup>[3]</sup> defines narratives like *Quichotte* are, "what happens when a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded by something too strange to believe." The novel's protagonist writer Sam DuChamp has been compared to Cide Hamete Benengeli, a fictional Arab writer whose manuscripts Cervantes claimed to translate the majority of Don Quixote from as a metafictional trick to give a greater credibility to the text. In *Quichotte*, Ismail



Smile's obsession with Salma R and his subsequent adoption of the pseudonym "Quichotte" parallel that of Alonso Quijano, the fictional hidalgo who renames himself "Don Quixote" after falling into madness.

### Conclusion

Right from the beginning, Rushdie's novels mostly fantasize the Indian history, politics, religion and postcolonial issues as the narrative contexts. But, *Quichotte* is based in America. In terms of textual configuration, the novel no doubt focuses on the components of intertextuality and magic realism with some Indian references. But, thematically, it focuses on mass media concerns, climate change, the opioid crisis, pharmaceutical scenarios, and post-truth political culture in America. In addition, it seems that from the tradition of writing narratives based on the tenets of the authorial notion of hyperculture is a completely new concept because it fantasizes both fictional and virtual worlds with a blend of fictional as well as virtual intelligence. Rushdie continues to be a postmodern experimentalist creating both cyberspace and virtual tour as an attempt to explore his new horizons of imaginary homelands. Rushdie in his interview (You Tube 13-Nov-2019) hints that as an ostensible author of *Quichotte*, he attempts to make it a deeply weird work forging Don Quixote relating to the modern junk culture, transforming his personal experience by making the lady protagonist Salma one consonant less than his name; and going beyond the traditional romantic flavour of most of the novels, almost giving a damp taste to the narrative by looking at the world from different weird angles.

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