

From Simulacrum to Phenomenon: the Status of Art in the Contemporary World

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Abstract

In Fury, the story of a retired historian of idea that turns into a dollmaker and writer, Salman Rushdie takes up the mythical story of Pygmalion and Galathea and adapts it to the changing environment of the contemporary globalized world. Threatened by the mechanization of the human, the artist is forced to choose between exerting/resuming control over his creation or becoming prey to the Furies (symbols of his repressed traumas and frustrations). The first option is discarded, as the creator is envisaged as granting freedom to his creatures. The dilemma is solved when art is reconceptualized as moving from representation to simulacrum (in the Delleuzian sense) and given new meanings by the possibilities of the new electronic media, which abolishes the traditional linearity of the story for a simultaneity of multiple story lines. The artist learns to give up control over his production, as what really matters is the ongoing process of creation taking place in the "ocean of memory, imagination and dreams."

Keywords: *Salman Rushdie, Creation, Simulacrum, Phenomenon, Pygmalion Effect.*

Introduction

The distinction between mythos and logos stands at the basis of our technological civilization and the development of science. Ever since Plato logos was equated with truth, certainty and light, whereas mythos has enjoyed the precarious status of all ambiguities: neither true nor false, mythos was excluded from the proper domain of philosophical and later scientific thought and relegated to the lower realms of persuasion by appealing to the senses or the passions.

An outcast of philosophy and reason, Mythos has found its home in literature, which thrives on ambiguities of all kinds. The more science and reason progressed, literature and the arts witnessed an intense resurgence of mythos- to the extent that modern and post-modern literature can be adequately described as

mere re-visitations of ancient myths, just as philosophy was said to be only footnotes to Plato.

By the ambiguity that lies at its very heart, myth has proven to be the favourite framework for postcolonial writers that have exploited its openness and its loose structures to give voice to alternative counter-hegemonic histories or have used it to reflect the oral dimensions of their autochthonous cultures. Structuralist anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss contended that the function of myth is “to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction”¹ – and thus mythos can evade the hierarchical model of binary oppositions that engenders oppression and exploitation which formed the basis of Western imperialist policies. By virtue of its non-exclusiveness (McLuhan observes that myth does not exclude any aspect of experience, as in myth all the levels of signification are simultaneous),² myth offers postcolonial writers the chance to unearth or recover the forgotten histories of peoples and social categories that were wiped out, oppressed or silenced during centuries of Western colonization.

Fury: a reworking of the Pygmalion myth

Salman Rushdie, a prolific Indian-British postcolonial writer has used both local and Western myth and mythology in his novels. His use of myth is always finely tuned to the necessities of the story: in *The Satanic Verses*, for instance, the Western myth of Lucifer falling from the sky is employed to reflect on how immigrants are perceived by their host cultures, while the mythology of pre-Islamic Arabia becomes the critical lens through which the meanings of Islam are re-evaluated. Similarly, in *Midnight's Children*, Indian mythology serves as an alternative framework for narrating Indian history from an indigenous perspective.

Fury, a much later novel, takes up the Pygmalion-Galathea story in order to comment upon the condition of the writer in the contemporary globalized world. Actually, the mythological cocktail that spawns the novel is more complex, as the Pygmalion-Galathea story is accompanied by the recurring motif of the Erinyes or the Furies, the goddesses of retribution, as well as by allusions to canonical works such as *Macbeth* or *Frankenstein*, which have generated some of the most enduring myths of modernity.

The protagonist of the novel, Malik Solanka is a somewhat elderly academic Pygmalion, who falls in love with miniature dolls after a visit to the Amsterdam

¹ Claude Levi Strauss, “The Structural Study of Myth,” in *Structural Anthropology*, Vol. 1 (New York: Basic, 1963), 224.

² Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), 72.

Rijksmuseum. His enthusiasm is equally sparked by the complexity of details that the Dutch dolls and doll's houses exhibit as well as by an underlying dissatisfaction with the "narrowness, infighting and ultimate provincialism"³ of academic life which is looked at critically, as another cog in the machine. In a bout of despair and under a sudden impulse to give in to the creative drive that academic life no longer encouraged, he gives birth to Little Brain, a doll with a narrative and a philosophic personality, who challenges the prevailing mentality of the day. Solanka's psychic, emotional and intellectual investment in Little Brain is total- and this is the reason why the subsequent subversion of the doll's character by the media will give birth to sudden and unexplainable bouts of anger. She is both an expression of Solanka's anima (in Jungian terms) and an externalization of his critical attitude towards the altered intellectual climate of academia, which gives in to the imperatives of globalizing capitalism. If the domain of culture was traditionally one in which resistance to the mainstream ideology could still be expressed, global capitalism takes it over and transforms it into an industry that becomes as repressive as ideology: "The industry of culture would in the coming decades replace that of ideology, becoming «primary» in the way that economics used to be, and spawn a whole new nomenclature of cultural commissars, a new breed of apparatchiks engaged in great ministries of definition, exclusion, revision and persecution."⁴ As simultaneously an expression of Solanka's unconscious feminine psychological qualities and his conscious critique of the contemporary subversion of the meanings of culture by global capitalism, the doll is so intimately linked to Solanka that she becomes a kind of magical voodoo doll- whatever happens to Little Brain will have consequences for Solanka as well. She becomes "by the alchemy of art,"⁵ which transforms Self into Other and Other into Self, an image of Solanka himself. The relationship between him and the doll is one of magical correspondence, as she will give voice to his repressed revolutionary ideas: "Little Brain was smart, sassy, unafraid, genuinely interested in the deep information, in the getting of good quality wisdom; not so much a disciple as an agent provocateur with a time machine, she goaded the great minds of the ages into surprising revelations."⁶

In the Greek story of Pygmalion and Galathea, the sculptor, disappointed with women, fashions for himself an adequate object of desire, whom, with the help of Aphrodite (the personification of love) brings to life with a kiss. This is a

³ Salman Rushdie, *Fury* (London: Vintage, 2002), 14.

⁴ Rushdie, *Fury*, 24.

⁵ *Ibidem*, 16.

⁶ *Ibidem*, 17.

typical creation myth that rests on the underlying patriarchal notion of woman as passive, submissive and totally responsive to the male's needs. The male fantasy par excellence of the perfect woman. In *Fury*, the relationship between Solanka and Little Brain is more than one way communication between the creator who gives life to his creation, and the creation which fulfills his desire. Rushdie compares this kind of relation to that of a marionettist to his puppets; in contrast, Little Brain exceeds the role of the passive disciple that has been ascribed to her by the tradition and turns into "an agent provocateur". Of course, the Jewish-Christian undertones of the creation of man in the likeness of God, endowed with freedom, cannot be neglected. The relationship between Creator and creation is envisaged as a reciprocal one, the creation act manifesting its effect on both Creator⁷ and creation- as a result of the Creator's resolution to "retire from the post of divine marionettist,"⁸ cutting the strings that keep the created attached to himself.

The motif of the creature endowed with freedom of choice by its creator is resumed in the story of Akasz Kronos and the Puppet Kings on the Rijk planet, Solanka's second creative attempt. In this story Akasz Kronos created an army of cyborgs, the Puppet Kings, out of the egotistical desire to "guarantee nobody's survival or fortune but his own."⁹ Yet in spite of his self-serving opportunism, he grants his creature a certain degree of independence, in order to see "how these new life-forms resolved the battle that rages within all sentient creatures, between light and dark, heart and mind, spirit and machine." Endowing his cyborgs with a system of six values: lightness, quickness, exactitude, visibility, multiplicity and consistency, he embeds dual definitions of these values into the cyborgs' default programmes, thus allowing them the very human choice between good and evil. The possibility of freedom is thus conceived as part of a system of non-absolute values, which can be read either in a positive or a negative key, thus allowing for the specific human task of contextualization:

⁷ This reworking of the Pygmalion Galathea story into a two-way relationship between the Creator and his creation may be interpreted, of course, in the light of autobiographical detail, as an echo of Rushdie's own experience after the publication of *The Satanic Verses*. After the book was publicly burned in Bedford by a group of Muslim fanatics and ayatollah Khomeini pronounced a fatwa on Rushdie calling for his death, his life changed radically. He was forced to go into hiding and live under close police protection for more than 10 years. His marriage to the novelist Marianne Higgins was abruptly terminated; one of the most influential books of the 20th century, *The Satanic Verses* changed not only its author's life, but also those of its translators (the Japanese translator of the book was murdered, the Norwegian one only injured) or its public defenders (two Islamic officials that spoke in favour of the book were murdered).

⁸ Rushdie, *Fury*, 17.

⁹ *Ibidem*, 161.

Thus “lightness” might be defined as “doing lightly what is in reality a heavy duty”, that is to say, grace; but it might also be “treating frivolously what is serious”, or even “making light of what is grave”, that is amorality. And “quickness” could be “doing swiftly what is necessary”, in other words, efficiency: however, if the emphasis were to be placed on the second part of that phrase, a kind of ruthlessness would result. “Exactitude” could tend towards “precision” or “tyranny”, “visibility” might be “clarity of action” or “attention-seeking”, “multiplicity” was capable of being both “open-mindedness” and “duplicity” and “consistency”, the most important of the six, could mean either “trustworthiness” or “obsessiveness.”¹⁰

The ambiguity and the need for contextualization that lies at the heart of this ethical system make freedom both possible and necessary. The story of Akasz Kronos and the Puppet Kings on the Rijk planet is a sort of postmodernist allegory of humanity’s progressive liberation from its master narratives (the grand narratives of Religion, History, the State, the Sovereign Self, etc.) At first Kronos’ loyal subjects, the cyborgs learn in the course of time and after many successive experiences “to modify their own system without Kronos’ help.”¹¹ This lends them “a new sense of individual worth, even of “rights”.¹² An account of resistance of the cyborgs to the successive “interpellations” of Kronos’ ideological and repressive apparatuses ensues, under the Darwinian slogan of “Let the Fittest Survive”.

Redefining the relationship between the creator and creation

The reinterpretation of the Pygmalion- Galathea myth that Rushdie’s novel puts forth throws light on the signification of creation and on the relationship between the creator and its creation/creature. On the whole the novel is structured like a mise-en-abyme of the creation process: the story of Akasz Kronos and the Puppet Kings is an allegory and a comment on the creation of Little Brain and her subsequent liberation from its master; at the same time Solanka comes gradually and increasingly to resemble his protagonist Akasz Kronos, while the story of the cyborgs’ liberation is appropriated by a revolutionary Che Guevara figure, who turns fiction into reality in his Republic of Filbistan (Free Indian Liliput-Blefuscu). The myth is able to provide an integrative framework for all the different levels of the novel, which reflect on one another ad infinitum, like a row

¹⁰ Rushdie, *Fury*, 164.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, 165.

¹² *Ibidem*, 166.

of parallel mirrors. The real and the virtual worlds exist in a relation of reciprocity and interdependence, each of them acting on the other and being acted on in its turn. Thus, for instance, if Akasz Kronos creates his cyborgs to ensure his personal survival, the same holds true for Kronos' own creator – Solanka creates Kronos and his Puppet Kings in an attempt to come to terms with the subversion of his earliest creation, Little Brain. And just as Kronos' cyborgs fight their creator back and establish their own version of reality, the fictional story created by Solanka is appropriated by reality and turned into a real revolution. Reality fights Solanka back – during a journey to the Republic of Filbistan (a translation of his virtual story) he is taken prisoner and his girlfriend dies in the attempt to save the revolution.

This second trauma is a re-enactment of the tragedy that triggered Solanka's first murderous impulse, led to the break-up of his marriage and brought about his irascible temper and the bouts of sudden anger during which he loses all consciousness of himself. The Erynies, the goddesses of retaliation that haunt his present life come from a past of which he has lost all awareness. There is a secret that lies buried in his unconscious, and both his creation of Little Brain and the story of Akasz Kronos are attempt to draw the hidden trauma to light. Creation is thus equated with heightened consciousness – as in *The Ground beneath Her Feet*, where the trope of katabasis (the descent into Hell) becomes one of the metaphors of creation, creativity is a practice that requires a descent into a personal Hell / unconscious, whose traumatic content is then translated into art. Rushdie often writes about art as alchemy or the philosopher's stone: it is the means by which each thing can be translated into its opposite. By virtue of art's transformative power traumas can be healed- but the reverse can also happen, and evil, followed by the vindictive Furies, may be brought about into the world.

The childhood trauma that prompted an aging academic to create dolls is revealed to the reader only towards the end of the novel, when it transpires that a fatherless Malik had been repeatedly abused and “dollified” (dressed up as a girl) by his step-father. Although carefully hidden, this incident is responsible for his failed relationships with women. All Solanka's relationships end violently and abruptly because he fails to acknowledge the traumatic event: “his women [...] dropped their defenses and relaxed into all the good stuff, and never saw the hidden twisting in him [...] until the day he snapped and the alien burst out of his stomach, baring multiple rows of teeth.”¹³ The adult represses the unpleasant content of the childhood memory, yet this returns to haunt him in the form of what

¹³ Rushdie, *Fury*, 30.

Freud called the “unheimlich” – the strange which at the same time vaguely familiar. In Amsterdam, Solanka haunts the Rijkmuseum for days on end until he decides to construct microcosms of his own, peopled with dolls. The puppeteer’s sense of control over his puppets helps him temporarily to deal with the content of the repressed memory – until the character of Little Brain, his favourite doll, is taken over and subverted by the media. Disillusioned with the way his creature of critical imagination had turned into a mainstream figure and monster of celebrity, Solanka asks his wife to send all the Little Brain figures away from their home and then one night he finds himself holding a knife over the sleeping bodies of his wife and child. Then he decides to flee to New York to lose himself among the teeming multitudes of a city that “boiled with money.”¹⁴ By losing control over his creation of Little Brain, Solanka loses control over that part of himself that had managed to silence the childhood trauma. The bouts of fury that seize Solanka, the Erynies that haunt his every step are symbols of the intermittent eruptions of the traumatic memory, which fights for a way to resurface. When he finally remembers and decides to share the memory with his new girlfriend Neela, the Furies (artfully disguised under the shape of a “great black bird” reminiscent of Poe’s Raven) will disappear: “Solanka understood that his own cure, his recovery from his rare condition, was complete. The goddesses of wrath had departed; their hold over him was broken at last.”¹⁵

The creative impulse is thus linked to the problem of evil, – first of all, art is understood as a specific way of dealing with inherent traumatic aspects of life. Secondly, creation, as a non-absolute value system that remains open to different readings and contextualizations can itself be used to engender evil. If the relationship between the creator and its creation acquires certain religious undertones (echoing both Christian and Muslim myths of the creation of Adam and his endowment with free will), the act of creation itself is regarded as a complete manifestation of our humanity. When Solanka started to carve out his clay or wooden figurines “he thought of them as people. When he was bringing them into being, they were as real to him as anyone else he knew. Once he had created them, however, once he knew their stories, he was happy to let them go their own way.”¹⁶ Once outside the mind and the control of their creator, the creatures fall prey to the evils of the world. The greatest of these evils, is, in Solanka’s opinion, the mechanization of the human by the proliferating industries

¹⁴ Rushdie, *Fury*, 3.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, 219.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 95.

of global capitalism. Whereas before the Self was regulated only by institutions like the state, the education system and the church, the advent of neo-liberalism gave rise to a whole new knowledge/power system devised to control and regulate selfhood:

Here at the outset of the third millennium, medication was really available to deal with the irruption into the adult self of the outrageous and the inchoate. [...] every good American knew the names of half a dozen effective mood-management medicaments. [...] All around him the American self was reconceiving itself in mechanical terms, but everywhere running out of control. An industry of controllers [...] had arisen to deal with its problems of performance. Redefinition was this industry's mode of operation. Unhappiness was redefined as physical unfitness, despair as a question of good spinal alignment. Happiness was better food, wiser furniture orientation, deeper breathing technique.¹⁷

Little Brain, his philosophic doll, falls prey to this mechanization and standardization and turns from the philosophic doll "able to hold her own with Erasmus and Schopenhauer" that Solanka had created out "of his best self and purest endeavour" into a "creature of the entertainment microverse", with "the intellect of a slightly over-average chimpanzee."¹⁸ Although Solanka is deeply affected by this transformation, so affected that it ruins his marriage and family life, he does not try to correct himself the second time, when he creates Akasz Kronos and the Puppet Kings. He makes the same mistake that he did with Little Brain, allowing his creations the freedom to be manipulated, or transformed, by themselves or by others. Finally, by granting his creations freedom, he opens himself to the wounds that they will inflict on him: the break-up of his marriage, the murder of his girlfriend Neela.

From simulacrum to phenomenon

Rushdie's version of the Pygmalion story is intended as a comment on the status of art in a globalized world. The myth is there to point to the origin of art (born as an externalization of the artist's desires, ideals, value systems) as well as attempt a redefinition of its significance for the contemporary globalized world. In the beginning, Solanka remarks, "the doll was not a thing in itself but a representation."¹⁹ This was of course the first theory of art as representation of an idea outlined by Plato. The relation between the realm of truth/reality and art was a

¹⁷ Rushdie, *Fury*, 183.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 98.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 73.

hierarchical one, as art imitated the original by producing copies. Yet Plato operated a distinction between the creation of likenesses (eikons) and semblances or phantasms (simulacra). The simulacrum appears as a perversion of the original or the model- a false likeness which corrupts the purity of truth. After the character of Little Brain is appropriated and subverted by the media, Solanka notes with despair that “This was not the life he had imagined for her. This had nothing to do with the back story he had created for his life and joy. This L.B. was an impostor, with the wrong history, the wrong dialogue, the wrong personality, the wrong wardrobe, the wrong brain.”²⁰ From a faithful copy of Solanka’s innermost thoughts and desire, from an expression of his anima, Little Brain turns into a simulacrum- in the Platonic sense. Nevertheless, her worldwide success that defies the barriers of “language, race and class”, the sheer number of her admirers (a success that becomes possible only in the globalized world characterized by the space-time compression) has an unexpected consequence: “Little Brain [...] was no longer a simulacrum. She was a phenomenon. The fairy’s wand had touched her, and she was real.”²¹ Although denying the original intention of her creator, Little Brain becomes a symbol for democratization and the erasing of boundaries and hierarchies that is also a part of the process of globalization. From a simulacrum in the Platonic sense, she become a simulacrum in the terms of Gilles Deleuze:

The simulacrum is not a degraded copy. It harbors a positive power which denies the original and the copy, the model and the reproduction. At least two divergent series are internalized in the simulacrum- neither can be assigned as the original, neither as the copy... There is no longer any privileged point of view except that of the object common to all points of view. There is no possible hierarchy, no second, no third... The same and the similar no longer have an essence except as simulated, that is as expressing the functioning of the simulacrum.²²

The conditions of global neoliberal capitalism are beneficial for the liberation of art from the tyranny of its creator and from the hierarchies of representation. Art as simulation, a parallel virtual world no longer serving the needs of the real is the nightmare of the artist. Solanka shudders with horror at his remembrance of the final scene of the movie *Solaris*.²³

At the end of the science fiction film *Solaris*, the story of an ocean covered planet that functions as a single giant brain, can read men’s minds and make their

²⁰ Rushdie, *Fury*, 98.

²¹ *Ibidem*, 98.

²² Gilles Deleuze, “Plato and the Simulacrum,” *October*, No. 27 Winter (1983), 53.

²³ *Solaris* was directed by the Russian movie-maker Andrei Tarkovsky, being inspired by the eponymous novel of the Polish science-fiction writer Stanislas Lem.

dreams come true, the spaceman-hero is back home at last, on the porch of his long-lost Russian dacha, with his children running joyfully around and his beautiful dead wife alive again at his side. As the camera pulls back, endlessly, impossibly, we see that the dacha is on a tiny island set in the great ocean of Solaris: a delusion, or perhaps a deeper truth than the truth.²⁴

The deeper truth that Solanka the creator has to face is that about the significance of creation. While in the case of Little Brain he reified his creation and wanted to immortalize it in the role that he had originally assigned for it, with Akasz Kronos and the Puppet Kings he learns that what really matters is the creative potential itself whose image is the “mighty seductive ocean of memory, imagination and dream, where nothing dies”, the ocean of endless simulation: “Fiction had him in his grip, and the figurine themselves began to feel secondary: not ends in themselves, but means.”²⁵ The story taken on a new life when it becomes translated into an online game on the Puppet Kings website. Solanka becomes entranced by the new experience of time that online gaming affords “Until the advent of hyperlinks, only God had been able to see simultaneously into past, present and future alike; human beings were imprisoned into the calendar of their days.”²⁶ Moreover, the fact that the story is transformed into an open-ended project subject to infinite transmutations of the “world’s storehouse of old stories and ancient histories” feels like his “imagination was fed from a thousand streams. It began to swell and grow.”²⁷

The difference between the positive transformation of the Puppet Kings into a long-term electronic project with infinite possibilities and the negative transformation of the Little Brain when appropriated by the media can of course be explained by the specific features of the two medias. While television offers ideologically charged representations of life which distort and aim at controlling the masses, electronic space and the Internet constitute a more democratic space where a variety of opinions can interact and coexist. Solanka stands in awe at the new possibilities offered by the “brave new electronic world, [...] with its formal preference for lateral leaps and its relative uninterest in linear progression, a bias that had already bred in its users a greater interest in variation than in chronology.”²⁸ Unlike television, which acts as a kind of visual logos aiming to control knowledge production, electronic space may be compared to a mythical

²⁴ Rushdie, *Fury*, 220.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, 186.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, 187.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, 191.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, 186.

space which harbours simultaneously different levels of significance. It is both this magical mythical space and changed relationship between the artist and the artefact that give art the status of a phenomenon in the contemporary globalized world.

Conclusion

In *Fury*, Salman Rushdie takes up the ancient story of Pygmalion and Galathea and adapts it to the changing environment of the contemporary globalized world. Threatened by the mechanization of the human, the artist has to choose between resuming control over his creation or becoming prey to the fury and frustration that eat him up. The first option is discarded, as the creator is envisaged as granting freedom to his creatures. The dilemma is solved when art is reconceptualized as moving from representation to simulacrum (in the Delleuzian sense) and given new meanings by the possibilities of the new electronic media, which abolishes the traditional linearity of the story for a simultaneity of multiple story lines. The artist learns to give up control over his production, as what really matters is the ongoing process of creation taking place in the “ocean of memory, imagination and dreams.”

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