

## Two Cases of *Roman-monde*: Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Édouard Glissant's *Tout-monde*

Mattia Bonasia  
La Sapienza Università di Roma  
(Italia)

### **Abstract:**

L'exposé souhaite comparer les romans *Tout-monde* (1993) de Édouard Glissant (1922-2011) et *Midnight's Children* (1981) de Salman Rushdie (1947- ) en les lisant comme cases d'étude du « roman-monde » théorisé par le même Glissant dans *Poétique de la Relation* (1990), c'est-à-dire comme la réécriture « créolisée » de la structure discursive du colonisateur.

La migration de la propre terre d'origine (Martinique et Inde) vers la terre du colonisateur (France et Angleterre) fait percevoir aux deux écrivains ses natures de « hommes-traduits », c'est-à-dire de sujets entre-deux cultures et histoires. Dans les deux romans cette expérience permet la déconstruction de l'auctorialité occidentale vers la création d'un « auteur-rhizome » : un « pacotilleur » d'une « mer d'histoires » qui se démultiplie dans des différentes « identités-relation » dialoguant dans le texte. Il en découle une structure romanesque qui nie la logique narrative occidentale cause-effet, s'appuyant sur le retour « à spirale » de motifs thématiques et formels, sur la déconstruction du canon grâce à l'hybridation des sources et des genres littéraires à la fois européens, américaines (Glissant) et orientales (Rushdie), et surtout sur la polyphonie des voix et des langues. En fait la langue du colonisateur (français et anglais) ne vient pas abandonnée (comme dans autres expériences postcoloniales), en revanche elle est « créolisée » à travers des processus d'oralisation et de pluralisation à partir du créole, de l'italien e de l'anglais (Glissant), du dialecte de Bombay, de l'urdu et de l'arabe (Rushdie).

**Keywords:** Édouard Glissant, Salman Rushdie, Roman-monde, *Midnight's Children*, *Tout-monde*

In the following paper I will compare two major twentieth-century novels: Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and Édouard Glissant's *Tout-monde* (1993). They are two hybrid, transcultural works of literature: written in French and English yet not confined to their national canons. At the same time, they struggle against the ghettoization in Commonwealth's (Rushdie) and Francophonie's (Glissant) literary fields. In fact, they cross borders starting from their condition: Glissant and Rushdie are two expatriated writers that imagine their homecomings.

As Silvia Albertazzi points out (2013) both novels can be studied through the lenses of Glissant's *roman-monde* theory. According to the author, the novel is the discursive form of colonialism, the political decolonization of the world is subject to the revolution of the imagination. An anti-colonial novel can't respect the classic literary genres' partition (Glissant, 2010). The *roman-monde* is the aesthetic translation of *Poétique de la Relation* (1990), thus the weaving of a multi-discursive texture that highlights the *lieux communs* between different cultures<sup>1</sup>.

First and foremost, it is useful to understand the authors' choice to write in English and French instead of Creole or Urdu (or Hindi). In his essay *Influence* (included in *Step Across This Line*, 2002) Rushdie writes about the Indian literary critics' hostility towards Anglo-Indian writers. They would be children of world's "Coca-Colonisation" (Rushdie, 2002): rootless authors without a true interest in the Subcontinent's working class. In a similar way, Glissant criticizes the *Éloge de la créolité* (1989) group (Raphael Confiant, Patrick Chamoiseau). According to the writer, *créolité* is an essentialist concept bound to Aimé Césaire's *négritude*, while the worldly creolization implies a hybrid conception of culture (Glissant, 1990). The famous "j'écris en présence de toutes les langues du monde" (Glissant, 1997) doesn't mean to juxtapose the biggest number of languages in our own discourse, but to defend the interior multilingualism of every language. Therefore, "créoliser le français" stands for the *oralisation* of the dominant language, the translation of the characteristics of orality into writing (circular repetition, doublings, diversified comebacks to our speech).

Two types of creole coexist within *Tout-monde*. The single-word one which emerges as a pre-logical cry and the one which deconstructs the occi-

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<sup>1</sup> The comparative study of *roman-monde*'s structures is the focus of my PhD thesis, in this paper I will concentrate on the multilingualism and the relational identity.

dental novel's monologic into a polyphony. The narrator's speech is alternated with different characters that take the floor preserving their orality.

In *Influence*, Rushdie explains how the English that he uses is not comparable to the one of England's native speakers. His language is structured by Hindi-Urdu, by that: "other music, the rhythms, patterns, and habits of thought and metaphor of my Indian tongues" (Rushdie, 2002). His "Hindlinglish" arises from the mutual translation between the two languages, between orality and writing<sup>1</sup>. In fact, *Midnight's Children* is presented as the tale that the protagonist tells Padma whilst he's writing it. According to Andrew Teverson (2008) this procedure is functional to the clarification of the placement of the subject's identity and language. By doing so, Rushdie wants to prove that literature is not an unhistorical event, but a network structured in social and cultural exchange. Moreover, whenever the listener-Padma vanishes, the narrator-Saleem struggles: the book is created by the open interaction between the writer and the public.

*Midnight's Children's* English is not only hybridized with Hindi's orality, but also with the American slang talked by the character of Evie Burns and Sonny. As Evie is American, Sonnie is a Bombay Native, so his hybrid language is justifiable only through the influence of American culture in India through advertising and television. Finally, the two become lovers, as if it were a linguistic assimilation.

As Glissant points out in *Tout-monde*, language is a "parcours à étapes", made by the various tongues of our personal history (Glissant, 1993). Actually, in *Tout-monde's* first chapter (*Banians*, settled in Vernazza, Liguria, Italy) personal, collective and transnational histories are hybridized through multilingualism. Here, Glissant's personal memories are mingled with the history of the conquest of America (Christopher Columbus was born in Genova, Liguria, Italy), as Italian gets mixed with French. We find morpho-syntactic adaptations ("les piazzettas entre les rideaux de pailles"), insertions of local words ("les parties de scopa et de tresette"; "on pouvait sprinter, staccare"; "ils menaient leur passeggiata sur la jetée"), mispronunciations ("scala cuaranta"; "son amarro d'avant dîner"), puns ("Isole Tremiti, Tremiti isolée").

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper I have decided not to focus on the lexical and grammar particularities of the Indian English (I study it in my PhD thesis), but to give importance to other major orality issues in *Midnight's Children*.

In both novels, the registers' plurality is translated also into a transcultural multiplicity of references. I would like to suggest the expression "transcultural intertextuality" to define the discursive weave that structures both *Tout-monde* and *Midnight's Children*. Here I shall limit my dissertation only to a brief summary. *Tout-monde's* first chapter opens with a quote from Cyrano de Bergerac's *Histoire comique des états et des Empires de la Lune*, but other chapters are opened with oral (or creole) quotes, like "parole d'Apocal". Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon's postcolonial tradition relates Deleuze and Guattari's *Mille plateaux* (1980), Saint-John Perse, but also the Egyptian *Livre des morts*. Finally, we can find also a transmedial tendency due to references to Sud American visual culture (Matta and Gamarra).

At the same time, in the preface to *Midnight's Children's* 2021 edition Rushdie points both the influence of the European novel's tradition (*Anna Karenina*, *Tristram Shandy*, *Little Dorrit*, *Gargantua et Pantagruel*) and the "modern counterparts of this masterpieces" (Rushdie, 2021): Gunter Grass' *The Tin Drum*, Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Cien Anos de Soledad*. This Occidental layout is hybridized with the Indian epic: the *Mahabharatha*, the *Ramayana*, the *Panchatantra* and, last but not least, *One Thousand and One Nights*. Moreover, the author highlights the influence of Bollywood films concerning the plot and the soundscape (in particular the two songs *Mera Joota Hai Japani* and *Bombay Meri Jaan*).

Multilingualism is not the only stylistic element shared by the two novels. According to Romuald Fonkoua, the linguistic centrality in Glissant's writing is functional to the instauration of a particular subject that creates his own language and affirms his identity status (Fonkoua, 2002). In *Poétique de la Relation* Glissant opposes the concept of identité-relation and single-rooted-identity: "l'identité-relation est donnée dans la trame chaotique de la Relation, et non pas dans la violence cachée de la filiation, est liée non pas à une création du monde, mais au vécu conscient et contradictoire des contacts de cultures" (Glissant, 1990). The relational subject exceeds the migrant or the exiled conditions: he lives in a perpetual *errance enracinée*, that is a wandering having rhizomatic roots. This condition results in a spiral-shaped comeback of the native identity, tilting it and extending it each time.

Glissant's *identité-relation* is comparable to Rushdie's own definition of translated-man in *Imaginary Homelands*:

The word “translation” comes, etymologically, from the Latin for “bearing across”. Having been borne across the world, we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained (Rushdie, 1991).

In the following paragraphs I would like to analyze the literary creation of this *identité-relation* in *Tout-monde* and *Midnight's Children* through the study of the two main characters, Mathieu Béluse and Saleem Sinai, and their relationships with the authorship.

Mathieu Béluse is the protagonist of the majority of Glissant's novels: he is some kind of writer's alter ego, his fictional double. In *Tout-monde* the relationship between Béluse and the author is the creative matrix of chapters “*seuils*” (Genette, 1987). Most of the paratexts are opened by quotes from *Traité du Tout-monde de Mathieu Béluse*, which is included in Glissant's *Traité du Tout-monde*. Significantly, this essay will be published only in 1997, four years after *Tout-monde's* publication. However, Béluse is only one of the characters that translate the author's identity poles throughout the novel. At the end of the chapter *Atala* the reader finds a poet very similar to the young Parisian Glissant, who discusses the unpublished and fortuitously discovered novel *La Tarantule* with his friends:

«À la lanterne en plein boulevard, on a pendu l'oncle Edouard.»  
«Et de fait», faisait observer Maurice d'une petite voix à peine soutenue, «avez-vous noté les analogies de titre avec les romans de Glissant ? L'un a écrit *La Lézarde*, l'autre *La Tarentule*, celui-là *Le Quatrième Siècle*, celui-ci *L'An II*, vous ne trouvez pas ça troublant?» (Glissant, 1993).

The author's name enters in the text through characters' voices. Later, “une romancière qui aimait à fréquenter la poésie” affirms that “Nous écrivons tous comme ça”, leaving the stage to the narrator:

Nous écrivons comme ça. Nous contons ces histoires sempiternellement reprises. L'avion a mélangé les langues, te voici là en présence de toutes les langues du monde, il faudra que tu déboussoles celle que tu pratiques [...]. Le langage est un voyage et voyez qu'il n'a pas

de fin. Les langues sont des étapes, où vous couchez à l'ablation, pour noircir ou blanchir selon qu'il se trouve (Glissant, 1993).

This "we" isn't a generic and impersonal first-person plural. It represents a collectivity that connects the diverse subjects in which the author has deconstructed himself through the creolization of the languages of the tout-monde. Actually, as the language is a journey whose stages are our own languages themselves, the subject is a route, shaped by the relationships with other individuals.

Later, the narrator emphasizes to the reader that:

Remarquez ainsi la multiplication, à partir de Mathieu Béluse : Mathieu, le chroniqueur, le poète, le romancier, sans compter celui o cela-ci qui écrit là en ce moment et qui ne se confond ni avec Mathieu, ce chroniqueur, ce romancier ni ce poète, ils prolifèrent, peut-on dire qu'ils sont un seul divisé en lui-même, ou plusieurs qui se rencontrent en un ? (Glissant, 1993).

At the end of the chapter the poet faces a metamorphosis: he becomes a *déparleur*. According to Dominique Chancé, the *déparleur* is a narrator who rejects the classic novel by replacing individual writing with the voices of many. The aim of this poetic that juxtaposes texts of various status is the recognition of the diversity of all world subjects (Chancé, 2002).

The identification between Béluse and Glissant flows in the novel's end. Béluse comes back to Martinique in order to find his mother's house. His mother, Marie-Euphémie Godard, is obviously Glissant's one. Béluse is attacked and stabbed by criminals, and he is on the verge of death. The narrator does not tell us whether he dies or not. What is concerning at this point is that the event is described in an anti-epic and mundane way, and even more that it coincides with an extreme approach to the origin.

It seems that Glissant wants to tell us that the *tout-monde*, the tourbillon of identities, finds his focal point in the impossibility of touching the origin. The uprooting generates the *errance enracinée*, that leads to multiplicity.

Moving to *Midnight's Children*, it's important to report that Rushdie has always described Saleem Sinai as a simple fictional character. However, the overlaps with his biography are striking (the details of his childhood in Bombay, the displacement to Pakistan...). Anyway, the aim of my research is

not to find out the links between life and work of art, but to analyze the textual elements of this self-rhizomatization. Starting from the incipit, Saleem Sinai presents himself to the reader as a hybrid subject (“I, Saleem Sinai, later variously called Snotnose, Stainface, Baldy, Sniffer, Buddha and even Piece-of-the-Moon”, Rushdie, 1981). As explained in a manifesto-paragraph:

Who what am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I’ve gone which would not have happened if I had not come. Nor am I particularly exceptional in this matter; each “I”, every one of the now-six-hundred-million-plus of us, contains a similar multitude. I repeat for the last time: to understand me, you’ll have to swallow a world (Rushdie, 1981).

Saleem multiplicity is inscribed into his name as it indicates Ibn Sina (a master adept of the Sufi religion), “Sin the moon” (the ancient God of Hadramaut), but also the mount Sinai (place of the divine revelation into the Christian religion). At the same time, the deconstruction of a single-rooted-identity is conducted by the “strange talent to give birth to different parents” (Rushdie, 1981). In fact, Saleem was exchanged with another toddler at the time of his birth, such that his parents are not Ahmed et Amina Sinai, despite the protagonist build with them a system of mental and physical analogies. Moreover, Saleem refers to various cultural fathers who belong to multiple classes and cultures: the Englishman William Methwold, general Zulfikar, the communist Quasim Khan, Wee Willie Winkie (his true biological father). His self-rhizomatization achieves its culminant point in the chapter *All-India Radio*. Here, thanks to his (suppository) telepathy, Saleem enters the minds of various characters (both fictional and historical), as he affirms to “become them”. Like Mathieu Béluse, also Saleem dies at the end of the novel. According to Soren Frank, the cause is his “elephantiasis”, which is the aesthetic effort of embedding India’s multiplicity in him (Frank, 2008). Eventually, there could be a mutual proportion between the novel and the narrator: the more the novel gets closer to its ending, the more Saleem approaches his annihilation. According to Frank, this process outlines how

life is translated into the book and how identity is produced as a work of art (Frank, 2008).

However, if “*tout le monde se créolise*” (Glissant, 1990), the writer can’t be the only rhizomatic identity in the novel.

Saleem’s destiny (as he repeats over and over again) is strictly related to India’s:

I was born in the city of Bombay... once upon a time. No, that won’t do, there’s no getting away from the date: I was born in Doctor Narlikar’s Nursing Home on August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1947. And the time? The time matters, too. Well then: at night. No, it’s important to be more... On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. Clock-hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came. Oh, spell it out: at the precise instant of India’s arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world [...].

I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country. (Rushdie, 1981).

In this paper I can’t focus on the peculiarities of the process of critical rewriting of the official Indian and English historiography, indeed I’d like to study the representation of the Indian subject as a transcultural one. As shown by Rachel Trousdale, Rushdie seems to translate Bombay’s history into Saleem’s family structure, both made by the Portuguese (Trousdale, 2010). The nurse Mary Pereira is responsible for the toddlers’ exchange, and at the end of the story she reappears with the name of Mrs. Braganza (inspired by Catherine of Braganza, who posed Bombay under British law). However, all characters display a multiplicity of names and identities. Saleem’s grandfather (the protagonist of the book’s first part) is Aadam Aziz, Doctor Sahib, Doctor Aziz, “my grandfather” as well. At the beginning, Saleem’s grandmother, Naseem Aziz, is loved in fragments by Aziz, but after the reunification of the parts of her body she becomes Reverend Mother. Saleem’s mother is Mumtaz during her engagement with the poet Nadir Khan (who will become the communist Quasim Khan for his part), to become Amina Sinai after marrying Ahmed Sinai. Even Ahmed becomes a white man at some stage (“like the majority of Indian businessmen”, Saleem tells us ironically), and Saleem’s childhood friend Cyrus-the-Great becomes the guru Lord Koshro. We could continue this list for another two pages, but the



notable point is that the character's identity is both local et global, Indian and occidental, just as in *Tout-monde*.

In *Tout-monde*'s penultimate chapter, Mathieu Béluse and Glissant meet Jorge de Rocamarron. He is related to Georges de Rochebrune, a Martinican freedman protagonist of the second chapter, *L'eau du volcan*. In this chapter, settled in nineteenth-century Martinique, George talks frankly with the *békés* (the white colons living in the Antilles) Laroche and Senglis. During this conversation the reader finds out that Georges is the child of an affair between Laroche and a black slave, therefore he exemplifies the Martinican *métissage* and the creole identity. However, because the creole is only a model of worldly creolization, Rochebrune is only the first *métis* of a genealogy which cross the continents during the decades, creolizing nationalities and cultures, arriving to Rocamarron. His name is the Spanish translation of Rochebrune, which for its part was the hybrid version of Laroche (the *béké's* surname is merged with the adjective *brune*, brown). According to Christian Uwe the name's translation reveals that of identities' as well as the incoherence of the affirmation of a single-rooted culture (Uwe, 2017).

In conclusion, I hope to have shown the possible relationships between Glissant and Rushdie's novels and poetics. This short paper is only a small part of a bigger research project, where I study other novels of the two writers but also the ones of Luigi Meneghello<sup>1</sup>. My aim is to demonstrate the scientific validity of the *roman-monde* critical category, showing a network of transnational authors in World Literature's field sharing similar structures and themes despite having no direct contact with each other.

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<sup>1</sup> Luigi Meneghello (1922-2007) was an Italian twentieth-century writer that lived most of his life in England, teaching Italian Studies at the University of Reading. His novels are characterized by the dispatiation poetics, that is the literary creation of a hybrid identity that flows between Italy, Vicenza and England. His writing is generated by a linguistic interplay, a mutual translation between Italian, English and the Venetian dialect. Two of his novels, *Libera nos a malo* (1963) and *I Piccoli Maestri* (1964) have been translated into English (*Deliver Us*, 2011; *The Outlaws*, 1967).

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