A Change of Dominant in Rushdie's Recent Fiction

An analysis of *The Golden House* and *Quichotte*

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1. Introduction

A SHIFT AWAY FROM POSTMODERNISM?

Over the past decades a shift away from postmodernism has been described by various literary critics (Hutcheon 2002, McLaughlin 2012). In this thesis I aim to analyse whether such a shift has taken place in the work of Salman Rushdie. This thesis focuses particularly on typical postmodern topics such as the questioning of the ontological relationship between reality and truth, since Rushdie's style of fantastical writing invites such a focus.

(Literary) Postmodernism is a hard concept to define, since it is an outlook on reality as well as a concomitant style of writing that revels in the possibility of multiple truths. One of its most defining characteristics according to Lyotard is its "incredulity towards metanarrative" (Lyotard 1984, 14). What this means is that postmodernism challenges narratives — such as history and religion — that give meaning to all sort of events and experiences. Most of all, postmodernism challenges the assumption of such narratives that there is a singular truth that can be explained through discourse. Such a explanation of postmodernism might seem similar to a description of modernism. To differentiate the two and ultimately come up with a satisfying definition of postmodernism, I will use McHale's model of the dominant mode (McHale 1987). McHale states that most definitions of postmodernism consist of a list of characteristics, usually in opposition to the characteristics of modernism. While different models of postmodernism can have merit simultaneously, he argues for a unifying factor of these characteristics. What he proposes is an overlapping category of these characteristics: the dominant mode of a certain style. For modernism, this would be the epistemological dominant. Almost all of the themes seen in modernist fiction can be seen through the lens of epistemology. Modernism brings up problems like to what degree one can ever be certain that anyone's view is correct when everyone has a subjective view of the world. In other words, modernism deals with the question of how do we know what we know. In postmodernism, the dominant has shifted away from an epistemological dominant to an ontological

dominant. McHale writes that such a dominant explains the typical characteristics of postmodernism: “the ontological dominant is the principle of systematicity underlying these otherwise heterogeneous catalogues” (McHale 1987, 10). Postmodernism foregrounds questions such as: What can be said to exist? On what level of existence does this exist? What happens when two levels of existence interact? For example, what happens when there is an interaction between the constructed world of a text and the ‘reality’ outside of a text? To which world would we give more credence? These kind of interactions and questions foreground the ontological boundaries of a text.

McHale then addresses the objection that most postmodernist books can still be read from an epistemological viewpoint. McHale agrees, but responds that his point is that the current dominant *foregrounds* a certain perspective:

“it specifies the *order* in which different aspects are to be attended to, so that, although it would be perfectly possible to interrogate a postmodernist text about its epistemological implications, it is more *urgent* to interrogate it about its ontological implications. In postmodernist texts, in other words, epistemology is *backgrounded,* as the price for foregrounding ontology” (11).

Although elements of modernism can be detected in postmodern works, this does not mean that therefore postmodern works should still be grouped under modernism. One can transform elements of a previous style into something new by changing the dominant mode of the text.

This notion is important to this thesis as it will discuss such a switch of dominant. Many theorist have claimed that the period of postmodernism has ended. Hutcheon, for examples, states that postmodernism is a “thing of the past” (Hutcheon 2002, 165), and Rudrum and Stravis's argue in *Supplanting the Postmodern* (2015) that in the 21th century postmodernism has been overthrown. Alber and Bell (2019) notice in theories of what comes after postmodernism that there is a “return to sincerity, realism or ethics” (122). The unwieldy construction of 'what comes after postmodernism' is a testament to the fact that there is not yet a consensus on a name for this kind of writing. Christian Moraru calls it cosmodernism, arguing that the problems of globalisation birthed

a style that foregrounds a global connection between people. Others, such as McLaughlin, call it post-postmodernism, emphasising its relation to postmodernism (McLaughlin 2012). He argues that while writers still use the techniques typical of postmodernism - such as ironic self-reflexivity, intertextuality and questions about representation - the focus is now less on using these devices in an ironic way to show the constructed nature of a text and more about using these devices to reach "a reality outside of language" (McLaughlin 2012, 216). Postmodern critics might argue that this is impossible since such a reality does not exist, yet post-postmodernism seems not to be concerned about that. Albers and Bell summarise McLaughlin's characteristics of writers of post-postmodernists:

- even though they understand that truth is contingent, they try to speak the truth;
- although they acknowledge that all representations are self-referential, they try to represent the real;
- even though they know that the human subject is constructed by discourse, they value the individual;
- and although they know that knowledge is ultimately impossible, they commit to ethical and productive ways of knowing. (Albers and Bell 2019, 122)

While post-postmodernism accepts the construed nature of representations and reality highlighted by postmodernism, it then continues to ask the question how to create the best construction of this reality. The post-postmodernism text acknowledges that it is constructed, but this is no longer of major interest, as by now this is common knowledge. What post-postmodernism addresses is how to make use of this constructed nature of the text, and apply it to have a positive effect on society. In other words, the dominant seems to have shifted from an ontological dominant towards an ethical dominant. No longer content to adopt a nihilistic attitude such as writers like Beckett did, post-postmodern literature is more moralistic, despite the limitations of all sort of representations. Of course every text can be read as an ethical text, but as stated above, the point of the new dominant is that it is now the *primary* frame of reference. Post-postmodernist writers still use devices of postmodernism, but they "do not use these techniques to expose the artificiality of all narratives like

their postmodernist predecessors. Instead, they engage with very specific moral, ethical and/or political issues that they consider to be relevant to the real world" (Albers and Bell 125). These techniques show that post-postmodernism is aware of its limitations, yet there is still a desire for interaction with reality. In this thesis I will analyse four texts by Salman Rushdie to demonstrate that in his work such a shift has taken place.

SALMAN RUSHDIE

Salman Rushdie has been (and continuous to be) an influential writer, in various ways. His novel *Midnight's Children*, which won the 1981 Booker Prize, has been awarded The Booker of Booker Prize twice. The first was in 1993 for the best Booker Prize winner of the previous twenty-five years, and later the novel won again in 2008 for being the best novel of the previous forty years. While no other novels of him have been as critically acclaimed as *Midnight's Children,* Rushdie still is a prolific writer, so far publishing fourteen novels and various non-fiction books and essays.

Nevertheless, a big part of his fame may also stem from the reaction to his novel *The Satanic Verses.* In 1989 the Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran issued a *fatwā*, calling followers of Islam to assassinate Rushdie if in a position to do so. According to Khomeini, *The Satanic Verses* (1988) contained blasphemy against the prophet Mohammed, which under his legislation was punishable by death. Critics have argued that this incident, commonly known as the Rushdie Affair, has been one of the events that precipitated current polarisation and identity politics between Muslim and Western societies, even going as far as to say that before the Rushdie affair elements such as 'the Muslim identity' or 'the Western identity' were not publicly discussed topics before the issuing of the *fatwā* (Asad 1990, Malik 2018).

These events might lead one to think that Rushdie's work is mostly preoccupied with religion, but there is much more to his work than this, as religion is just an element of the topics he deals with in his novel. In fact, Gonzalez writes that *"*the main difficulty with the work of Salman Rushdie is one of categorisation" (Gonzalez 2005, 197). Perhaps the difficulty of such

categorisation is connected to the difficulty of labelling his texts in terms of genre. However, most critics eventually label his work as either postmodernist or post-colonial (Weller 2009, Brouillette 2007). Characteristics typical to Rushdie's work include the use of self-reflexive narrative, the use of magical elements, extensive employment of intertextuality, and a globalist perspective. Considering Rushdie has been a citizen of countries on three different continents (he was born in India, moved to the United Kingdom and currently lives in the United States), his globalist tendencies might not come as a surprise. This might also be the reason for aforementioned difficulties when it comes to the characterisation of his work, since he heavily incorporates stories of both Eastern and Western mythology and also of popular culture of both hemispheres in his work. What potentially complicates his work further is his innovative use of both fantastical and historical elements.

Still, an aspect that returns in all of his novels is a foregrounding of the concept of reality. Rushdie's novels utilise various challenges to normality such as the magic children in *Midnight's Children* or the literal transformation of immigrants into monsters in *The Satanic Verses.* In *Midnight's Children* the sense of reality is disturbed, amongst other techniques, by the coexistence of magical children alongside historical figures such as Indira Gandhi. From a postmodern perspective, this juxtaposition of fantastical and historical elements draws parallels between fiction and history. In *The Satanic Verses*, the idea that the fictional can become reality is discussed alongside religion, exploring the idea that for everyone reality is different, depending on their specific set of beliefs. Very often there are magical incidents in Rushdie's books that challenge the reader to choose between a psychological or a magical explanation. Turning to his most recent novels, both *The Golden House* (2017) and *Quichotte* (2019) are still heavily invested in the exploration of what can be described as real. Both novels are preoccupied with fiction's effect on reality, similar to *The Satanic Verses.* In a period where one man's truth is another man's fake news, it is hardly surprising that this topic continues to be relevant.

My aim in this thesis is to analyse whether in Rushdie's work a shift in dominant has taken place, similar to how Albers, McLaughlin, Vermeulen and more have suggested has happened in contemporary writing. This analysis specifically focusses on the relationship between truth and reality. Therefore the following section discusses the postmodern concept of reality in more detail.

POSTMODERN REALITY

As mentioned before, one of the defining features of postmodernism is its rejection of master narratives. The term rejection is maybe too strong, since it does not exactly deny that master narratives exist, but it does their claim to truth. Postmodernism points out that there is no master narrative that can wholly describe and explain reality. In postmodernist theory, narratives do not describe reality, but *are* in fact that reality, as that what it is supposed to depict does not exist. McHale usefully summarises Berger and Luckmann's notions about the social construct of reality: "Berger and Luckmann regard reality as a kind of collective fiction, constructed and sustained by the processes of socialisation, institutionalisation, and everyday social interaction, especially through the medium of language" (McHale 1987, 37). Therefore our culture may be seen as the product of shared narratives, but this narrative is ultimately based on itself, not on a general truth independent of it.

Because postmodernism views the real as constructed, works of fiction have a different relationship to reality than in for example modernism, since now both reality and art are conceived to be constructed. The line between fiction and reality is therefore blurred, and both influence each other extensively. Postmodern literature often highlights this blurred line. For instance, intertextuality makes the reader realise that the world of the fiction and the their reality apparently share this text. But at the same time the world of the fiction is different from the world of the reader, creating an imbalance between the depicted fiction and the real world. Another device that highlights a postmodern conception of reality is a narrative with high amounts of self-reflexivity.

Because of the preoccupation with reality being constructed through certain thought processes and conceptualisations, postmodern writers add self-reflection to their texts to foreground that their narrative is also construed this way.

Especially important to a discussion of Rushdie's views on reality is the influence of fiction on reality. If reality is constructed by narratives, it follows that narratives have a strong influence on (our conception of) reality. The line between real and unreal is different for everyone, according to McHale: "The external cut of the fictional heterocosm, it appears, is not determined only by fiction's relation to the real world and to other fictional texts, but also by its place among the whole range of other 'unreal' and 'quasi-real' ontologies in a given culture" (McHale 1987, 36). In postmodernism, the use of magical realism is a major example of playing with the idea that what is fictional in one's reality is not so in another's. The idea that reality is strongly influenced by one's belief system, is very much present in for example *The Satanic Verses*. Of course, this idea is nothing new in literary works. Concerns about the influence of fiction go back to the eighteenth century, with books such as *Joseph Andrews, Shamela* and *Northanger Abbey* parodying such concerns. The issue then, however, was more that fiction warped the reader's vision of the real truth, while in postmodernity such a truth does not exist at all. This allows Rushdie to freely combine different ontological levels in his fiction, but interestingly enough, recently he started to deal with the idea of fiction influencing reality in a more 'classical' manner. His recent novel *Quichotte* describes a man with delusions caused by extensive consumption of reality TV, similar to how in the past there was a real concern that novels would delude its readers from reality.

To reiterate, what I aim to do in this thesis is to analyse whether Rushdie's postmodernist style has changed, in particular as to his views on reality and truth. I will do this by employing McHale's system of the dominant as my framework. In this way, when looking at questions of reality, this thesis will analyse whether Rushdie foregrounds an ontological perspective or a more ethical frame of reference. I will do this by focusing mostly on his two recent novels, *The Golden*

House and *Quichotte*. To analyse whether a change has taken place I will also first discuss his older works, such as *Midnight's Children* and *The Satanic Verses.* I will analyse postmodern features in these texts and how these features depict reality and truth. After that I will turn to *The Golden House* and *Quichotte*, so as to be able to compare Rushdie's older and newer works. My hypothesis is that there is indeed a more ethical approach regarding reality to these newer books; the novels attempt to connect to and comment on reality despite their repeated foregrounding of their own construction. This might be partly because they are set in Trump's America. Rushdie stated in 2018 in an interview with Channel 4 News that he sees America as a country in crisis, due to extreme polarisation (Rushdie 2018). He says there are groups that cannot agree on "the simplest definition of what is true" (Rushdie 2018, 34:00—34:05). When asked if "there comes a time when you'll have to pick a side and fight for it", Rushdie answers: "Oh yes, that time is now" (Rushdie 2018, 36: 55 — 37:05). Such an answer seems to point towards a more ethical, moralistic and didactic way of writing, even though in the same interview Rushdie expresses his disgust at being didactic. Nevertheless, 'to pick a side' could indicate a different way of writing than the postmodernist style that generally focuses on the emptiness of language and the subjectiveness of all narratives, making it difficult to have a moralistic message at the same time. Yet one should be careful with generalisations, as postmodernist works vary in their attitudes towards ontological questions, which does not make them not postmodern, as McHale also points out:

> A wide ranges of ontological themes or attitudes is available to postmodernist writers, and it is important to specify which writers display which attitudes. But it is equally important to recognise that these attitudes, whatever they may be, come to our attention only through the foregrounding of ontological concerns which is common to all postmodernist writers. (McHale 1987, 27)

As such, then, the foregrounding of ontological questions is what makes a work postmodern, not one's attitude towards those ontological questions. What is meant by the writer's attitude is for example whether the text laments the idea of the loss of a reality upon which everyone can agree, or whether it accepts reality as just one's personal experience. Yet the change towards an ethical

dominant would imply a certain attitude towards ontological questions, namely that of a desire to construct a reality that is good. Therefore this thesis will take in account Rushdie's attitude towards reality as an indication whether it is shifting away from postmodernism or not.

2. Analysis of *The Satanic Verses* and *Midnight's Children*

In this chapter I will analyse various postmodern techniques used in *The Satanic Verses* and *Midnight's Children.* They pertain mostly to how narratives can shape reality. By analysing these techniques I will show how the dominant viewpoint is ontological, as these techniques deconstruct the worlds created by language and therefore question the construction of reality. Through questioning different ideologies and the worlds they create, Rushdie creates an unstable reality that is fragmented on many levels. By showing that Rushdie's earlier novels were typically postmodern, I can then in the following chapters highlight how his newer novels differ from his earlier style.

2.1 *The Satanic Verses*

The Satanic Verses starts with an example of postmodern foregrounding of the ontological, through the use of magic realism. One of the characteristics of magical realism is its banality, meaning that the characters fail to be amazed at the unnatural events happening around them. Instead, this amazement is left to the reader, creating an intentional barrier between the novel's world and that of the reader. In *The Satanic Verses*, the narrator is aware of this discrepancy between his reader and his characters, and comments on it. In the opening scene, the novel describes how its two main characters, Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha (or in its non-abbreviated form, Salahuddin Chamchawala) tumble through the sky after their airplane crashed mid-flight. During this tumble, Chamcha is described as "a fastidious shadow falling headfirst in a grey suit (…) *taking for granted the improbability of the bowler hat on his head* [my emphasis]" (Rushdie 1988, 3). Later on, the narrator interrupts a battle of songs the two have while falling: "Let's face it: it was impossible for

them to have heard one another, much less conversed and also competed thus in song. Accelerating towards the planet, atmosphere roaring around them, how could they? But let's face this too: they did" (6). Because of the narrator's intervention, the fictive nature of the text is foregrounded. The narrator admits the improbability of his story, but also comments on the power that he, as the creator of this narrative, has. He is saying that the reader will have to face that the novel is not depicting 'reality' and that he can determine what is possible and what is not.

This power of constructing reality through language recurs throughout the novel. For example, the novel shows how the Qur'an uses sacred language in order to shape reality. Rushdie inserts himself into the novel as "some sort of bum from Persia by the outlandish name of Salman" (101), who is the scribe for the prophet Mahound. Through this character, Rushdie (the writer) challenges the sacred nature of the Qur'an. Salman (the character) is a devout follower of Mahound until he realises that his revelations, which Mahound claims come directly from God, "sounded so much like a businessman" and that "Mahound himself had been a businessman" (364). Salman's suspicion that Mahound is fabricating messages from God for Mahound's own benefit increases, and ultimately he begins to alter Mahound's revelations. At first he makes minor revisions such as 'all-hearing' to 'all-knowing', but later he changes important signifiers such as 'Christian' to 'Jew' (367-368). These changes remain unnoticed by Mahound, which raises the question whether the Qur'an really is sacred if someone as ordinary as a scribe can alter its meaning. In an analysis of the discursive strategies in *The Satanic Verses,* Moslund writes that "the Qur'an itself is demystified to become a text like any other text which has no more right to determine the nature of reality than Salman's discourse" (Moslund 2006, 293). Rushdie brings the language of the Qur'an back to the realm of mortals, where the conflict of reality is not God versus blasphemer, but one person's word against another, as Salman the Persian says: "'It's his Word [Mahound's] against mine'" (368). The novel emphasises that it is Mahound's words that give him

his might. It is language that creates meaning and it is language that can create a narrative about reality.

Another example of the power of language to shape reality involves the prejudices of the British against immigrants. Saladin, after washing up on the shores of England, changes into a devilish goat as soon as he touches upon British ground. Shortly after his arrival, he is arrested as an illegal immigrant. His story of falling thirty-thousand feet and then swimming ashore is not believed, and the immigration police see him as one of the illegals who "used to come in fishing boats" (139). The police's suspicion of Chamcha's admittedly unbelievable story is then juxtaposed with their readiness to believe that Chamcha is transforming into a goat. Instead of being surprised, they start making jokes about him. Chamcha wonders why "a circumstance which struck him as utterly bewildering and unprecedented, -- that is, his metamorphosis into this supernatural imp -- was being treated by the others as if it were the most banal and familiar matter they could imagine" (158). The policemen's willingness to see an 'illegal' as a literal devil is odd after their previous refusal to believe Chamcha's story. This can be related to McHale's claim that the distinction between fact and fiction is dependent on one's belief system and culture. Apparently the police's prejudice against immigrants makes it easy to believe that some of them are actually devils.

The police escort Chamcha to a temporary holding cell for immigrants, where he encounters all kinds of metamorphosed people, from "businessmen from Nigeria, who have grown sturdy tails", to holidaymakers from Senegal who "were turned into slippery snakes" (168). When Chamcha asks a nurse how this is possible, she answers: "They describe us (…) They have the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct" (168). The supernatural metamorphoses of these immigrants, then, are literal representations of the racist discourse used to depict the immigrants. In this way Rushdie both satirises racist notions about immigrants and highlights the way language shapes one's view of reality.

TRUTH IS WHAT ONE BELIEVES IN

One could argue that *The Satanic Verses* is a satire aimed at all forms of dogmatic ideologies. As seen before, Rushdie satirises the reception of the Qur'an, which describes a reality dictated by God, through questioning the distinction between sacred revelation and fiction. At the same time he critiques the British world-view through the concretisation of racist discourse. His use of fantastical elements also challenges the absolutes of scientific truth, since Rushdie describes events that are deemed impossible by the laws of science. Moslund writes that Rushdie has different discourses conflicting in order to destabilise them: "another language intrudes the truth game of the targeted discourse to disclaim its logocentric authorization" (294). In the case of the Islam the language of the mundane intrudes that of the sacred. The empirical world-view is challenged through the introduction of fantastical language. In addition to the fantastical elements, the novel claims that there are multiple truths that can exist at the same time. *The Satanic Verses* describes a world where logical impossibility seems to be possible; a world where a statement can be true and false at the same time. This is exemplified in the sentences "it was and it was not so" and "it happened and it never did" (35) that are repeated throughout the book. This shows the book's aversion to narratives that only allow for one truth. Instead the novel depicts a postmodern fragmentation of reality, in which one's subjective view also changes the content of their reality.

A good example of this fragmentation of reality is the halo that appears around the head of Gibreel. It is first seen by Rosa Diamond, who sees a "faint, but distinctly golden, glow" around the "edges of Gibreel Farishta's head" (133). Shortly after that, the police officers who had arrived to investigate the sightings of illegal immigrants, also see the halo: "it became clear to everyone that a pale, golden light was emanating from the direction of the man" (142). Yet for Chamcha the light does not appear, as Gibreel had just ignored his pleas and let him be taken by the police without interfering: "He saw the traitor, Gibreel Farishta, (…) and there wasn't any light shining around the bastard's head" (142). Chamcha hates Gibreel, so for him this light is not visible at all. It is not clear

who is right at this point, and the problem is never resolved. This highlights the novel's point that how we see the world is influenced by what we believe.

Towards the end of the novel, the halo returns to be an important symbol for the subjectiveness of reality. Gibreel, after destroying Alleluia's apartment in a rage of jealously stoked up by Chamcha, buys a trumpet and dubs it Azraeel. What follows is a narrative how he walks through the streets of London as the Archangel of God, and passes "the judgment of God in his wrath" (461) by blowing fire out of Azraeel. A while later Gibreel is found having collapsed on the floor, and the narrator describes him as "talking in his sleep: a delirious babble about a magic trumpet and the fire that he blew" (469). Yet Mishal, the girl that finds him, starts to believe the story of Gibreel, seeing as she has seen "Chamcha as a devil, and has come to accept the possibility of many things" (468). For her, blowing fire out of a trumpet is not that far-fetched. Additionally, there are fires burning all over Brickhall, the area in which she finds Gibreel, which seemingly corroborate Gibreel's story. Hanif, Mishal's boyfriend, assures her however that "'what has happened here in Brickhall tonight is a socio-political phenomenon'" (468). Again, there are two conflicting explanations for these events: Gibreel is delirious and took part in a riot, or he truly is an archangel.

To return to the importance of the halo, before Gibreel's rampage starts, the employees of the store where he buys the trumpet say that "all around the fucking insane, certifiable bastard's head there was this bright glow, you know?" (448). There seems to be evidence both against and for Gibreel being a true archangel. The halo around his head is seen by various people, corroborating his angelic nature, but all of his actions can also be explained as the acts of a delirious, sleep-deprived man. The reader is left in a state of hesitation between a psychological and a supernatural explanation, neither of which is given a preference in the novel. The novel seems to avoid preferring any truth over another, but instead argues that whatever one believes becomes real. When discussing Gibreel's potential delusions, Allie thinks about a question of William Blake: "Does a

firm perswasion [sic] that a thing is so, make it so?" (338). This question is very important to this novel, and it highlights its postmodern tendencies. Reality is no longer one universal existant, but becomes fragmented between various people.

The belief in the fragmentation of reality is also seen in the intentional intermingling of names and concept between various entities in the book. Miller writes that "as each character's discourse competes against other, antagonistic discourses, (…) it is impossible to differentiate man from animal, angel from demon, God from Shaitan" (Miller 2005, 21). As discussed before, the question whether Gibreel is an angel or a mortal with delusions is never fully answered in the book. But there is another layer to it, as Gibreel and Chamcha are both associated with images of devils and angels. Most obviously, of course, Chamcha is the devil because of his goatish appearance, while Gibreel is an angel due to his halo and his name. Yet in his youth, Gibreel's breath of "those ochre clouds of sulphur and brimstone" gave him "an air more saturnine than haloed" (13). The association of sulphur and brimstone to Gibreel gives him both angelic and devilish qualities. He loses his bad breath at the beginning of the novel, but it returns once he pushes Alleluia to her death. On the other hand, there is Chamcha, who physically is a devil, but is seen by the minorities in his neighbourhood as the hero for their resistance against oppression. They start wearing horns and tails in defiance to inequality, in the process redefining these devilish attributes.

The concepts of Satan and God are conflated in a similar fashion too. The most striking occasion is related to the narrator of the novel. The narrator of *The Satanic Verses* often intrudes, and early in the novel asks the reader: "Who am I?" (4) It is evident that this is the narrator talking to the reader, since the narrator had just admonished himself/herself that he/she "mustn't interfere" (4). After this question, the narrator alludes in contradictory manners to his identity. For example, the narrator intervenes abruptly and suggests that he is Satan. The narrator asks: "You think they fell a long way? In the matter of tumbles I yield pride of place to no personage, whether mortal or im-. From clouds to ashes, down the chimney you might say, from heaven light to

hellfire…" (133). This obviously suggest the narrator is Lucifer, the angel that fell from heaven. Yet at the same time, the narrator styles himself as God. After a fight with Alleluia, Gibreel sees God sitting on her bed. Later, the narrator admits: "I sat on Alleluia Cone's bed and spoke to the superstar, Gibreel" (409). He even hints at his own duality: "Ooparvala or Neechayvala*,* he wanted to know, and I didn't enlighten him" (409). Oorpavala earlier was described as the Fellow Upstairs, while Neechayvala is the Fellow Downstairs. This coexistence of opposites highlights how truth is flexible, and depending on whom you ask, a person can be either good or bad or even both. There is not one reality, but many more. *The Satanic Verses,* then, uses discursive techniques to problematise reality and highlight how language influences this reality. If a person can both be angelic and devilish, if a person is both the Devil and God, does this language refer to some kind of external truth or is it the language that creates the truth, depending on what one believes in?

A NOVEL WITHOUT IDEOLOGY

I have shown various ways in which Rushdie uses discursive techniques as means to criticize the notion of absolute truths. Furthermore, I have shown the postmodern tendency in the novel to see language as an unreliable way of describing the world, as it will always create reality as much as describe it. Yet one could argue that the text fronts political matters as much as it does highlight these topics. The novel contains overt political satire, for example towards immigrant policy in Britain. It also seems a clear challenge towards the Islam, and religion in general. In the introduction on this thesis I have stated that post-postmodernist have become more politically involved than postmodernists. To show that such a change has also taken place in Rushdie's work, I need to address his already politically charged writing in *The Satanic Verses* and *Midnight's Children.* If Rushdie was already writing in a politically involved manner in *The Satanic Verses*, is it still possible to claim that his style has shifted to be more political? I argue that a shift is perceptible, since in Rushdie's newer novels there is a specific group he targets, while in his earlier

novels he satirises every kind of group that tries to push a narrative. I have tried to show that Rushdie's overall discursive techniques are aimed at absolute truths in general, and not with any specific political or moral lessons in mind. Postmodernism, as stated before, is a movement that goes against the idea of master-narratives of reality. *The Satanic Verses* employs the same idea. Alexander Adkins argues in a critique of moralism in general that *The Satanic Verses* is a book of "political purity, challenging the prevalent assumption that satire is the moralistic genre par excellence" (Adkins 2017, 14) What he means by political purity is that Rushdie does not seem to subscribe to any ideology. Adkin refers to Timothy Brennan, who says Rushdie uses the principle of "satiric equal time" (Brennan 1989, 44). Brennan argues that in Rushdie's work, every side of a political debate is satirised in equal amounts. Adkins agrees and points out that Rushdie avoids sounding one-sidedly moralistic by finding fault in every kind of moral narrative.

Examples of Rushdie's style of writing without moralising are the characters of Hal Valance and Billy Batutta. They are one-dimensional characters representing the post-ideological stance associated with Thatcherism, who merely focus on economic wealth and are willing to commit to any ideology as long as these help them amass more money. They are satirised in the sense that their characters are magnified to absurdist levels, but at the same time Chamcha is the one ridiculed for sticking to old morals. The new generation of citizens seems to actual admire the brazen immorality of Hal and Billy:

> I am a man, Chamcha realized, who does not know the score, living in an amoral, survivalist, get-away-with-it world. Mishal and Anahita [...] were beings who plainly admired such creatures as moonlighters, shoplifters, filchers: scam artists in general. He corrected himself: not admired, that wasn't it. Neither girl would ever steal a pin. But they saw such persons as representative of the gestalt, of how-it-was. As an experiment he told them the story of Billy Battuta and the mink coat. Their eyes shone, and at the end they applauded and giggled with delighted. Wickedness, unpunished, made them laugh. (263)

Billy Battuta's world is seen as the true world, without the narratives told by conventional moral codes and manners. The cold, hard world of economic growth is reality without any clouding

narratives to obscure the truth. This can be read as a critique of such an attitude, and it is, but I side with Atkins and Brennan when they say that Billy and Hal are not the sole receivers of criticism. They are ridiculed, but alongside with the Anglophile Indian Chamcha who is ridiculed just as much.

Yet not everyone agrees that *The Satanic Verses* is a book without any ideological biases. Moslund argues, after listing the discursive techniques Rushdie uses to point out the language games used in totalising discourses to manipulate reality, that Rushdie employs these same tricks for his own novel. According to Moslund, Rushdie himself also tries to write a metanarrtive of reality, by claiming that reality is always changing and unstable. Evidence for this can be found in the metaphors of the shifting sands of Jahilia:

> a sight to wonder at: walled, four-gated, the whole of it a miracle worked by its citizens, who have learned the trick of transforming the fine white dune-sand of those forsaken parts, – the very stuff of inconstancy, – the quintessence of unsettlement, shifting, treachery, lack-of-form, – and have turned it, by alchemy, into the fabric of their newly invented permanence. (Rushdie 1998, 94)

Moslund says that this is a metaphor for how Rushdie thinks "discourse is an artificial construct that violates an otherwise free and constantly changing reality" (Moslund 2006, 298). Yet he shows that Rushdie himself is also guilty of trying to form reality by depicting in as inconsistent and treacherous. Rushdie uses the undermining of the truth of other discourses in order to create his own reality through his own discourse. Moslund argues that Rushdie tries, by creating a novel without ideological ties, to manoeuvre himself in a position to do exactly what other absolutisms do, namely describe reality as this and not that. According to Moslund, literature does not stand outside the discursive, but is just less obvious in its assertions in regard to truth and reality. As shown before, I agree that Rushdie uses the discursive techniques to undermine absolute truths. However, I think Moslund's statement that Rushdie is creating his own form of reality misses the point that the novel is making. Rushdie, in line with other postmodern writers, preempts Moslund's critical argument by including many self-aware commentaries throughout the book. This is a common postmodern

technique which undoubtedly Moslund must have been aware of, but it seems as if his criticism does not consider the possibility that Rushdie may be satirising himself too. The narrator makes quips on how he is God and Satan, comments on how he has the power to change the rules of nature as he wishes, and in general continuously points out his power to the reader. Perhaps one could read this as a technique Rushdie uses to clear himself of accusations of the sort Moslund makes, but does this really work this way? When an author purposefully highlights that a text is created by him or her, and therefore influenced by his or her opinion, does this not intentionally make the reader aware of the subjectiveness of its contents? The point Moslund brings up that Rushdie himself is not totally free of discursive faults is one that is impossible to prevent, since the act of writing will always be subjective. This is something that Rushdie realises, hence his self-reflective writing.

Overall, I think Miller's succinct description of *The Satanic Verses* is applicable to this analysis as well: "Above all, it is a novel about discursive authority, about what may be said, how, and by whom" (Miller 2005, 21). The techniques outlined above aim to undermine dogmatic master-narratives of truth and reality and in this way foregrounds the way reality is shaped by how one describes it. Despite presenting topics such as racism, religion and immigration, the novel is not overtly moralistic. Its use of these controversial topics is mainly a tool to show how belief systems can manipulate and shape reality in an absurd way. The novel deconstructs these belief systems by satirising the language of which they are constructed. This makes *The Satanic Verses* typically postmodern in the sense that it tries to avoid a position that adheres to any kind of dogmatic truth, and instead prefers to undermine other constructions rather than building one for itself.

2.2 *Midnight's Children*

Where *The Satanic Verses* deconstructs the language of religion and racism, *Midnight's Children* is focussed on the analysis of history, memory and the process of creating a nation. *Midnight's Children* is set in India and Pakistan and deals with momentous events from the history of India

such as the Amritsar massacre, the Independence of India, the Indo-Pakistani war of 1971 and the State of Emergency during the presidency of Indira Gandhi. The main character Saleem is, according to his own story, inexorably linked to these historical events. Saleem is born at midnight on the 15th of August 1947, which is the exact moment of the Independence of India. He participates in the Indo-Pakistani war and his grandfather was present at the Amritsar massacre. Additionally, because of the special moment of his birth, he is able to communicate through telepathy with the other children born on the day that India became independent. These children also possess supernatural powers and are called the midnight's children — according to Saleem, they were the actual reason The Widow (who is based upon Indira Gandhi) declared the State of Emergency. She used this declaration to find and capture the midnight's children, who were a threat to her. In this way, Saleem has a personal link with various recent historical events in Indian history.

Midnight's Children highlights through Saleem's personal way of depicting such events the subjective experience of history, and how this experience can vary from the official historical narrative. Saleem states that "'what's real and what's true aren't necessarily the same'" (Rushdie 1981, 103), claiming that for him truth "was something hidden inside the stories Mary Pereira told me", or "a thing concealed just over the horizon towards which the fisherman's finger pointed in the picture on my wall" (103). Truth for Saleem is weighed against the experiences of his childhood. His conception of reality has been shaped by childhood influences like his *ayah* Mary or the imagined world of the painting on his wall. This shows how since Saleem's childhood, his perspective on reality has been shaped by his surroundings. Saleem is saying that he will always interpret reality through this filter that has been created by experience and his surroundings, making his truth and reality not always the same thing.

When Saleem confesses his love for his sister Jamila Singer (or the Brass Monkey), this difference between reality and truth is exemplified. Saleem has found out that his ayah Mary Pereira had swapped him and his nemesis Shiva at birth, which resulted in Saleem growing up in a

family not related to him. He falls in love with his sister, but until he discovers this secret, he does not dare to declare his feelings. However, he does confess when he is no longer related to her, but for Jamila and ultimately for him, this does not matter: “he realized that although what he was saying was the literal truth, there were other truths which had become more important because they had been sanctified by time” (451). In this example, reality is subordinate to its interpretation; what is objectively true might not matter.

In fact, the novel argues that reality does not even exist in some cases. Saleem observes that Pakistan is “a country where the truth is what it is instructed to be” and that in such places “reality quite literally ceases to exist” (453). This seems to say that whenever there is a narrative that creates a totalitarian view of reality, it fails to depict reality in a truthful manner. If the truth is instructed by a singular power, it creates a monolithic view of reality. But, according to the novel, reality can never be approached in such a manner, since reality has multiple aspects, all of which are part of reality and cannot be enveloped in one uniform perspective. The danger of describing truth in a singular fashion is that it will ignore other perspectives than its own. Yet, Saleem admits, there is no power that can control the narrative of reality to that extent: “'nobody, no country, has a monopoly of untruth”' (453). People will always have their own versions and understanding of events, creating their own 'untruths'. It is interesting that these versions are called untruths. The term 'untruths’ suggests that all narratives are approximations of the truth, and can never fully describe reality. It is evident that Rushdie is very cautious with claiming anything as true in both *The Satanic Verses* and *Midnight’s Children*.

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL METAFICTION

Midnight’s Children foregrounds how language shapes reality through meta-commentary on historiographical writing. The idea that the personal experience of history can be different from the official account flows forth from the personalised view of reality of Saleem. But in this novel,

personal experience is also more real than historical truth. Saleem urges Padma to feel sorry for him, who is "deprived of the hundred daily pinpricks of family life, which alone could deflate the great ballooning fantasy of history and bring it down to a more manageably human scale" (482). History is best understood through close interaction with loved ones, instead of a grand narrative that is far removed from the events it describes. History is a fantasy of how things happened; reality is daily life. The postmodern distrust of master-narratives is clearly seen in this attitude. The novel highlights the illogical, fragmented reality underneath the historical facts:

> Reality is a question of perspective; the further you get from the past, the more concrete and plausible it seems - but as you approach the present, it inevitably seems more and more incredible. Suppose yourself in a large cinema, sitting at first in the back row, and gradually moving up, row by row, until your nose is almost pressed against the screen. Gradually the stars' faces dissolve into dancing grain; tiny details assume grotesque proportions; the illusion dissolves or rather, it becomes clear that the illusion itself *is* reality (229)

The creation of a narrative to describe the world around us is similar to the illusion created in a cinema. The narrative connects the individual pixels into a whole image, creating a picture that makes sense, even though the parts it consist of do not. The individual parts of history might be very different from what the zoomed-out narrative shows. What the quotation given above illustrates is a problem of perspective; from a distance, historical events might make sense, but when lived close-up, things start to feel unreal.

The novel also highlights that out of necessity history glosses over events that in a personal experience might be very significant. For example, the novel shows how the independence of India is a minuscule event, relative to the immense timespans of the *yuga*'s of Hinduism: "Think of this: history, in my version, entered a new phase on August 15th, 1947 — but in another version, that inescapable date is no more than one fleeting instant in the Age of Darkness" which "will last for a mere 432,000 years!" (269). In this way Saleem trivialises his own problems, which mean nothing in a time scale so grand. But it also puts history into perspective, by showing how it has to ignore millions of lives in order to create a logical narrative of any large time period. This aspect is

important to Saleem, who throughout the novel repeats the idea that in order to truly know something, everything should be known: “To know just one life, you’ll have to swallow the world” (109). This can be extrapolated to India. To know the history of India, all of its inhabitants of any given period should be known, rather than just the select few that are written about. Yet this very idea is also ridiculed, as the narrator asks himself whether the “urge to encapsulate the whole of reality” (97) is an Indian disease. The narrator acknowledges that the description of the whole of reality is impossible. But since such a description is necessary just for the narration of one life, the narrator admits that no history will ever be fully truthful. For to know a life, you have to encapsulate the whole of reality, which proves to be an impossible task. Therefore the novel adopts a sceptical view on history, since the only form of depicting reality as it really exists, is deemed impossible.

A form of historical metafiction in the novel is its discussion of the influence of present-day events on historiography. *Midnight’s Children* considers this topic through an apt metaphor: the process of making chutney. Saleem says that besides recording his past in writing, he also stores his memories in the form of chutney. Acknowledging the defects of his historical writing, Saleem tries to find an alternative in the form of chutney, yet the same problems persist there. David Birch explains the metaphor succinctly: “Chutneys are attempts at preservation — illusions of past ingredients being held unchangingly to be brought out in a present —but what appears is a different reality; the process of pickling changes the reality of the ingredients; it doesn't preserve them, it makes new commodities” (Birch 1991, 3). The past can only exist in the present, and the present influences how the past is viewed. Birch calls this conflict the confrontation between meaning then and meaning now. Such conflicts are ubiquitously present in the novel. For example, Birch explains that the meaning of the whole beginning of the novel changes when the reader learns that the characters previously thought of as Saleem’s grandparents are not actually related to him. He writes

that the illusion of Saleem's grandparents is established through a misreading of the meaning of the enormous nose shared by both Saleem and his supposed grandfather Aadam Aziz:

> Retrospective processes of interpretation result, not in reconstructing the truths of the past, but in misreadings. A hundred pages or so after the start of the novel what appeared to be family of Saleem turns out to be an illusion; a retrospective reading signals that descriptions of a nose lead to these misreadings, lead to the establishment of an illusory coherence. This is not just ambiguity; the apparent irreconcilability of the readings and misreadings are a major deconstructive process resting on a recognition that language - discourse - compels all readings to be misreadings. (Birch, 2)

Birch argues that the novel's focus on the conflict between the experience of an event and the historical representation of said event highlights the idea that language can never express reality in a wholly truthful way. All attempts of recreating the past are constructed through language, and therefore are subject to misreading and subjective interpretation.

Even an experience relived in memory is different from what happened during the actual event. Saleem shows how something can mean one thing in the past and another in the present, when Padma questions whether his fantastical stories are true:

> I told you the truth," I say yet again, "Memory's truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent versions of events; and no sane human being ever trusts someone else's version more than his own. (292)

The use of magical elements in the 'memory's truth' of Saleem exaggerates how one's memory can be distorted. For the reader it seems obvious that the events he speaks of are not possible. He speaks of he, "who-has-the-gift-of-levitation", "she-whose-looks-can-kill" and he "who-can-escape-through-mirrors" (608). Yet it also reminds the reader that one might not notice these exaggerations, glorifications and eliminations of memory's truth if what one remembers fits into one's accepted reality. David Price writes how "Saleem's past affirms the creative power of the imagination to construct our reality; it is imagination, specifically metaphoric construction, that permits us to structure our world and make true narratives" (Price 1994, 102). When describing the past, one always imagines in some way how it was at that time. The novel discusses how every kind of

representation of the past is a kind of illusion, whether constructed discursively or through one's memory. Not only that, narratives help us shape the way we remember things by making a logical story of events, even when these are not necessarily correlated. Saleem's memory of the midnight's children might be an extreme form of this. He forms a narrative of magical children so he can make sense of events and relate them to himself, and his mind internalises this as his memory.

The examples of both novels discussed in this chapter show how Rushdie is trying to deconstruct the idea of reality as a monolithic whole. He continually highlights how a thing can be both true and not true, and shows how different fragments of reality can compete against each other. In the following chapter I will look at *The Golden House*, and how it employs similar deconstructive techniques, but at the same time tries to connect to a reality despite acknowledging its limitations as a discursive medium.

3. Analysis of *The Golden House*

This chapter analyses one of Rushdie's most recent novels, *The Golden House* (2017). I will discuss how *The Golden House* uses similar techniques as previously seen in *The Satanic Verses* and *Midnight's Children*, but I will also point out how this later novel differs in attitude towards these techniques. *The Golden House* repeatedly foregrounds its narrative as a constructed story. Additionally, the line between fact and fiction is thin, and it is often unsure when the narrator is discussing facts or when he is imagining scenes. However, this line is not blurred in order to deconstruct a dogmatic view on reality or to point out the possibility of other realities, as seen in Rushdie's earlier novels. Instead, the novel highlights the dangers of the merging of fact and fiction. Hoydis writes that the text does not "primarily celebrate the blurred boundaries between fact and fiction but dramatise the 'real' repercussions of an endemic failure to distinguish between these realms" (Hoydis 2019, 168). Rushdie, who previously used techniques such as magic realism to undermine grand narratives such as history and religion that shape our perception of reality, now

writes a novel highlighting the dangers of a society without moral narratives that mould this society's worldview. A desire for a world with more universal truths is apparent from the opening pages of the novel: "What is a good life? What is its opposite? These are questions which no two men will give the same answers. In these our cowardly times, we deny the grandeur of the Universal" (Rushdie 2016, 7). The novel, then, shows the dangers modern society faces because it has no clear answer to the question of what is virtuous. Apparent in this question is also the previously outlined ethical dominant, different from Rushdie's earlier novels.

FICTION WITHIN A FICTION

The Golden House is set in America during the Obama presidency and the first months of the presidency of Donald Trump. The novel is narrated by René, a young film director. He describes the process of creating a film about his enclosed neighbourhood called the Gardens. He writes about his neighbours, whom he has renamed, "in order to make them up more easily" (210). The main subjects are the Goldens, a family of four men, who have immigrated to America and changed their identity. The narrative generally deals with what happens to these characters, although René admits that he imagines certain side stories for them. Despite this confession, it becomes increasingly unclear to determine what is part of René's screenplay and thus fictionalised and what is 'unmediated' reality. The quotation marks already point out that this reality is of course also discursive. The layering of a work of fiction into a work of fiction is a postmodern technique often used to foreground the discursive nature of a text. The multiple ontological levels in *The Golden House* produces an effect called *trompe-l'œil,* which literally means 'deceive the eye'. The reader thinks that he or she has resurfaced in the primary level of the fiction, the 'actual' of the fiction, but is still within a secondary layer such as a novel, manuscript or movie. René sometimes overtly presents parts of his narration in the form of a screenplay, where the layout of the page mimics instructions for a movie set: "INTERIOR, NIGHT, PETYA GOLDEN'S APARTMENT.

BEDROOM" (216). The dialogue is also explicitly attributed to some character as one would see in a screenplay. Yet at other times, a whole passage is narrated after which a statement such as "it may have gone somewhat differently" since the narrator "wasn't there" (64), decreases the credibility of this passage. This creates a text in which the reader should constantly be aware that what he or she is reading could be part of René's screenplay.

René explicitly refers to the different ontological levels in his text. When he introduces himself as the narrator, he writes: "Call me René. I have always liked it that the narrator of *Moby-Dick* doesn't actually tell us his name. Call-me-Ishmael might in "reality," which is to say in the petty Actual that lay outside the grand Real of the novel, he might have been called, oh, anything" (24). Here the narrator points out the difference between the world he lives in and the world he narrates. This differentiation of Actual and Real is used more often by him, as, for example, when explaining the changes he makes to his neighbours in order to utilise them in his script: "they first had to stop being my neighbours, who lived in the Actual, and become my characters, alive in the Real" (42). The Actual is something different from the Real, something that lies outside of the narrative of the story. The Actual according to René is not of great interest, indicated by the adjective 'petty', but there *is* a reality outside of the narrative he creates. A good way to describe the novel is to compare it to the structure of a Chinese doll. Such a doll contains a tinier version of itself, which also holds a smaller version, etc. Similarly, Rushdie's (and the reader's) Actual envelops the reality of the novel, while inside this reality there is René's Actual or the Real of the novel, which contains the Real of the screenplay.

Such a construction is also seen in *The Satanic Verses*. There is the primary world of the novel, and within this world there is the world of Gibreel's dreams. Through the recurring of names and elements of the dream world into the enveloping world, a similar effect of *trompe-l'œil* as in *The Golden House* occurs. Thus this technique is not new for Rushdie. In *The Golden House*, however, there is a slight difference of structure, since the effect is created by another discursive

creation; the writing of a script, instead of a dream. This increases the focus on the constructed nature of the novel too, as it shows the process of creating a text. A more important difference is that the function of the blurring of fact and fiction has changed in regard to Rushdie's earlier work. Before this can be discussed fully, the idea that postmodernism practises a form of mimesis has to be brought up. McHale argues that the multiple levels of reality typical of postmodernism could be considered a form of realism:

> In a television-oriented culture like the one that postmodernist writing so often reflects, TV and the movies constitute a privileged source for the sort of conceits that threaten to overwhelm the primary, literal reality (see pp. 133–47). After all, if the culture as a whole seems to hover between reality and televised fictions, what could be more appropriate than for the texts of that culture to hover between literal reality and a cinematic or television metaphor? (McHale 1987,128)

The frequent dipping into different realities is a way of representing modern society, with its many narrative levels of games, television and internet. In this way postmodern novels do not mimic society in content, but rather in the form this content is represented.

Consequently, a common criticism is that postmodernism perpetuates the unrealities created by TV and other media (Gardener 1978, Graff 1979, Newman 1984). Such critics argue that postmodernist texts, instead of opposing any master narrative, have become part of mainstream society: "The vaunted fragmentation of art is no longer an aesthetic choice; it is simply a cultural aspect of the economic and social fabric" (Newman 1984, 183). McHale comments that their criticism seems to tend towards nostalgic feelings of nineteenth-century realism. Yet McHale also says these critics seem "sophisticated enough to know *not* to identify reality simplistically with the conventions of nineteenth-century realism" (McHale 220). Such a return to realism would be impossible, since through postmodernism the idea of truly depicting reality has been disproven.

The Golden House seeks a middle ground between a criticism of detachment of objective truth and a full return to traditional realism. The novel represents modern society as a world invaded by fictions from the internet and television. René is constantly referring to movies, which also

influences how he sees the world. He admits this himself: “Weddings always make me think of the movies. (Everything makes me thing of the movies)” (120). The break up between two of his neighbours is a “telenovela” (214). The family drama of Dionysus Golden’s girlfriend Riya is “like a bad TV show” (100). When Apu Golden returns to India he says he did not realise he would be “walking into a Bollywood movie” (237). New York City has movie versions superimposed over itself:

> Manhattan below 14th Street at 3 A.M. on November 28 was Batman’s Gotham City; Manhattan between 14th and 110th Streets on the brightest and sunniest days in July was Superman’s Metropolis (…) All these cities, the invisible imaginary cities lying over and around and interwoven with the real one (358)

This invasion of TV and internet realities is presented as part of daily life, but the repercussions of the disappearing line between fact and fiction are severe: “The villains were spilling off the movie screens (…) he had the guilty feeling that the industry was responsible, it had created these monsters and made them glamorous and sexy and now they were taking over the town” (330). Throughout the text there is an attitude which holds television and internet at least partly responsible for the fact that “America had left reality behind and entered the comic-book universe” (248). This shows the difference between the blurring of fact and fiction in *The Golden House* from earlier work such as *The Satanic Verses*. In *The Satanic Verses,* one of the functions of the confusing distinction between fact and fiction is to dissuade people from seeing their point of view as fact. In *The Golden House* the same technique is used to show the dangers of a world without any objective truth. It depicts an America in which “the internet was still full of lies and the business of the truth was broken” (358). The text mimics modern society and shows the effect that so many unrealities have upon society. In this sense the novel tends towards critics such as Graff, who approves of works “that provide some true understanding of non-reality” and disapproves of “those which are merely symptoms of it” (Graff 1979, 12).

OPERATIC REALISM: A DESIRE FOR TRUTH

Clearly, *The Golden House* problematises the idea of non-reality created by aspects of modern society such as internet and TV. At the same time, the novel does not make the mistake to harbour a sense of nostalgia for the realism of the past. René himself describes his script as "Operatic Realism" (28), which is similar to how Rushdie (Tuttle 2017) himself describes his novel: "I'm on the Technicolor end. It's realism, but amped up, boosted". The publisher marketed the book as Rushdie's "return to realism" (Ali 2017). However, it is not realism as realism was in nineteenth-century literature. Hoydis writes that the novel is "nostalgically-imitative neither of nineteenth-century realist nor postmodernist narrative" (Hoydis 2019, 157). This seems accurate, as the term realism seems out of place in a novel that constantly questions the reality of its narrative. Still, as Hoydis argues, the novel is also not postmodern. Instead the novel seeks to represent "reality in flux; its interest lies in political representation and ethics, which are contradicted by epistemological uncertainty" (Hoydis 2019, 158). The novel can be placed on a middle ground between realism and postmodernism, containing elements of both.

One of the things such a middle ground brings forward is René's desire to speak the truth. Yet it has to be accepted that truth, according to René's fellow filmmaker and girlfriend Suchitra, is "a twentieth-century concept" (221). She says it is more important whether she can "get you to believe it", whether she "can get it repeated enough times to make it as good as true" (221). He realises that filming in the style of realism is in a way insincere, since it pretends to depict reality while this is not achievable. Instead of the documentary he imagined making, he now thinks "the mockumentary is the art form of the day" (222). This means that his script "should be written and shot in documentary fashion, but scripted, played by actors" (222). In this way, the constructed nature of the documentary becomes more apparent, creating a form of earnestness that a traditional documentary lacks.

René's impulse to connect to reality stems from the amount of distrust he sees around him.

He comments on how in the time of Orson Welles, "'people still believed in the truth'" (222). Suchitra agrees and continues:

> Now the only person you think is lying to you is the expert who actually knows something. He's the one not to believe because he's the elite and the elites are against the people, they will do the people down. To know the truth is to be elite. If you say you saw God's face in a watermelon, more people will believe you than if you find the Missing Link, because if you're a scientist then you're elite. Reality TV is fake but it's not elite so you buy it. The news: that's elite. (222)

This trend of anti-intellectualism is a concern the novel brings up a few times. This might be one of the concerns that pushed this novel towards its particular kind of style. Rushdie's older novels — *Midnight's Children* in particular — mix fiction with history, in order to challenge the claim to truth official versions of history make. In *The Golden House*, this idea has taken on extreme proportions — official versions are no longer accepted at all. Scientists are no longer believed and everyone who claims to have objective truths are not to be trusted since they are the elite.

The novel analyses why anti-intellectualism is on the rise, and René knows what is to blame for it: "I blame truthiness. I blame Stephen Colbert" (222). The term truthiness was introduced by popular talk show host and comedian Stephen Colbert. He coined this term for when something is perceived to be true because of a strong belief that it is true, but without any evidence to support this belief (or even contrary to the evidence). When asked about the term in an interview, Colbert explained:

> It used to be, everyone was entitled to their own opinion, but not their own facts. But that's not the case anymore. Facts matter not at all. Perception is everything. It's certainty. People love the President [at that time this was George W. Bush] because he's certain of his choices as a leader, even if the facts that back him up don't seem to exist. It's the fact that he's certain that is very appealing to a certain section of the country. I really feel a dichotomy in the American populace. What is important? What you want to be true, or what is true? (Colbert 2006)

This dichotomy in America has only increased 14 years later, and the president mentioned by Colbert could just as easily have been Trump. What one wants to be true seems to be getting more important as experts and research are ignored and dismissed as fake news. *The Golden House*

highlights this conflict between what one wants to be true and what is true continuously. 2016, the year of the election between Clinton and Trump, is described as a "year of two bubbles" (249). In one bubble, people support Trump. In a lengthy tirade, the narrator then describes how in this bubble, logic is reversed and reality is altered into a grotesque parody of itself:

> In that bubble the climate was not changing and the end of the Arctic icecap was just a new real estate opportunity. In that bubble, gun murderers were exercising their constitutional rights but the parents of murderers were un-American. (…) In that bubble (…) the president of the neighboring country to the south which was sending rapists and killers to America would be forced to pay for a wall (…) and the meanings of things would change; multiple bankruptcies would be understood to prove great business expertise; and three and a half thousand lawsuits against you would be understood to prove business acumen (249)

This continues in the same way for the whole page, highlighting various reversals of meaning that have taken place in Trump's bubble. The other bubble is of those who could "identify a con man when they saw one" (250). What then ensues is "the great battle between deranged fantasy and gray reality" (250), where gray reality is "the possibly unknowable but probably existing thing in itself, the world as it was independently of what was said about it or how it was seen, the *Ding an sich*" (250) and deranged fantasy is linked to those who think that "elections were rigged and the media were crooked and everything you hated was a conspiracy against you" (250). These quotes of these two pages are crucial for the argument that Rushdie's style has moved beyond postmodernism.

Firstly, there is an obvious political preference in the narrator's searing monologue. More important is the idea that there probably is a world outside of how it is being described. Here the novel displays one of its central ideas: objective truth does exist, and even though this truth is possibly never attained, this should not mean society should not try to attain it. Consequently, the focus shifts from the questioning of the structure of reality seen in Rushdie's earlier work to questioning how society should relate to the *Ding an sich.* The focus is no longer on showing that

truth can be multiple things, but how to preserve some connection between reality outside of perception and how we choose to interpret this world.

The characters of *The Golden House* show this conflict — that is, the conflict between the views of reality as purely constructed and reality as something independent of description — on a personal level. An example of this can be seen in Vasilisa's desire to have a baby with Nero Golden, so she can be next in line for acquiring his riches. She coerces Nero into agreeing to have a baby, but after she secretly runs a seminogram she finds out that he is no longer capable of fathering children. Yet the facts of these tests are no obstacle for her, as she doctors the numbers to create the results she wants: "if I put a little V after the I, so now it's Motility IV, that's perfect, that's A-OK. And here, sperm concentration, 5 million per milliliter, very low, but now I put a little 1 before 5, and 15 million, this is normal (…) now he is totally capable of fatherhood" (179). The scientific facts do not matter: the strength of her desire will shape reality as she wants it. But René sees the flaw in her thinking, as her seductive powers are not enough to "convince the person upon whom it was unleashed (me) that fiction was fact, that falsifying a diagnosis would actually alter that diagnosis in the real world" (179). Yet she does persuade him to be a secret sperm donor, convincing everyone that she had a baby with Nero. As Suchitra had said before, the truth is not important, it is whether you can make someone to believe you.

Another theme of the novel is identity. Here the conflict between what is real and what one wants to be real occurs as well. This is most clear in the character of Dionysius, who struggles with his gender identity. (I will refer to Dionysius as male since that is what is done in the greater part of the book). In a conversation with his therapist, the idea of malleable reality comes up. His therapist tells him that he is capable of choosing what gender he wants to be. For Dionysius, this is a problem. He compares the idea of choosing your gender to the generally refuted idea that homosexuality is a choice. He argues that because homosexuality is "inborn" and "a human way to be", it cannot be chosen or unchosen, and he hates the "reactionary idea that you could" (258). He

then compares this reactionary idea with the idea that one can choose what gender one is: “what if I can’t see how these choices you are proposing, these multiple-possibility gender nuances, are not part of that same reactionary ideology (…) What if I believe there is an *I am* and I need to find that” (258-259). The idea that reality shapes itself in the way you desire is not acceptable to Dionysius. He wants to find reality as it is, not through choosing a reality and thereby creating it. Contrary to his stance, the therapist creates reality in a way similar to truthiness, by making it true through believing it strongly enough. In a different way this conflict highlights the dichotomy Colbert spoke of. What is more important, the fact of what genitalia you possess or what you would want them to be? In this particular case the idea of facts is problematised, since with questions of identity facts are not as clear cut. The relation between biological sex and gender is complicated. The objective truth in this case does not seem to exist. Thus there does not seem to be any explicit judgement against the therapist for trying to shape reality according to his or her views on gender. However, one could argue that the outcome of Dionysius’ struggle for his identity puts some blame on the therapist. Dionysius comes back to the house of the Goldens, dressed in fashionable women clothes, and commits suicide by shooting himself.

While the subjective experience is celebrated in Rushdie’s earlier work such as *Midnight’s Children,* René has a more wary attitude towards such experience. He believes that subjective experience of events exist, but he also holds onto a sense of objective truth outside subjective perception: “The mystical experience existed. I understood that. When my rational self reasserted itself it would say, yes, agreed, but it was an interior experience, not an exterior one: subjective, not objective” (247). There is almost no magical realism in this book, but Rushdie’s past use of magical realism still echoes through the book. René at one point discusses how in his notes for writing the script he considers whether he should “reserve possibility of supernaturally powerful infants” (42), but had afterward rejected this idea. Later on, when describing how he had seen Nero conversing with the ghosts of two women, he precedes this with a disclaimer: “Let me say now that I am not a

believer in the claims of the mystically or supernatural inclined (…) I have no time for angels or devils" (127). It seems like this metanarrative commentary reflects on how Rushdie himself has refrained from using magical realism in this novel in favour of a more traditional realist tone. The specific wording of having no time for angels or devils seems to indicate the shift away from the style of novels like *The Satanic Verses,* which deals extensively with topics like angels and devils that René dismisses so easily. Additionally, the dismissal of 'supernaturally powerful infants' is a stab aimed at *Midnight's Children.*

Similar to Saleem in *Midnight's Children*, René is a self-reflective narrator. He admits that he is writing a fiction, and that he is guessing at how certain events happened because he is not there himself to witness them. However, his self-reflectiveness is different from that of other Rushdie narrators, such as Saleem. Where René admits that he has imagined the events for which he was not there, Saleem points towards a supernatural power that allows him to remember events before he even was born. René admits that he is unreliable in spite of his attempts. He wants the reader to trust him, but knows that everything he writes will be coloured by his personal viewpoint: "I did know that I would pursue the answer in my Tintinish, Poiroty, post-Belgian way, and that when I found it, I would have the story that I had decided was mine and mine alone to tell" (39). He accepts that the story he will tell will be *his*, even though it would be about the lives of other people. It will be Tintinish and post-Belgian because his parents originated from Belgium. This awareness of his subjective viewpoint is also clear when René discusses how he focalises the story. He writes that he has "been hiding behind the first person plural, and may do so again" (23), and compares his position in the story to that of a smart camera: "Maybe I'm a smart camera. I record, but I'm not exactly passive. I think. I alter. Possibly I even invent" (24). But René does want to be trustworthy, even after admitting that he is not totally objective. He worries that he has "given the reader an unnecessarily poor impression of my [sic] character" (35) and proceeds to list his credentials "so that the reader may feel in good hands, the hands of a credible and not inexperienced

storyteller" (35). This is comparable to Saleem's plea to not regard his tale of the midnight children as the product of an ailing mind: "Midnight's children can be made to represent many things (…) but what they must not become is the bizarre creation of a rambling, diseased mind" (Rushdie 1981, 278). Saleem does not admit that he has invented aspects of his narrative, but claims that it can be interpreted in many ways. He is saying there are multiple truths, and what is true depends on how you interpret it. In *The Golden House*, René wants to depict a single truth, but admits that this is not possible because what is depicted will be coloured through his subjective view. There is no question that he is at some points an unreliable narrator, as he admits openly. In *Midnight's Children,* there is more room for doubt, even though Saleem's narration is considerably more questionable than that of René. The alterations to history Saleem introduces to his story are of a different magnitude than those of René. Saleem offers supernatural explanations for major events in history, while René reconstructs certain events in the life of a family based upon stories gathered through the members of this family. Yet René is more worried about the subjectivity in his narrative than Saleem is.

But despite this self-conscious way of narrating, René is still in search for a way to represent his story in a sincere manner. In the following quote he asks the reader to comprehend the text — or at least the next passage— in a vacuum, as a performance without any relation to the environment it was created in, even though he has before stated his knowledge of the impossibility of this:

> Let my little story have its final moments in the midst of whatever macro garbage is around as you read this, whatever *manufactroversy,* whatever horror or stupidity or ugliness or disgrace. Let me invite the giant victorious green-haired cartoon king and his billion-dollar movie franchise to take a back seat and let real people drive the bus. Our little lives are perhaps as much as we are able to comprehend. (359)

In this quote one can see the attempt at a connection between art and reality, an attempt at describing a reality which can be shared between two 'little lives'. It focusses again on the Real of the story, which features "real" people, as opposed to the fake people of the movies and internet. The novel says that there is no reality in grand narratives and manufactured controversies. It asks

the reader to focus only on the real created in the novel, as that is something that is possible to comprehend. This is similar to an idea called performatism, which Vermeulen and Van den Akker discuss in their paper with reference to Eshelman: “Eshelman describes performatism as the willful self-deceit to believe in — or identify with, or solve —something in spite of itself” (Vermeulen & Van den Akker 2010, 6).

René asks the reader to deceive themselves that whatever situation they find themselves in does not exist and to perceive the real of the novel as a worthwhile depiction of reality, despite its discursive complications. Such an attempt at sincerity is alien to postmodernism, which would have stopped short of attempting such a connection to reality after stating the unreality of the encompassing sphere. Art critic Saltz writes in an article called “Sincerity and Irony Hug it Out” about a certain attitude he observes in modern art gallery exhibitions:

> It’s an attitude that says, I know that the art I’m creating may seem silly, even stupid, or that it might have been done before, but that doesn’t mean this isn’t serious. At once knowingly self-conscious about art, unafraid, and unashamed, these young artists not only see the distinction between earnestness and detachment as artificial; they grasp that they can be ironic and sincere at the same time, and they are making art from this compound-complex state of mind. (Saltz 2010)

While Saltz refers to young artists in the context of art exposition and galleries, this concept is applicable to Rushdie’s narrator René as well. Irony is seen in the narrator René, whose commentary on his own narrative creates an ironic detachment from the story. Yet at the same time he express earnest sentiments, that border on cliché. René sees the Joker’s (or Trump’s, if you will) presidency as a dangerous force that has to be conquered through the combined forces of love and humanity:

> It had been more than a year since the Joker’s conquest of America and we were all still in shock and going through the stages of grief but now we needed to come together and set love and beauty and solidarity and friendship against the monstrous forces that faced us. Humanity was the only answer to the cartoon. (365)

Such an uncomplicated depiction of good versus evil would be strange in a postmodern novel. Yet, René is not such a narrator. He makes these kind of statements without irony. He thinks there is good and bad, and not only subjective interpretations of the world. There is a sense of urgency to his style, which is not lessened by him being conscious about his own position in the narrative. Rushdie states that he recognises a change since writing *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*: "Certainly I've increasingly found in my writing that love becomes the dominant value, in a way that it wasn't so much when I was writing 'Midnight's Children' and 'Shame'" (Tuttle 2017). Of course love has been a dominant theme in all kinds of writing, including postmodernism, but René's cliché of love and humanity staves off the apathy and detachment of reality often seen in self-aware narrators. René's concern for the state of society is strong enough to bear the risk to seem silly and express himself in a sincere way even though he is self-conscious about it. There is the belief in a certain connection between humans, a universal humanity, despite being aware that the concept of humanity is a constructed idea that might not fully reflect reality.

The focus of *The Golden House* on truth and reality might give the impression that an ontological perspective as discussed by McHale is still the dominant of the novel. Yet the novel gives more importance to the question of what to do with the idea of a malleable reality and what to do if there is not any form of objective truth. What happens to morals and ethics when truth no longer exists? These are the kind of questions the novel asks: "what is heroism in our time? What is villainy? How much we have forgotten, if we don't know the answer to such questions anymore" (47). The novel discusses that "in our age of bitterly contested realities it is not easy to agree upon what is actually happening or has happened, on *what is the case,* let alone upon the moral or meaning of this or any other tale" (41). The novel conveys that contemporary times are detached from reality, more so than in the past. It then asks how one can still determine what is morally good or bad, when there is no way of knowing what is true and what is not. There are definitely ontological aspects carried over from postmodernism in the novel, but the novel leans

more towards the ethical dominant of post-postmodernism.

Whether in this respect *The Golden House* is a one-off in Rushdie's oeuvre will become clear in the next chapter which discusses Rushdie's latest novel, *Quichotte* (2019). This novel also comments on the unreality of contemporary times, which it dubs the Age of Anything-Can Happen.

4. Analysis of Quichotte

Quichotte (2019) is Rushdie's latest novel, which is once again set in modern day America. As the title suggests, the novel is based upon Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. The main character, Quichotte, can no longer distinguish what is real from what is not. This delusion is induced by watching extensive amounts of television shows. Not only does he consume these shows obsessively, he also falls in love with a woman he has seen on television: Salma R, a famous actress/talk show host. He sets out on a quest for her love. At the start of his journey, Quichotte realises his regret for not having a child, and wishes for the creation of one during a meteor shower. In this way, his son Sancho is born. Sancho can first only be seen by Quichotte, but as the story progresses he starts to interact with other people. After introducing these characters, the novel then reveals that the story of Quichotte is being written by an Indian-American who goes by the pseudonym of Sam DuChamp. Such a structure in also seen in *Don Quixote*: Cervantes says that the second part of the novel is written by an historian called Benengeli and in the third part even enters the fiction himself. Therefore, besides *Quichotte*'s obvious references to *Don Quixote* with the names of its characters and its plot line, the novel's metanarrative play is also a nod to Cervantes.

Quichotte has elements from many different styles and genres. The quest for love suggest the novel is a classical romance. The many references to *Don Quixote* and other literary works makes the novel a pastiche. Furthermore, the novel is also a commentary on American society and

politics and incorporates elements of spy-novels and science fiction novels. The novel itself is aware of its many topics:

> [H]e talked about wanting to take on the destructive, mind-numbing junk culture of his own age. He said he was trying also to write about impossible, obsessional love, father son relationships, sibling quarrels, and yes, unforgivable things: About Indian immigrants, racism towards them, crooks among them; about cyber-spies, science fiction, the intertwining of fictional and 'real' realities, the death of the author, the end of the world. (…) Nothing very ambitious, then, she said. And it's about opioid addiction, too, he added. (Rushdie 2019, 289)

All this may seem like an amalgamation of unrelated topics, which is what some reviewers criticise the book for. Sandhu says that the novel fails as a critique of modern culture, as it participates in the same torrent of topics and cheap entertainment as the society it intends to critique: *"Quichotte* is too restless and in love with itself to be anything other than a symptom of the malaise it laments" (Sandhu 2019). But these topics, while diverse, do not detract from what I see as the novel's main theme: the effect of fiction on reality. In fact, most of these topics are connected through this theme, which will become clear throughout this chapter. For now I will continue with the novel's aspiration to discuss the junk culture of modern society.

THE HOLY REALMS OF TELEVISION

Similar to *The Golden House*, *Quichotte*'s America is caught in a kind of unreality, which "might be termed the unreal real" (Rushdie 2019, 4). The cause for this is television, its depiction of reality for many being more real than that what it supposedly depicts. To live in the world of television is the highest achievable goal and the novel compares the role television plays in society with the role of a concept such as heaven. When one enters the live of reality TV, one has entered the real world and left behind the mundane life outside of television, which is only a weak reflection of the exalted lifestyle of the actors. Such thinking is also often seen in religion: life on Earth is merely a prelude to life in heaven. In this life after death you will find that your true life has now begun and life on Earth is just a reflection of the goodness of this realm. When Quichotte finally meets Salma R, he thinks:

> Between the gods and mortal men there hung a veil, and its name was *maya.* The truth was that the fabled world of the gods was the real one, while the supposedly actual world inhabited by human beings was an illusion, and *maya,* the veil of illusion, was the magic by which the gods persuaded men and woman that their illusory world was real. When Quichotte saw Miss Salma R walking toward him (…) he was about to have an experience granted to very few creatures of flesh and blood: he would pass through the veil and enter the realm of the blessed, where divinities made their sport. (329)

The veil in this case is that of the television screen, the illusion that, before their meeting, prevented Quichotte from entering the world of Salma. Now that he has met her, he has left behind the actual of his own life and passed into the world of an actress.

Another instance of such imagery is Quichotte's discussion of the two cities of New York. He argues that the first version is the city he experiences everyday, with all of its many aspects —"the whole ugly-pretty city" (157). Existing next to this visible city is the one that is invisible: "'this is the guardian city, its high forbidding walls made of wealth and power, and it is were reality lives. Only its few keyholders can enter that sacred space'" (157). This is the city of TV, where reality is created — or rather, what Quichotte deems to be reality.

Quichotte seems to be one of these keyholders: "'I have one key,' Quichotte said, 'and when the time comes I may have to go to find the lock it opens'" (157). This is related to a play on words mentioned in the prelude of the novel, where the narrator mentions that "for the purposes of this text, the recommended pronunciation is the elegant French 'key-SHOT' for reasons which the text itself will make clear" (xiii). The emphasis on the word shot foreshadows that the key Quichotte refers to is in fact a gun. When his meeting with Salma did not go as he wanted, Quichotte despairs and feels that the "invisible membrane that separated Salma's world from his had thickened" (337). In his desperation, his gun begins talking to him, a trope also seen in *The Golden House.* His gun tells him: "the way for an ordinary decrepit nobody like you to penetrate the barrier that keeps you out of the blessed world, the world of light and fame and wealth, is to use a bullet" (337). The only way to enter the blessed world of media and television is to shoot Salma. The decision Quichotte makes to not shoot her is the climax of the theme of morality which is central to this novel. The

novel illustrates how the morality of American society is degrading, partly through the unrealities of internet and television. This concern is summarised in Quichotte's inner debate: "do you mean to do right by her? Do you mean well by her? Or is your desire so great that it overwhelms your sense of the right and the good?" (325). Has Quichotte's sense of morality been degraded so much by the desire for access to the sacred world of television that he is willing to shoot somebody, or is there still a sense of humanity left in him?

BLURRING OF FACT AND FICTION

Quichotte is very much a metanarrative novel, even more so than *The Golden House.* Similar to *The Golden House,* it has a Chinese doll-like structure, with multiple narratives that contain other narratives themselves. The narrative of Quichotte is contained within the world of the author DuChamp (who is also referred to as Brother), of whom it is not clear whether he is the narrator of his own story or if he is being narrated himself. Sancho is imagined by Quichotte, adding another layer of fiction to the novel. The effect of *trompe-l'œil* is again present, as the line between the world of Quichotte and that of Brother becomes more and more blurred throughout the novel. One of the causes for this blurring is the influence Brother's life has on Quichotte's narrative. Commenting on the creation of his new novel featuring Quichotte, Brother says: "Perhaps this bizarre story was a metamorphosed version of his own" (22). Elements of Brother's life keep recurring in Quichotte's tale. Brother's son makes a miracle reappearance in his life after being absent for a long time, just as Sancho is miraculously born after Quichotte wishes for him. Brother is estranged from his sister, but seeks for ways to make amends; a situation in which Quichotte finds himself too. Brother is distraught with guilt for the unforgivable things he had done to his sister, which is reflected in his characters. Even when the stories of Brother's characters are not a exact copy of his life, aspects of it still find a way into the narrative of Quichotte. Feeling betrayed by his sister because she leaves him and their parents for England, Brother hits her: "the blow

almost knocked her out and she felt a thin trickle of blood seeping out of her ringing ear" (65). Later Sancho questions Quichotte as to why he is estranged from his sister: "'Did you hit her?' I [Sancho] asked him. 'Is that it? You hit her across the face with an open hand and a trickle of blood came down from her ear'" (200). It turns out that this is not what happened with Quichotte and his sister, but Brother's feelings of guilt are obviously passed on to his characters. Moments like these recur throughout the book, creating a connection between reality and fiction.

But it is not a connection that goes only one way. In the beginning of the novel, Brother already realises the effect his fiction has on his life: "Quichotte himself might say, if he was aware of Brother (which was impossible, naturally), that in fact the writer's tale was the altered version *his* history, rather than the other way around" (22). Quichotte's story seems to have an effect on Brother's reality too. In his novel, Brother writes about a man who makes racist remarks towards two Indian men, after which he returns with a gun and shoots them. Later, when Brother is in a bar with his son, the exact same thing happens to him, causing him to predict what is going to happen. Before this scene, he has found out that his sister had been abused in the same way his fictional character Salma R has been assaulted. His sister, at a young age, was harassed by his father, but nobody from Brother's family told him. Yet, he has imagined this scene for his character. He thinks: "Maybe this was the human condition, to live inside fictions created by untruths or the withholding of actual truths. Maybe human life was truly fictional in this sense, that those who lived it didn't understand it wasn't real" (300). His realisation about his family has shattered his understanding of reality, making him question whether people do not just tell themselves narratives about their life, without any grasp of reality itself.

But Brother does hold on to the idea that some narratives can provide insight into reality. He has a glimpse of hope that humankind *can* have access to reality, even though this would be through yet another narrative. Apparently Brother had always known about his father's abuse, but he needed his novel to realise this: "he had been writing about an imaginary girl in an imaginary family and he

had given her something close to Sister's fate, without knowing how close to the truth he had come. (…) could books, some books, gain access to those hidden chambers and use what they found there?" (300-301). Brother seems to entertain the idea that literature can be a way to approximate reality. At the very least, literature is able to transform and improve reality. This can be seen in, for example, Brother's "*fool's conviction* [my emphasis] that the imaginings of creative people could spill over beyond the boundaries of the works themselves, that they possessed the power to enter and transform and even improve the real world" (32). He truly beliefs literature possesses this power, but at the same time admits them to be the beliefs of a fool.

The novel has numerous other characters that are trying to find a way towards objective truth. Quichotte's sister recalls that in the past Quichotte was a freelance investigative, interested in "delving into the hidden reality of the world, the truth that exists but is buried very deep so that most of us can live among more palatable fictions" (254). Salma R makes a program which is to "take on all the enemies of contemporary reality: the anti-vaxxers, the climate loonies (…) the president, the religious nuts (327). She says that the truth is "still out there, still breathing under the rubble of the bullshit bombs" and that her team is the "rescue squad" that is going to get the truth "out alive" (327). The scientist Evel Cent says that the "truth is the truth and must be heard, however problematic it seems" (269). Despite Brother's postmodern realisation that reality is constructed through narratives, there is the sense that reality still can be approached by picking the right narratives, whether this is through combating enemies of contemporary reality such as 'anti-vaxxers' or the president, through conducting science, or through literature.

The influence fiction has on reality is exemplified through an absurd climax where Brother's fictional characters appear in his Brother's room. In Brother's fiction, the fabric of Quichotte's world has started to come apart, creating black holes that consist of nothingness. To escape this danger, the genius scientist/entrepreneur Evel Cent has created a device called NEXT, which acts as a portal to a parallel earth. He boldly steps into this portal and arrives in Brother's study, but his size

relative to the world around him is so small that he dies of suffocation, as the air of Brother's world is too thick for him to breathe. This can be read as a metaphor for how fiction relates to the real. Brother realises: "It was a question of scale. This world so gigantic compared to that. That other world, which he now understood to be the one he himself has made, was a miniature universe" (390). The fiction of Brother does not have the impact to survive in the actual outside his miniature universe. But once in a while, a fiction becomes big enough to make the cross-over from fiction to reality.

RUSHDIE'S NEW STYLE

Similar to *The Golden House*, *Quichotte* highlights the problems of a society where fiction and fact are indistinguishable. *Quichotte* depicts a world where TV and internet give credibility to every kind of narrative:

> Meanwhile, things fall apart as well as people. Countries fall apart as well as their citizens. 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. How's a young person supposed to tell them apart? How to discriminate? Every show on every network tells you the same thing: based upon a true story. But that's not true either. The true story is that there's no true story anymore. There's no true any more that anyone can agree on. (133)

The text realises that truth is not always absolute and is constructed through narratives; Brother's realisation that his whole image of his youth has been a fiction is proof of such awareness. Still, countries are falling apart — in Quichotte's world this happens quite literally — because there is no way to differentiate between what is true and what is not. Despite Brother's hesitation whether humans are even capable of living in reality, the ability to differentiate between true and false is still valued. This desire for a more clear distinction between fact and fiction stems — as previously seen in *The Golden House* — from concerns about the dichotomy in American society. Because such different interpretations of what is fact and what is fiction exist side by side, very polarising interpretations of the truth arise within the same society. Sancho, lacking guidance for how to live his life, turns to television to see how other people live. He wants to learn what is considered

normal, yet normality turns out to be a concept that is interpreted very differently depending on who you ask:

> Normal is guns and the normal America that really wants to be great again. Then there's another normal if your skin colour is the wrong colour and another if you're educated and another if you think education is brainwashing and there's an America that believes in vaccines for kids and another that says that's a con trick and everything one normal believes is a lie to another normal and they're all on TV depending where you look (132)

This long winding sentence is similar to René's outburst on what normality looks like in Trump's bubble. The concern for the dichotomy in America's society is portrayed with a sense of urgency, which is different from the traditionally detached position of postmodernism. A sense of impending doom is present throughout the book. Vermeulen and Van den Akker mention that "the threefold 'threat' of the credit crunch, a collapsed center, and climate change (…) infuses doubt, inspires reflection, and incites a move forward out of the postmodern and into the metamodern" (Vermeulen & van den Akker 2010, 125), in which the metamodern is a concept similar to what I call post-postmodernism in this thesis. The same notion can be seen in *Quichotte*. Brother explains that he utilises the metaphor of a world that is literally falling apart as "a parallel to the decay — the environmental, political, social, moral decay — of the planet on which he lived" (356). The urgency of these problems is what makes the novel adopt a sincere and direct tone, with a specific moral purpose. All of the characters in the novel constantly remind the reader that they are living in very tumultuous times. Sancho feels that the "world outside the motel room has totally ceased to be straightforward" (134). There are continuous references to contemporary times as the "Age of Anything-can-Happen" (7, 79, 369). The response a writer may have to this, according to Brother, is to criticise that what makes the times seem to be so out of control: "I think that it's legitimate for a work of art made in the present time to say, we are being crippled by the culture we have made, by its most popular elements above all (…) and by stupidity and ignorance and bigotry" (362).

This comment seems to indicate the attitude Rushdie has towards this novel. To draw parallels between the author of a novel and his narrator is often perceived as a fallacy, but in the case of *Quichotte* it seems like the novel invites the reader to compare these two. Through its Chinese doll structure the text focusses on the role of the narrator, and how he infuses his fiction with elements of his own life. Brother's discussion of his relation to his character Quichotte echoes Rushdie's own relation to his fiction: "they were both Indian American men, one real, one fictional, both born long ago in what was then Bombay (…) They were about the same age" (22). All of these similairites can also be used in a comparison between Rushdie and Brother. The sub-plot of Brother's paranoid fear for some powerful conspiracy against his life echoes how Rushdie would have lived in the years after the *fatwa.* Part of the intricacy of this novel is its depiction of the relation between Brother and Quichotte, while at the same time the relation between Rushdie and his characters is constantly hinted at. In any case, whether this aspiration is shared by Rushdie or not, Brother strives for a connection of his art with the world outside his art, in order to change the damaging effect of the stupidity and bigotry he observes there. Yet the novel also realises that this ambition might be naive. When his son responds to Brother's claim that it is his job as a writer to comment on the damaging elements of modern society:

> 'So what have you done about it?' Son demanded. 'What's your contribution? What sort of mark do you think you're leaving on the world'? 'I did my work, and then there's you,' he [Brother] said, hearing as he spoke the weakness of his reply. (…) Your son, your grand inquisitor. (362)

The narrator combines both sincerity and irony — he feels the need to combat the culture of bigotry and ignorance that is crippling society but he also accepts with some irony the weakness of his position. This marriage of two seemingly incompatible attitudes is important to Rushdie's new style. It suggests a concern with societal developments which doesn't allow for writing in the detached manner of postmodernism. Instead, Rushdie continues in the same manner as with *The Golden House. Quichotte* warns against a culture where every kind of information has the same value as the other, creating a society without knowledge of virtues or morals.

This moralistic aspect of Rushdie's writing in the Age of Anything-Can-Happen is seen in the more apparent preference of one side over another. In my analysis of *The Satanic Verses* I discussed the concept of satiric equal time. *The Satanic Verses* by some is considered to be almost void of bias because the novel satirises everything and everyone. But just as in *The Golden House*, *Quichotte* contains more overt political criticism, aimed at one particular side. Sancho and Quichotte have numerous experiences with racist violence and behaviour. One of these experiences describes a climate of racism in the Republican leaning states. Sancho, feeling the racial tension build up in a diner where they have stopped, mentions that they "need to get out of the red states" and go to the "nearest blue state" (142). Soon after, they get kicked out and Quichotte seeks refuge in "Lawrence, Kansas (pop. 95,358), a liberal-minded enclave in that conservative state" (144). While this is not especially critical language, it implies that racism mostly resides in the Republican states. Later, Sancho sees a "fat man in a red hat screaming at men and women also fat also in red hats about victory" (132) on a TV programme. The man explains whom they represent: "We're undereducated and overfed. We're full of pride over who the f*ck knows. (…) We are Beavis and Butt-Head on 'roids. We drink Roundup from the can. Our president looks like a Christmas ham and talks like Chucky. We're America, bitch" (132). This pointed satire aimed at Trump and his supporters is unconcealed, containing an anger also seen in René's monologue quoted in the previous chapter. There is no attempt to hide bias, not even behind the flimsy veil of fictionality. The novel ridicules the idea that its characters are not based upon any real life persons by the sarcastic insistence that a character — which is based upon Trump — is totally fictional. This character is described as a "wholly imaginary chief executive who was obsessed by cable news, who pandered to a white supremacist base, and who had played gold with Salma C's predecessor and talked locker-room shit to him about girls" (46). This continues with references to this executive's "fictional dislike of immigrants" and his "fictitious inability to focus" (46). By continuously highlighting the fictive nature of the executive's characteristics, this insistence

becomes a sarcastic remark that means the exact opposite. It is obvious that this character is based upon Trump. While such satire was always present in Rushdie's work, his most recent novel feature satire that is aimed predominantly at one side of the political spectrum.

Because of this overt political preference, it is plausible to read some of the novel's slightly less explicit satire through this lens as well. A example is the absurdist passage where Quichotte and Sancho travel through a town where some of the population has changed into mastodons. Rushdie borrows heavily from from Eugène Ionesco's play *Rhinoceros* for this scene, adding another intertextual reference to the novel. This depiction of an opposition in the form of monstrous mastodons versus humans resembles how *The Golden House* depicts the dichotomy of American society — humanity versus monsters. The mastodons show nationalistic tendencies, but then stop communicating with any of the humans of Berenger: "'In the first days one or two of them insisted that they were the true Americans, and we were the dinosaurs and ought to be extinct. But after a short time they gave up on talking to us, and just yowled like flügelhorns instead'" (185). This is similar to how supporters of Trump have been depicted earlier; as proud Americans, overfed and uneducated, without "anything like moderation" (189).

The choice for absurdism, a technique often used in postmodernism, to engage with a political phenomenon, is similar to how Alber and Bell describe the new sincerity of post-postmodernism:

> Whether postmodernism is dead, dying, deadish or simply less dominant, there is a growing argument that many cultural artefacts in the twenty-first century use postmodern techniques not to foreground the artificiality of all narratives and by implication the world beyond but instead to earnestly engage with the moral, ethical and political issues affecting contemporary society. (Alber and Bell 2019, 124)

The absurdism of the mastodons is a way to engage with the political landscape of the novel. Through the use of this technique, Rushdie discusses the dangers that come from the polarisation of society. Brother later explains the function of the passage of the mastodons in his text. He says that the absurd in general "both mocked and celebrated our inability to give life a truly coherent

meaning" (362), while the "mastodons in particular" said "something about our growing dehumanisation, about how as a species we, or some of us, might be losing our moral compass" (362). While the absurd in general might foreground the artificiality of meaning, his use of absurdism is to highlight the ethical problems of modern society. Brother's use of a postmodern technique thus firstly engages with both political and ethical issues, before the technique foregrounds the constructed nature of meaning-making. Still, there are a lot of postmodernist elements in *Quichotte.* There is a high amount of intertextuality, and the various ontological levels of the text result in a highly metanarrative text. There is a return to magical realism, such as this description of the working prowess of Salma R, which is very reminiscent of Rushdie's earlier work:

> Monday was the only weekday on which the show did not air and so, on acount of the force of Miss Salma R's will, the laws of the universe were indeed suspended at the *Salma* offices building each Monday (…) Unnerved by Miss Salma R's temporal absolutism, the clocks gave up arguing and stopped trying to run the hours in the normal fashion, so that when people looked in their direction to see what the tie was, the clocks showed them whatever time they wanted it to be. (48)

Another example is the way Rushdie highlights the inexactness of discursive reality. In a side note printed in italics, the narrator tells us that Quichotte and Sancho live on the road, sleeping in a tent. The narrator then apologises for not discussing this tent before: "There has always been a tent in Quichotte's car. Maybe we should have mentioned that. It has been there all the time. Sorry" (97). This interjection of the narrator is a postmodern technique that highlights the indeterminate nature of objects in discursive representations. Rushdie plays with the idea that beside what a text literally describes, the text also projects a mental construct that fills in the blanks for what the text does *not* describe. For example, when an event takes place in a house, not every room will be described exhaustively. There is a spotlight that illuminates some parts of the house, but the other parts are only implied. Postmodernists then intentionally direct the reader's attention

to this impossibility to exhaustively describe everything. By highlighting the failure to mention the tent before, the narrator shows the narrowness of a discursive depiction of reality.

However, most of these postmodern techniques are found within the fiction created by Brother. Salma R's ability to control the flow of time and the postmodern tent are both passages that are supposedly written by Brother. Whenever Brother's life itself is narrated, such typically postmodern tricks are not present, with the exception of the blurring of fiction and reality. The novel seems to parody the postmodern in Brother's writing, while the narration of Brother's life has a more realist tone.

Towards the end of the novel, Quichotte's world starts to fall apart. Holes which do not contain any matter at all start appearing at random. At one point, "the nothingness burst through the somethingness of the world" (377) and destroys the Metropolitan Museum, of which the narrator comments that "the long-gathered and carefully curated history of the human race was gone, and with it a part of the meaning of life on earth" (377). If this would have happened in *Midnight's Children,* I imagine Saleem would react differently. The destruction of a careful curated history might be welcome to him, as it would be symbolic of the constructed nature of history. But the narrator in *Quichotte* is different, as he laments the destruction of these narratives which provide live with meaning. One can see the different attitudes towards narratives; where Saleem looks for the deconstruction of narratives, the narrator in *Quichotte* is looking for meaning where he can. The same attitude is seen in Sister (Brother's sister). She is a life-long lawyer who has worked countless pro-bono cases for minorities. Nevertheless, she is accused of being racist when she helps her neighbourhood sue a restaurant — called Sancho, in honour of the African Ignatius Sancho — for noise-pollution. She wins the lawsuit, but longs for a past where things had meaning:

> One had no story any more. Character, narrative, history, were all dead. Only the flat caricature of the instant remained, and that was what one was judged by. To have lived long enough to witness the replacement of the depth of her chosen world's culture by its surfaces was a sad thing. (236)

She seems to remember a time where there was a more permanent truth, even if this truth was created by nothing more than a narrative; a kind of objective truth which could be called upon to determine what was true or false. Again, such a sentiment is different from Rushdie's earlier novels, which deconstruct exactly these kind of narratives.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MORALITY AND LOVE

The novel shows that with the decline of narrative, history and culture, also comes the decline of morality. Sancho exemplifies the novel's idea that depriving the universe of meaning leads to a decline in morality: "'I'm like the sky at night. The universe has no interest in right and wrong. It doesn't care who lives or dies and who behaved well or badly. (…) You know what the motto of the universe is? Give me more. I want it all. That's my motto too'" (103). He argues that in modern society it is difficult to gain a moral compass, since the universe is empty of meaning, and thus right and wrong do not exist. Sancho is born from the television and internet culture of America the novel wants to combat: "he himself was a by-blow of the junk culture that was addling the brains of many fool old and young, maybe even of America" (351). Sancho has a lack of consciousness because his life is not based upon reality, but rather upon what he sees on TV. He argues that he does not need a conscience, since he has seen that "conscience isn't a major requirement in human affairs" (341). Sancho's main desire is to be a real human, and he says that because he has an insula — the area of the brain that regulates a lot of mental processes which are considered unique to humans — proves that he is a "genuine human person" (341). Yet, the cricket who bestowed him this humanity, tells him that "without a conscience (…) you're not even a genuine chimpazee'"(341). The novel states that a very important aspect of being human is one's conscience, and this is exactly what humanity is losing.

Because of his lack of humanity, Sancho is becoming less real by the moment. He is literally disappearing and he is compared to a "bad signal" that is not "always coming through

clearly" (349). The use of such imagery links Sancho again to the world of TV. The solution for his problem is love — a somewhat naif and uncomplicated solution, typical of Rushdie's newer style. Sancho meets a fairy who offers him her definition of love: "love makes the other more important than you. And the other isn't necessarily an individual. It can be a town, a community, a country" (349). Love is a narrative that gives reality meaning, making the world and the one who loves more real. One of Sancho's most heinous crimes is that he robbed money from Quichotte's sister while enjoying her hospitality. After this, he progressively becomes less real, and in order to preserve himself he gets the advice that he should "apologise, get a job, work until you've paid her back, and cling to the love of being alive and living a decent life. That's the love that makes you real" (349). Since Sancho is in some ways modern society personified, this advice has a broader audience than only Sancho. The increasing unreality of the world and its dangers sketched in this novel can be overcome through regaining a sense of morality that guides humanity to live a decent life. The novel seems to say that not only Sancho, but modern society has to learn to love in such a way again. Sancho then responds that he is definitely not taking that advice, since he could get the same advice from a "Internet meme or in a fortune cookie" (349). Again, the novel combines a genuine message with a self-conscious remark that this message is cliché. Yet the message proves to be true, as Sancho ultimately disappears, unable to become a real person. Quichotte, however, realises that his quest was not only about achieving something he desires, but about regaining his morality:

> 'My quest for you,' he told Miss Salma R,' has not been for you alone, but also for my own compromised goodness and virtue" (…) I was out my mind, looking for this year's birds in last year's nest. And all around me America — and not only America, the whole human race! — yes even our India!— was also losing its reason, its capacity for ethics, its goodness, its soul' (381).

This realisation then passes through from the level of Quichotte's fiction to that of Brother: "The character was teaching the Author about the nature of true love" (356). Brother is referred to as the Author, a sudden change from his former name. This suggests that the text is referring to some

unknown narrator, possibly even Rushdie. Shortly after having this realisation about the recovery of his morality, Quichotte enters the Author's reality. This seems to indicate an attempt to connect the world of the fiction with that of reality. In this way, the novel expresses the desire to make Quichotte, with his ideas of morality and love, enter the real and change it for the better. Again this idea is not presented without any complication, as the last sentence of the novel shows: "There they stood in the gateway, on the threshold of an impossible dream: Miss Salma R and Quichotte" (390). An attempt of connecting fiction with reality has been made, but there is also the realisation that this is an unattainable fantasy. A postmodern realisation, but without the ironic detachment that postmodernists usually utilise.

Thus the importance of morality and love in this novel suggests that the blurring of fact and fiction should not be read primarily in the traditional postmodern manner. Instead, what can characterise *Quichotte's* style is its ethical dominant. The text mainly points out its ethical concerns about the difficulty to discern between fact and fiction, while the postmodern topic of the artificiality of narratives is discussed as merely a part of this overarching ethical problem. The novel shows, through some literary criticism of itself, that its interplay between fact and fiction is a way to represent modern society in the most realistic way. A FBI agent, who is investigating Brother, says the following about Brother's story of Quichotte: "'I'm no critic, sir, but I estimate that you're telling the reader that the surreal, and even the absurd, now potentially offer the most accurate descriptors of real life" (222). *Quichotte's* blurring of fact and fiction is an attempt to depict modern reality — a reality in which the constant interruptions of fictive versions of reality by TV and internet have created a society that is in a similar state as Quichotte's deluded mind. This blurring is not a postmodern technique which ironically highlights its own discursiveness, but an attempt to depict modern society and point out genuine concerns. Just as in *The Golden House,* this reality is then critiqued and its dangers are described. The loss of morality is identified as a threat which comes from a society that cannot tell what is true and what is not. *Quichotte,* in a similar way

as *The Golden House*, marks a shift in approach in Rushdie's work to a more ethically concerned and sincere style, despite its apparent postmodernist characteristics.

5. Conclusion

The goal of this thesis is to show that Rushdie's style has changed from his postmodernist works such as *Midnight's Children* and *The Satanic Verses* to a style more concerned with ethical and moral subjects. My analysis by and large finds similar characteristics in Rushdie's newest novel that critics such as Vermeulen and Alber and Bell detect in other 21st-century literature and other art-forms. Vermeulen states in a 2012 interview: "The metamodern generation oscillates between a postmodern doubt and a modern desire for sense: for meaning, for direction. Grand narratives are as necessary as they are problematic, hope is not simply something to distrust, love not necessarily something to be ridiculed" (Vermeulen 2012, 215). Both *The Golden House* and *Quichotte* show a significantly different attitude than earlier Rushdie novels towards metanarratives and their role in constructing our conception of reality. In his new novels, Rushdie — like the metamodern generation, as Vermeulen says — advocates the necessity of stable, trustable narratives that help give meaning to reality. The novels also exhibit a strong interest in questions of morality. Perhaps this interest stems from the belief that through values and morals direction can be found and the desire for sense can be satisfied. Additionally, as Vermeulen mentions, love is a dominant value in Rushdie's recent fiction. *Quichotte* and *The Golden House* both put forward love as a viable solution to the problems they depict. The novels reflect with some irony on the naivety of such a conviction, but most definitely do not ridicule love.

This analysis of his recent fiction shows that Rushdie has turned to this new style in part because of the political and societal atmosphere in the United States. The current political climate plus the ease of spreading one's opinion through the internet creates an environment in which every

kind of narrative is worth as much as the other. One of the reasons for the differences between Rushdie's attitude towards narratives between his earlier novels and more recent novels is that at the time of writing, for example, *Midnight's Children*, society's conception of truth and reality had a different dynamic. His concern lay mostly with official narratives that interpret and shape people's conception of reality. Rushdie's earlier style of writing questions the truth of meaning made through grand narratives. However, such undermining of narratives is commonplace in modern society. One merely has to call a story fake news and to a certain part of the populace all credibility of this story is lost. These developments might have induced Rushdie to change his attitude towards the necessity of metanarratives. Thus the fragmentation of reality — depicted through magical realism and other postmodern techniques — so often seen in *Midnight's Children* and *The Satanic Verses* is less pronounced, or at least less promoted, in his newer novels.

Part of these changes in style might also have to do with the decrease in value of knowledge in modern society. The current political environment has brought a atmosphere that dismisses all kinds of knowledge — most significantly, scientific and journalistic knowledge — as elitist. This environment supports the notion that laymen have the same claim to truth as the experts do. It seems plausible that as a counter reaction to these developments, Rushdie might have changed his style to foreground less how subjective experience changes one's perception of reality, and rather show how individual perception does not disallow for universal truths.

Besides explanations that focus on societal developments, the widespread use of postmodern techniques such as self-reflexivity has made the postmodern — the movement that opposes literary conventions — so familiar that postmodern techniques themselves have become convention. Alber and Bell state that "self-reflexivity has become a common and well-known narrative device, and, somewhat paradoxically, its familiarity has allowed authors to utilise these conventions to produce a new artistic movement" (Alber and Bell 2019, 131). It seems a natural step from an artistic perspective to move away, or rather transform the increasingly stale conventions into

something that is more applicable in a depiction of modern society. Art forms such as René's *mockumentary* show how the postmodern device of self-reflexivity can be transformed into a way to reflect "the struggle for authenticity and sincerity of writers" (Hoydis 2019, 152).

The Golden House and *Quichotte*, then, show that Rushdie's style of writing has changed, and at the heart of this change lies the change of the dominant in approaching these novels. In *The Satanic Verses* Rushdie highlights how our belief systems influence our worldview; in *Midnight's Children* discursive representations are shown to be constructions which shape our conception of the universe. But in his later works Rushdie no longer primarily questions these interaction between language and our perception of reality. Instead, his newer novels discuss why it is important to have these narratives that give meaning to life. They highlight that it is important that we choose the right narrative to shape our conceptions of reality. The novels show that morals might be constructed, but that some morals are necessary as guidance. As such, the dominant of these novels is no longer ontological, but ethical.

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