

## Cultural contradiction of characters in Salman Rushdie's *The Free Radio*

In the stories of Salman Rushdie, it is not a surprising phenomenon for the main characters to often have a mixed or so called hybrid identity which is usually based on the differences of the Orient and Occident, where main characters of a certain cultural background also happen to have the (mainly inner) characteristics of the "opposite" culture. *The Free Radio* is one of the three stories of the East section of Rushdie's *East, West* collection, published in 1994. These stories, as the section's title also suggests, are set in an eastern setting, where the Orientals (Indian people) are influenced by the West, so much so that their traditions and way of life become in a way "corrupted" by western standards and culture. Therefore, the characters even start to think about life like the idolized westerners do by trying to break free from the traditions and having new ambitions different from the ones their culture would approve of or normally tolerate.

In the case of *The Free Radio* we can divide the three main characters into three main categories: an old teacher, the representative of the orient and old Indian traditional values; Ramani, the main character who is a naïve rickshaw rider and lastly, the thief's widow (later Ramani's wife) whose personality is almost the opposite of what it is supposed to be like. "Teacher sahib" is an old retired teacher, a respected figure who spends his old days according to the tradition, sitting under a banyan tree smoking his hookah and observing the life of everyday people. He has healthy curiosity towards other people's business and in particular towards Ramani's whom he feels responsible for and genuinely worries about, since he used to know his deceased parents. It is important to note that he is the one who narrates the story, therefore it is mostly his biased point of view that we see.

Then, we have Ramani, a young non-educated but good looking man, who in the beginning of the story lives his life without ambitions and works as a 'rickshaw-wallah'. Strangely he is the only one in the story who has a name. He has a stable business. He could have married someone his age, had his own children and led an average life. Unfortunately, he also happens to be very easily manipulated and thus he ends up marrying a thief's widow and becomes the father of her five children. They made him do and even believe things he in a traditional environment never

would have done, like the vasectomy and dreaming about becoming an actor in Bollywood. All these factors lead to a change in Ramani's perspective on life and this change symbolizes how the culture of India due to the West's intervention fell apart.

However, the worst part about Ramani's character is not the fact that he is easily manipulated, but the way he holds onto these newly implanted ideas which are basically the illusions of the poor. As it is the case with the "free radio", Ramani is made to believe that with the vasectomy he makes the thief's widow happy, thus serves his country's interests and on top of these he will get a free radio in return. It must be mentioned at this point that the dream of the free radio comes before the dreams of being a Bollywood actor and therefore a radio would have played a significant role in his life. It would mean entertainment and information; it represents the western world and would attract new customers to the rickshaw. So, he blindly puts all his faith into the space between his hand and ear, which represents the burden he is to carry. However, even after he finds out that he will never receive a radio from the government, he continues to chase his other unfulfilled dream by making use of the only great thing God has given to him -- his looks. He decides to sell his rickshaw, the only thing that ties him to his old self, and leaves for Bombay to make his way into the film industry. This is where magic realism really draws a line and becomes clear that this story is pure fiction because under normal circumstances there would be no way that some poor rickshaw driver, who cannot even write, would become a successful actor in an unknown city with only his good look. The narrator knows Ramani, so he lets us know that he is known for often conjuring reality, which means that his dreams happened only inside his mind and they could not be turned into reality.

Lastly, we have the thief's attractive widow, who is blamed for the fall of Ramani from the very beginning. She is ten years older than Ramani and has five children and apparently earns her money by doing suspicious deeds. Being the wife of a thief she and her children were poor even before her husband died and naturally after his death their condition becomes worse, and she needs someone to support them. She has her eyes on a young man who is not famous for his brains. The fact that she would have the courage and confidence to go after anybody as a widow makes her different from the typical oriental woman. According to the tradition, as a widow she should have gone to the 'widows' ashrams', joined a spiritual community and spent the rest of her life there praying. Considering that she starts screaming on

the street and shaming someone older than her, not to mention a man who is respected by the people, shows just how much she opposes the cultural norms. She also claims that she has no desire to marry Ramani since she does not want more children. However, soon after she contradicts herself by making him have a vasectomy and they get married. It is as if she was someone who grew up in an entirely different place. To be more exact, she is the one whose simple existence represents the West and the way it gets its way into the life of Indian people and how it stays there until their whole culture, ambitions and beliefs change.

It is interesting to see a duality in the language of this story too. Rushdie uses Indian words and proverbs like “banyan” and “two mouthfuls are better to eat than wind” in order to emphasize the presence of Indian culture in an English text. As I mentioned earlier, these differences actually help to make the story also relevant for the people of the West. Naturally, this works the other way around too and the reason for that is that even though these stories are based on the differences of the Orient and the Occident, people are people and these cultures are not as different as we often like to think.