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The Ground Beneath Her Feet: Myth, Migration and Identity in Salman Rushdie

Abstract I: In *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999) Salman Rushdie indaga temi complessi quali migrazione, mito, identità e celebrità, attraverso una narrazione che con-fonde mitologia antica e cultura pop contemporanea. Più precisamente il romanzo rappresenta da un lato uno spazio in cui i miti classici (uno tra tutti quello di *Orfeo*) migrano verso forme nuove, dando corpo a complesse fisionomie identitarie, dall'altro un narrare della musica e dei musicisti pop in quanto miti contemporanei o meglio metafore contemporanee della migrazione stessa. Mito, migrazione e identità sono dunque le forze discorsive principali del *musical novel* rushdiano, forze attraverso cui è possibile comprendere la fase attuale della globalizzazione.

Abstract II: *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* – Salman Rushdie's 1999 cult novel – stands as a very rich and complex cultural text, which today should be praised for the originality and intelligence of the author's literary invention and for offering a crucial key for the understanding of essential aspects of our present. In the novel the Anglo-Indian writer investigates such complex topics as myth, migration, identity and celebrity, through an extremely rich narrative, which mixes ancient mythology and contemporary pop culture. More specifically the novel represents a space in which ancient myths (namely, the myth of Orpheus) migrate into new forms – shaping complex identities – and at the same time a rich narrative about music and pop musicians as contemporary myths, or better metaphors, of migration. It might be argued that myth, migration and identity represent the main themes and discursive forces of Rushdie's *musical* narrative; these very forces are, in our perspective, essential in order to understand and respond to the present moment of the globalised era.

In the first issue of *Celebrity Studies*, Holmes and Redmond focus on the relationship between stardom and celebrity within the realm of popular culture, making a distinction between the two terms and noting how:

> Film studies in particular has historically used the term 'star' [...] to refer to a representational interaction between the on/off-screen persona. In comparison works outside film studies have more often used the term 'celebrity' to indicate a broad category, which defines the contemporary state of being famous. [...] but what generally

> unites the work on stardom and celebrity is the agreement that celebrity or fame does not reside in the individual: it is constituted discursively 'by the way in which the individual is represented' (Holmes & Redmond 2010: 4).

The issue of representation is of paramount importance in any discourse *on* and *by* Salman Rushdie. In *The Golden House* (2017), his latest novel, which includes multiple references to films and film stars, Rushdie engages in a complex effort of representation of America's nationwide identity crisis and of its obsession with celebrity; here he offers the reader, as a frame for the story of the ultra-wealthy Nero Golden – which the novel's protagonist René, a would-be film-maker, considers a perfect subject for a "mockumentary" – two powerful portraits of America's last two presidents, Obama ("the benevolent emperor") and Trump, who is interestingly referred to in terms of one of film culture's most disturbing icons, (*Batman*'s) the Joker. On the other hand, many discourses *on* Rushdie focus on his celebrity status; English and Frow, indeed, include his name in a list of authors – featuring Martin Amis, Helen Fielding, J. K. Rowling – who have become "celebrity novelists", that is, writers, "whose public personae, whose 'personalities', whose 'real life' stories have become objects of special fascination and intense scrutiny, effectively dominating the reception of their work" (2006: 39).

The very reception of *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* has been, as we will see, dominated by Rushdie's public persona. Rushdie's 1999 world novel represents a very interesting cultural text, which, despite the sharp criticism it received after its publication, by reviewers and scholars alike (often based on pointless comparisons with previous novels by Rushdie), should today be praised for the freshness and intelligence of the author's literary invention and for offering a crucial key for the understanding of essential aspects of our present. Here the Anglo-Indian writer investigates such complex topics as myth, migration, identity and media celebrity, through an extremely rich narrative, which mixes ancient mythology and contemporary pop culture.

The author's interest in investigating and representing the relationship between identity and celebrity culture in the novel is strictly related to two events which have deeply marked his life (in the late 1980s) and the life of his beloved Britain (in the period in which the novel was published). The first event is represented by the fatwa against Rushdie himself issued by Khomeini, after the publication of *The Satanic Verses* in 1988, which if on the one side rendered Rushdie's existence almost impossible, as the writer was compelled to hide himself (and so to lead a secluded life), on the other side made him a global celebrity. The second event is represented by the death of Princess Diana in 1997, that is in the very period in which the writer started working on *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*. What Rushdie found particularly interesting was the role played by the media in the whole story, from the responsibilities of the paparazzi to the narrative constructed by both newspapers and television after the Princess' death.

Rushdie responded to these two events with the construction of a narrative in which myth plays a very relevant role. *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* moves, indeed, between various mythologies: Greek, Indian, Mexican and the easier, but no less relevant, mythology of pop culture. The novel includes references to the Mexican myth of the invention of music

through the winged serpent Quetzalcoatl, alongside numerous references to Indian mythic figures such as Shiva, Kama and Rati. However, the book is strictly connected with Greek mythology. More specifically *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* stands as a postmodern and postcolonial rewriting of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. The two protagonists – Ormus Cama and Vina Apsara indeed – represent contemporary versions of the Greek god of poetry and music and of his beloved muse Eurydice.

It is worth here to briefly summarise the story developed in Rushdie's longest novel. The story begins in the 1930s in Bombay. The two families, the Camas and Merchants, become friends and Ormus Cama and Umeed Merchant, who, also known as Rai, is the novel's (photographer)/first person narrator (Concilio 2003), grow up in wary proximity. Into their lives, in the 1950s, comes the beautiful Vina Apsara, half-Indian, half-Greek, who was born in America but who was moved, in difficult circumstances, to India. Ormus is an extremely gifted musician and songwriter and Vina is an extraordinary singer, the two meet significantly in a Bombay record shop – their postmodern love emblematically originating "under the sign of music in the age of mechanical reproduction" (Bassi 2003: 107) – and they fall in love immediately, though during their relationship they suffer years of absence, in which, among other things, Rai becomes Vina's lover. In short, in the very process of migration, translation and rewriting which is at the heart of the novel, Orpheus and Eurydice are turned into two contemporary rock stars, whose celebrity status spreads across the world in a complex itinerary of migration which watches the two lovers and their music move from India, to England, to America, where with the band VTO they conquer global fame. Finally, in Mexico Vina dies in an earthquake, making, like Eurydice, an entrance into an underworld from where the novel's postmodern Orpheus, that is Ormus, won't rescue her.

In this sense the novel represents a space in which ancient myths migrate into new forms – shaping complex identities – and at the same time a fascinating narrative about music and pop musicians as contemporary myths, or better metaphors, of migration. It might be argued that myth, migration and identity represent the three main themes and discursive forces of Rushdie's *musical* narrative; these very forces are, in our perspective, essential in order to understand and respond to the present globalised era. Cupitt defines myth as a:

> traditional sacred story of anonymous authorship and archetypal or universal significance which is recounted in a certain community and is often linked with a ritual […] it tells the deeds of superhuman beings such as gods, demigods, heroes, spirits or ghosts […] it is set outside historical time in primal or eschatological time or in the supernatural world. […] The work of myth is to explain, to reconcile, to guide action or to legitimate. We can add that myth making is evidently a primal and universal function of the human mind as it seeks a more or less unified vision of the cosmic order, the social order and the meaning of the individual's life (Cupitt 1982: 29).

Cupitt stresses some features which are very relevant for the understanding of ancient and contemporary myths. There is a narrative dimension, which is central for the very life of myth in any age; myths can be narrated in many different forms: in conversation, novel, films, music, visual art. Recounting myths means offering examples, models, which very

often tend towards order and, more or less, stable meanings. In this sense, the term myth has very often been used in the second half of the twentieth century – starting with the publication of Barthes' *Mythologies* – to define all those forms of behaviour, all those practices and objects in which the cultural takes the place of the natural, occasions in which the establishment imposes its restrictive, normative ideology, and that happens, as we will see, also in the field of popular music. Hence the fashion – in cultural studies and discourse analysis – for so called *demythologisation*.

Today, the notion of myth must not, however, be restricted to that of ideology in the sense indicated by Barthes. According to Coupe (1997) it is possible to define myth in relation to three concepts: paradigm, perfection and possibility. We have already referred through Cupitt to the capacity of myths to offer exemplary models, paradigms, and to their tendency to provide models of order, totality, perfection which according to Coupe must in some cases be resisted, especially when perfectionism becomes synonym of totalitarianism.

The notion of possibility offers instead a new way of conceiving myth, one which preserving myth's contribution to human understanding, offers, according to Ricoeur, "a disclosure of unprecedented worlds […] which transcend the established limits of our *actual* world" (Ricoeur 1991: 490). To explain this idea Coupe makes reference to a Biblical myth, that of the Revelation:

> The readers of Revelation exist in a world of eschatological tension: they believe that Jesus has indeed saved them, has fulfilled the promise of the exodus, by virtue of his resurrection; but meanwhile they must wait the signs of the final victory over Satan. They exist between the already and the not yet. Both past promise and future possibility exist in the here and now (Coupe 1997: 78).

If one kind of myth may serve as the paradigm for mythology itself, the Revelation myth – based on permanent possibility – gives mythology the sense of a discourse whose otherness and instability can illuminate and transform our reassuring identities. Mythology becomes a set of stories with which we can establish an intelligent and fruitful dialogue. Here we have Myth not as closure and order, but as disclosure and openness. In this sense, myths work very much like metaphors: both create associations between apparently distant worlds to produce fresh and always shifting meanings.

Focusing on Jung's four archetypes – ego, shadow, anima and self – Coupe indicates as models of attainment of the self (which is the archetype of the fulfillment of potential and the integration of personality) two myths: that of Jesus Christ and that of Orpheus: "in both cases material failure leads to spiritual success. Jesus is crucified as a common criminal, but is then resurrected as the Christ", Orpheus fails to save his beloved from the underworld and is dismembered by angry maenads, yet "he becomes the object of an esoteric religious cult, his music and poetry symbolizing cosmic harmony" (Coupe 1997: 141).

The myth of Orpheus has meant different things in different periods of European history: in the Middle Ages the figure of Orpheus used to stand for the Christ-like figure already mentioned, but he was also considered "a psalmist or a troubadour, courtly lover and singer of pretty lyrics" (Warden 1982: 4). From the Renaissance on, Orpheus became

the incarnation of the power of music (which underlined his connection with science). To the Romantics and in the last century he has been "the eternal seeker beyond the threshold" (Warden 1982: 4). Orpheus' multiplicity is particularly fascinating but what emerges as his most interesting aspect is his liminality, his capacity to move in-between life and death, culture (art) and nature, reality and imagination, representing, thus, a model, a myth capable of speaking to what Bakhtin called the great time of history.

The author's choice of the Orpheus myth for his novel is particularly fitting. His male protagonist is a musical demi-God (who like Orpheus can enchant people and nature alike), whose life and music Rushdie constantly associates with the idea of migration. Speaking about the protagonist's identity and more specifically about the idea of belonging to a place (namely India) and the necessity of leaving your homeland, the narrator observes:

> Among the great struggles of man – good/evil, reason/unreason, etc. – there is also this mighty conflict between the fantasy of Home and the fantasy of Away, the dream of roots and the mirage of the journey. And if you are Ormus Cama, if you are Vina Apsara, whose songs could cross all frontiers, even the frontiers of people's hearts, then perhaps you believed all ground could be skipped over, all frontiers would crumble before the sorcery of the tune (Rushdie 2000: 55).

The tone of the narration seems here almost epic. Ormus' art is equated with magic; like Orpheus, Ormus (whose name seems to identify the Greek god with music itself: "Or"-"mus") can, through "the sorcery of the tune", not only enchant men and nature, but also cross any kind of frontier. In short, the Orpheus myth is rewritten in the context of globalisation, where pop music is one of the few languages which can be understood everywhere.

In a short article entitled "Globalization", Rushdie criticises the stance held by many, according to which "globalization is a […] social catastrophe with alarming implications for the survival of true cultural diversity". In this sense Rushdie, focusing on the notion of cultural identity, asks his readers:

> Do cultures exist as separable, pure, defensible entities? Is not melange, adulteration, impurity, pick'n'mix at the heart of the idea of the modern, and hasn't it been that way for most of this shook-up century? Doesn't the idea of pure cultures, in urgent need of being kept free from alien contamination, lead us inexorably towards apartheid, towards ethnic cleansing, towards the gas chamber? (Rushdie 2002a: 297).

Rushdie speaks here as a convinced advocate of cultural hybridity, a stance he shares with Homi Bhabha, who, famously, theorised the *third space* as a space in which "we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the other of ourselves" (Bhabha 1994: 39). The two novels Rushdie wrote at the turn of the century – that is *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* and *Fury* – embrace this aesthetics of the impure, seen as the only resource to preserve us from identitarian obsessions which could lead to war, death and self-destruction. Interestingly, *Fury* – published in August 2001 – prophesised the outburst of the rage of ethnic minorities, which is what, as we all know, led to the terrorist attack on The World Trade Center of 9/11.

In Rushdie's work there is always a fascinating and surprising dialogue involving fiction and truth. In this sense, Kenan Malik reports on how during a BBC Radio programme, *Desert Island Discs*, Rushdie noted that politicians "have got very good at inventing fictions which they tell us as the truth. It then becomes the job of the makers of fiction to start telling the real truth", then focusing on Rushdie he adds:

> Few makers of fiction have wrestled more with the question of how their work can engage with the truth than Rushdie himself. Not the truth of facts, of course, or of science, but the truth of human experience, and in particular the experience of change and transformation, of dislocation and belongingness (Malik 2013: vii).

In this sense, in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* Rushdie opposes the myth of purity, of a monolithic identity with a musical myth, a positive myth of impurity, change, transformation and constant opening to the other. In so doing Rushdie points to the impurity of rock music, which many wrongly consider as a homogeneous and homogenising language. Paradoxically in the novel we read that rock was born not in America but in India, namely Bombay, we learn that "Ormus dreams of Gayomart, his dead twin who teaches him about music, and he hears popular Western songs in his head 1001 days before they are released in the West" (Sanga 2001: 134). Here, more than trying to reverse the American myth, criticising (indirectly) the way the West appropriates and often steals from non-Western countries, Rushdie is pointing to something subtle, that is to say, to the notion that "the sense of the West has always existed in Bombay" (Sanga 2001: 134). Bombay has always been a space of mixture and contamination; indeed, Rushdie as a young boy would often listen to Western popular songs, aired on the now defunct Radio Ceylon.

At a different level Rushdie's paradoxical claim can be read as a reference to pop's and rock's constitutive impurity: the very birth of rock stands as the meeting between different cultures, that is the blues and soul of Black Americans and the country of White Americans with its debts to English and Irish folk music; it must be added that since the Beatles, pop musicians have always been attracted by Eastern sounds. Today, within the field of pop we often speak about world music, to identify musical experiences born in the East which parody and rewrite the rhythms and sounds of the West and vice versa. According to Rollason (2006) one of the limits of Rushdie's novel resides in the failure to engage with this kind of music, focusing almost exclusively on Western popular music; however, it can be argued that Rushdie's approach is aimed at showing Western Pop's complexity: its musical richness as well as its dialogical, critical relationship with the media and the establishment.

Rushdie's 1999 work can be considered a "pop novel" along with other novels such as Colin MacInnes' *Absolute Beginners* (1959), Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) and Nick Hornby's *High Fidelity* (1995). Interestingly, Kureishi's text – which also deals with cultural hybridity, staging a complex dialogue between the "two old stories" (the English and the Pakistani) out of which the protagonist Karim Amir is born – celebrates Western pop and in particular glam rock, with a specific focus on David Bowie (Critchley 2016), as "a third space" through which and in which to rethink our identity in terms of dialogue and performance rather than authenticity (Auslander 2006).

Today, pop music is a language practiced both at the level of performance and listening by everybody; it is a language capable of expressing ordinary experiences because it is itself an essential part of everyday life (DeNora 2000). The position of popular music within contemporary culture can be thought of in terms of the opposition between High and Low cultures (Bakhtin 1984), where Low language and culture stand as spaces of resistance to the order of discourse. In truth, popular music represents an extremely conflictual space where different positions, different poetics and ideologies clash. Since its very first days pop manifested a sort of inner contradiction: on the one hand it articulated the oppositional stance embraced by many young people, on the other hand, that articulation had to take place within the establishment which turned *rebel music* into a new form of commodity to be commercialised within the system, together with other commodities such as dresses, scooters, magazines etc. This is what cultural studies theorist Simon During defines as the "tension between music as an authentic, self-driven collective expression […] against music as […] industry product" (During 2005: 127-128). Today, part of the contemporary pop scene seems to be hardly interested in developing counter-discourses; much pop music accepts its role of pure entertainment, that is the space dominant discourses want it to fill. On the other hand, there are numerous instances of forms of popular music which position themselves in terms of resistant discourses, both at the level of form and content, whose power is given by the very fact that they act from the very inside of the establishment (as for instance Radiohead). In the novel, for instance, because of the anti-establishment contents of his lyrics, Ormus, in the early 70s is ordered by an immigration judge to leave America within sixty days; what follows is a series of solidarity concerts featuring Dylan, Lennon and Joplin. In this sense, the novel also shows how music can stand as an instrument of dialogue connecting individuals in the contemporary world through its celebration of multiplicity and semiotic instability against Orwellian discourses imposing single meanings.

In the new millennium pop and rock are also synonym of magazines, MTV, internet blogs/pages, all channels which amplify music's discursive potential. Through the multi-modal dimension of musical communication some pop artists are capable of articulating extremely complex and efficient counter-discourses which can be *read* by millions of people; that's what happened with U2 especially in the early part of their career; Bono, besides being one of Rushdie's best friends, is very often considered one of the most politically engaged rock stars in the world, even though, it must be observed, recent studies (Browne 2013) have problematised this very idea.

During an interview released after the publication of the novel, Rushdie declared that "rock is the mythology of our time" (Kadzis 2000: 223). And explained that for him it represented "a language of cultural reference […] which people all around the world would easily get, just in the same way that people once might have got a range of classical or mythological experience" (Kadzis 2000: 222-223). It must be added that today the term myth is often used in pop culture to indicate "a cultural icon", a celebrity which is the object of people's veneration. In this sense, as Rojek observes, contemporary celebrity culture posits itself as a "substitute for religion" (Longhurst 2007: 228). One of the last chapters of the novel is entitled Vina Divina and focuses on the reaction of Vina's fans to her death. The description

recalls very much what followed the death of Lady Diana, Diana being, besides Madonna, one of the models for Vina's character, with people mourning in every corner of the world, and with a number of initiatives, in particular concerts, organised in her honor, for what became a truly global event.

The novel's male protagonist, Ormus – who, interestingly, has been read as a fictional version of Freddy Mercury (Bassi 2003) – reacts to Vina's death writing a song in which he declares to the world his eternal love for her:

> All my life, I worshipped her. Her golden voice, her beauty's beat. How she made us feel, how she made me real, and the ground beneath her feet.
> And now I can't be sure of anything, black is white, and cold is heat; for what I worshipped stole my love away, it was the ground beneath her feet. […]
> Go lightly down your darkened way, go lightly underground, I'll be down there in another day, I won't rest until you're found.
> Let me love you true, let me rescue you, let me lead you where two roads meet. O come back above, where there is only love, and the ground's beneath your feet (Rushdie 2000: 475).

In 2000 U2 wrote a song based on these lyrics. It is interesting to see how Rushdie's words about music and migration have literally migrated from the written page to U2's sonic textures (enriched by Daniel Lanois' splendid production effort); that is, they have finally migrated towards music, more specifically towards the music of one of the most venerated bands in contemporary pop mythology. In his essay entitled "U2", included in *Step Across This Line,* Rushdie reports of how he was literally astonished after first listening to the melody *written* by Bono for his "words" and adds: "one of the novel's principal images is that of the permeable frontier between the world of the imagination and the one we inhabit, and here was an imaginary song crossing that frontier" (Rushdie 2002b: 105).

Albertazzi, in a study in which she investigates the function (and forms) of music in Rushdie's novel, insists on how "songs are more important than singers" and, offering us a final reading key for Rushdie's *rock* novel, adds: "What we are asked to appreciate is the inner potentiality of that music, the power of songs and the fact that they can go on living in our lives and have a meaning for us long after their singers have disappeared and their faces have been forgotten" (Albertazzi 2003: 97).

Interestingly, U2's 'The Ground Beneath Her Feet' was included in the soundtrack of German director Wim Wenders' cult film *The Million Dollar Hotel* (2000) featuring such celebrities as Milla Jovovich and Mel Gibson. We are faced here, once again, with a process of migration in which Rushdie's words, after migrating towards U2's soundscapes, have reached the screen, that is the images and *visions* of one of the most celebrated directors of our age. Wenders also directed the video of U2's song in which, besides footage from the film, we have images of Rushdie's himself portrayed in the very act of writing the song's lyrics. This beautiful confluence of ink, soundwaves and photograms fascinatingly interrogates and expands the multimodal complexity of Rushdie's writing.

In Rushdie's novel and in U2's song the earthquake is, in short, a metaphor for insta-

bility. Singing about liminal spaces dividing different worlds, and confounding contraries, Ormus as a contemporary Orpheus becomes a metaphor for music and for the musicians' potential – thanks to music's semiotic instability, that is "iconicity" (Peirce) – for crossing the boundaries of cultures and of people's minds, necessarily inviting them to rethink their identity in terms of its constitutive otherness. The very act of listening is indeed a dialogic process through which, according to Nancy (2007), we unconsciously open ourselves to the other. Music, and in particular pop music, becomes in this way a positive mythology extending its force beyond perfectionism, a mythology of the *possible*, to uses Coupe's terminology, in which and through which to think and enact one's identity as an identity in constant migration.

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