

John Thieme

*"So few rainbows anymore"?*

*Cinema, nostalgia and the concept of "home" in Salman Rushdie's fiction.*

**Abstract I:** This article explores the ambivalent representation of "home" in two texts in which Salman Rushdie responds to the film, *The Wizard of Oz*: his 1992 monograph, *The Wizard of Oz*, and the short story "At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers" (1992). Rushdie's monograph disputes the film's conclusion that "there's no place like home", suggesting instead that "home" is an imaginative construct, an enabling migrant fantasy founded upon distancing oneself from notions of "origins". The story's narrativization of "home" juxtaposes nostalgia for older discourses of "home", centred on the ruby slippers of the title with a range of contemporary diasporic alternatives.

**Abstract II:** Questo articolo esplora la rappresentazione ambivalente del concetto di "casa" in due testi nei quali Salman Rushdie replica al film *The Wizard of Oz*: la sua monografia del 1992, e il racconto breve "At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers" (1992). La monografia mette in discussione la conclusione del film secondo la quale "there's no place like home", suggerendo invece che "casa" è un costrutto immaginario, una fantasia migrante fondata sul distanziare se stessi dalla nozione di "origini". La narrativizzazione del concetto di casa contrappone la nostalgia per antichi discorsi di "casa", che fa perno intorno alle "ciabatte color rubino" del titolo, ad una gamma di alternative diasporiche contemporanee.

Salman Rushdie has referred to *Midnight's Children* as a "Bombay talkie" and, like all his subsequent fiction, the novel dismantles the very notion of a hierarchy of genres by mixing elements from popular culture, particularly film and music references, with more classical intertexts. Rushdie's repeated use of film forms, motifs and intertexts moves between a nostalgic evocation of the cinema of his

John Thieme. "So few rainbows anymore"?. *Cinema, nostalgia and the concept of "home" in Salman Rushdie's fiction.*

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youth, particularly classic Hollywood and Bollywood films, as a site for “home” and representations of cinema which problematize the very notion that a place such as “home” can exist. On the one hand, he wistfully associates cinema with childhood innocence and purity (analogues for “home”), on the other he suggests that it moves in the opposite direction, engendering impure, hybrid fantasies, which challenge and frustrate notions of cultural homogeneity and fixity of belonging. This ambivalent reaction to cinema - as a site of Edenic childhood innocence and purity on the one hand and as a site of blasphemous cultural impurity on the other - is common to his representation of both Bollywood and Hollywood, but the main focus of this paper is on the latter. My particular concern is with his response to Victor Fleming’s classic Hollywood film, *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), but I’d like to suggest that, while his comments on the film and particularly its representation of “home” demonstrate a very specific imaginative involvement with both the mode and theme of the Wizard, his reaction to the film can be seen as a metonym for his response to cinema more generally - particularly classic Hollywood films of the conservative “Golden Age” and the period immediately afterwards, and similar Bollywood fantasies.

In his 1992 British Film Institute monograph on *The Wizard of Oz*, Rushdie records how he wrote his first story in Bombay at the age of ten. Entitled “Over the Rainbow”, it was inspired by his boyhood fascination with film fantasy. He says the story “was about a ten-year-old Bombay boy who one day happens upon a rainbow’s beginning, a place as elusive as any pot-of-gold end-zone, and as rich in promises”. In addition to Fleming’s classic film, the story also, as he remembers it in the monograph, was inspired by both Hollywood more generally and by “the playback-singers of the Hindi movies, many of which [he says] make *The Wizard of Oz* look like kitchen-sink realism” (WO, *ibid.*). *The Wizard* wasn’t, though, simply the text that inspired Rushdie’s first fictional venture. It’s also a source-text for much of his subsequent work. In his BFI monograph he records how the green skin of the film’s Wicked Witch of the West provided the inspiration for Saleem’s dream about the terror-figure of the Widow in *Midnight’s Children*, commenting dryly that this “stream-of-consciousness sequence” fused “the nightmare of Indira Gandhi [...] with the equally nightmarish figure of Margaret Hamilton: a coming-together of the Wicked Witches of the East and the West” (WO, p. 33). He says that film helped him to make *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* a tale that could escape from the “ghetto” of children’s fiction to be “of interest to adults as well as children” and that the Wizard was the movie that most helped him to find the “right voice” for Haroun, while [the protagonist] Haroun’s companions contain “clear echoes” (WO, p. 18) of Dorothy’s friends. And Dorothy’s friends on the Yellow Brick Road, the Scarecrow, the Tin Man and the Cowardly Lion reappear in *The Moor’s Last Sigh* in the “surreal stratum” of the company that the narrator, Moor’s mother, Aurora, keeps during her phase as Bombay’s “nationalists’ queen”.

So, as Rushdie himself puts it, *The Wizard of Oz* “made a writer of [him]” (WO, p. 18) at the tender age of ten and it continued to be an important influence on his adult writing, both in terms of the mode he employs - as much a fictive

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<http://all.uniud.it/simplegadi>

equivalent of Fleming's "oddball ... live-action cartoon" (WO, p. 11) fantasy, as the variants of surrealism and magic realism that have often been seen as characteristic of his work. Additionally, one of the major themes of the film, the protagonist Dorothy's desire to return to Kansas, is centrally concerned with "home". Rushdie's most obvious engagement with this theme comes in the BFI monograph and his short story "At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers". The story takes its departure-point from the actual sale at auction of a pair of slippers supposed to have been worn by Judy Garland, who played Dorothy, in the film, though more probably those of her larger-footed double (WO, p. 46). The sale of the slippers is displaced in the story from the moment when it actually occurred, in 1970, into a futuristic dystopian world, where the slippers have become the central icons of a surrogate religious cult. In the film they are the portals that will enable Dorothy to return to Kansas from Oz, the magical objects that can initiate movement between different planes of reality. In the story the possibility of purchasing them offers a similar promise: the possibility of escaping from an increasingly troubled and unsettling everyday reality into a fantasy world, where a dream of security and belonging can still flourish. As such they can be seen as a metonym for the quasi-religious power of Hollywood cinema, particularly the films of the classic Golden Age, and for the narrator, who hopes to purchase them at the auction, they very clearly offer the promise of a return "home". It may not go amiss to note that the story was first published, in 1992, at a time when Rushdie was living under the shadow of the fatwa: he admits in the monograph that his own relationship with "home" had undergone a major transformation and confesses that he would have liked to have been able to return "home", a comment that presumably has temporal as well as spatial significance.

Rushdie's discussion of *The Wizard of Oz* in the BFI monograph foregrounds the film's engagement with what he sees as the archetypal "human dream of leaving, a dream at least as powerful as its countervailing dream of roots" (WO, p. 23; emphasis in original). His analysis of its narrative progression charts Dorothy's being swept up from the "monochrome 'real' world of Kansas" (WO, p. 19), constructed as "home" by the use of "simple, uncomplicated" geometrical shapes, by a tornado, the initial threshold between different planes of reality. The tornado is "twisty, irregular and misshapen", a transformative agent that "wrecks the plain shapes of [the] no-frills life" of home (WO, p. 21). When Dorothy's house lands in Oz, she - and, of course, the film's audiences - find themselves in a landscape of bold primary colours that are a correlative of her loss of "home". Oz and Hollywood film fantasy are, then, the surreal alternatives to the drabness of the Depression years and, it would seem, though Rushdie doesn't say this here, the sense of ontological security that Dorothy has known in Kansas. Now she's become an uprooted migrant and the film's visual style makes this seem infinitely preferable.

When Dorothy acquires the magical ruby slippers - again vividly coloured - which will enable her to return to Kansas, the central premise seems to be that she's on a quest that will only be complete once she has released her travelling

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companions from their fears and weaknesses and has herself completed the classic mythic pattern of the heroic journey, a journey based around the three stages of separation, initiation and return. Codified by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), it's a pattern which has continued to inform several of the major films of the last thirty years. From the *Odyssey* onwards, the culmination of such quests supposedly occurs when the protagonist arrives home. The difficulty, where *The Wizard of Oz* is concerned, at least as Rushdie sees it, is that when Dorothy does finally succeed in returning to Kansas, all the Technicolour magic and fantasy of Oz - and, one might add, the escapism of the Hollywood dream factory more generally - are dispelled in favour of a trite conclusion, which argues that the greyness of Depression Kansas is, after all, preferable! In the final Oz sequence, Dorothy tells the good witch Glinda "If I ever go looking for my heart's desire again, I won't look further than my own back yard" and Glinda tells her that all she needs to do is click the heels of the ruby slippers together three times and think "there's no place like home". And this is where Rushdie parts company with the expressed moral of the film. He comments:

Are we to believe that Dorothy has learned no more on her journey than that she didn't need to make such a journey in the first place? Must we accept that she now accepts the limitations of her home life, and agrees that the things that she doesn't have there are no loss to her? "Is that right?" Well, excuse me, Glinda but is it hell. [...] (WO, pp. 56-7; emphasis in original).

Rushdie finds a different morality in the various sequels that Frank Baum wrote to his book, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), on which the film was based. He argues that as a consequence of these

Oz finally became home; the imagined world became the actual world, as it does for us all, because the truth is that once we have left our childhood places and started out to make up our lives, armed only with what we have and are, we understand that the real secret of the ruby slippers is not that "there's no place like home" [...] (WO, p. 57; emphasis in original).

So, according to this line of thinking, "home" is an enabling migrant fantasy founded upon distancing oneself from notions of "origins": not a site of childhood innocence and ontological security, to which one can return, but rather the condition of those who, tortoise-like, carry their homes on their backs and find their sense of belonging in the "imagined world", represented here by the vivid Technicolour of Oz and the license it offered its film-makers and audiences to "go over the rainbow" into a world of "oddball ... live-action cartoon" fantasy.

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"Home" is narrativized in a similar manner in the short story, "At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers", though here the relationship with *The Wizard of Oz* is more oblique, the style is more elliptical and the intertexts are more varied, sometimes even cryptic. In addition to drawing on discourses of "home" that relate to film, questing and childhood, the story also introduces elements that relate the signifier to a particular form of sexuality and to popular music.

As in much speculative science fiction, a future setting provides a heightened version of the present and the auction of the ruby slippers takes place against the backdrop of a dystopian "post-millennial" society, where few dare to venture out from their bunkers. The auction room itself is a metonym for a late capitalist milieu where "[e]verything" - including the Taj Mahal, the Statue of Liberty, the Alps and the Sphinx - "is for sale" (EW, p. 98); and the narrator comments on the "simplicity" of people's behaviour in this location, where commodity fetishism has reduced the "vast complexity of life" into so many "packaged" lots (EW, p. 99). The people who attend the auction are those who have been lured by the possibility of "encountering the truly miraculous" (EW, p. 90) in the form of the ruby slippers. They include "movie stars", "genre actors", "memorabilia junkies" (EW, p. 88) and, significantly, "[e]xiles, displaced persons of all sorts": "homeless tramps", "political refugees", "deposed monarchs", "orphans" and "untouchables" (EW, pp. 90-93) among them. In short, a range of figures who collectively embody the late twentieth-century predicament of rootlessness and migration. The suggestion is that the slippers are a magical icon that may enable them to effect a "reverse metamorphosis" (EW, p. 92), like Dorothy, and return "home". However, the narrator remains sceptical about this:

"Home" has become such a scattered, damaged, various concept in our present travails. There is so much to yearn for. There are so few rainbows any more. How hard can we expect even a pair of magic shoes to work? They promised to take us home, but are metaphors of homeliness comprehensible to them, are abstractions possible? Are they literalists, or will they permit us to redefine the blessed word? (EW, p. 93; emphasis in original)

Throughout the story religious tropes are associated with the ruby slippers and the narrator is quite explicit that Hollywood iconography has replaced older belief-systems, providing a rare opportunity for an encounter with transcendental signification in "our Nietzschean relativistic universe" (EW, p. 90). So, just like Dorothy in the film, those who attend the auction come in the hope that worship at the shrine of the slippers, albeit through bullet-proof glass and state-of-the art defence systems that electrocute one acolyte, will enable them to return "home", the main difference being that "home" is now more obviously a metaphorical concept.

If Rushdie's story were adhering to the dynamic of the classic heroic quest, where the protagonist's return home resolves all the entanglements of the plot, in a straightforward way, the dénouement would begin with the successful

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<http://all.uniud.it/simplegadi>

purchase of the slippers, the open sesame to the possibility of a return "home". Predictably perhaps, since the story's attitude is at best postmodern pastiche, if not outright parody of the myth of homecoming, just when the climax appears to be approaching, with the slippers about to go under the hammer, Rushdie's narrator digresses into what appears to be another story.

Once again, though, this is concerned with "home". The narrator gives an account of his lovemaking with his cousin, Gale, whose name significantly echoes that of the protagonist of *The Wizard* - Dorothy's surname is "Gale" and it's a highly appropriate name in the film, since she is propelled from Kansas to Oz by the tornado. In the story the apparent interruption of the movement towards climax is replaced by climax of another kind, as the narrator explains the deep satisfaction he received from Dorothy's "erotic noisiness ... she chose to cry out at the moment of penetration: 'Home, boy! Home, baby, yes - you've come home!'" (EW, p. 95).

What are we to make of this apparent digression? On the one hand, it suggests a turning inwards towards lovemaking that is close to home - Gale is his cousin - but it also conflates her with Dorothy in the film, suggesting the possibility of a return to a more innocent view of the world, to childhood and innocence as analogues for "home" and as represented in the films of the conservative Golden Age of Hollywood. The ethos of such films, metonymically represented by the slippers, promises escape from the contemporary predicament of migrant displacement and hybridity. This possibility is, of course, swiftly undermined. The narrator records how he came home one day to find Gale betraying him with an escapee from a caveman movie and how he moved out with "his portrait of Gale in the guise of a tornado" (EW, p. 95) and his collection of Pat Boone records - Rushdie doesn't expand on this, but one of Pat Boone's most popular recordings was "I'll Be Home". Subsequently he has tried to imagine their "continuing life together in an alternative universe devoid of ape-men" (EW, p. 96), but the loss of her to this transgressive hybrid figure has not only ruined the relationship, but also rendered any possibility of his returning "home" through such a relationship.

More recently, he says, he has caught a glimpse of Gale in a bar, watching images of a spaceman stranded on Mars, a character who like Dorothy in the film longs to return to the "real" world of earth, but for whom no such return is possible. Again Rushdie introduces film and pop song intertexts to foreground his predicament: the spaceman is likened to Hal, the "dying computer" (EW, p. 97) in Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* and seen singing "Swanee", "Show Me the Way to Go Home" and various songs from *The Wizard of Oz*. These intertexts, I'd suggest, function as more than incidental counterpoint. They summon up the mood of an era when American discourses of "home" still carried force, an era when it was possible to believe in "home". Moved by the image of the stranded spaceman, the narrator has resolved to buy the slippers, offer them to Gale, who he feels may say he can use them to rescue the spaceman and bring him back to earth.

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The story returns to the Saleroom, with the narrator employing a heroic analogy, as he describes himself as "doing battle with an invisible world of demons and ghosts [absentee bidders]" for the prize of "my lady's hand" (EW, p. 101). Such mythologizing and the promise of narrative completion that accompanies it are, however, once again undermined. As the bidding reaches its climax, the narrator feels that, like the spaceman, he has become "detached from the earth". With the "ultimate goal" approaching, he crosses a "delirious frontier" (EW, p. 102) and realizes that his desire for the slippers, Gale and "home" is a dangerous fiction; and there is a complete reversal of the heroic quest pattern, as he leaves the auction liberated from his desire for Gale and the correlate of "home" that she represents. The story ends with his talking of another auction, where royal lineages and canine and feline pedigrees will be sold, offering everybody the opportunity to be "a blue-blood" (EW, p. 103). It's a coda that ironically underscores the main thrust of the story, which has suggested the futility of questing for "pure", non-mongrel identities as sites of "home".

At the same time, though, the predicament of the stranded spaceman and the displaced people who come to the Saleroom is in marked contrast to the colour and vibrancy of the world of Oz in Fleming's film and the nostalgia Rushdie evinces for such cinema - and its Bollywood equivalents - in his Wizard of Oz monograph. The story involves an element of progression in that the narrator emancipates himself from his obsession with "home" at the end, but its structure is primarily concerned with dismantling beliefs in the efficacy of originary belief-systems rather than stressing the positive benefits of "an empowering condition of hybridity". In narrative terms its postmodernist resistance to closure enacts a similar politics. The narrator comes to realize the danger of "fictions" and his own fictionalizing has been centrally concerned with narratives of "home", and the story frustrates any possibility of completing a traditional heroic quest and returning "home". Long before George Lucas, Steven Spielberg and other filmmakers of their generation seized upon Campbell's account of the heroic quest, The Wizard of Oz had structured its story around the pattern of separation, initiation and return. Rushdie, however, is clearly sceptical about the universal valency of such a myth and its privileging of settled and originary notions of "home", as it were replacing its emphasis on the archetypal nature of myths with the Barthean view that mythologies are socially constructed. In his hands "home" becomes a slippery and elusive concept. The story never deals with the provenance of the ruby slippers, but the monograph suggests that the pair sold at auction in 1970 were at best palimpsests of those that Garland wore in the film and perhaps no more than oversized surrogates. The monograph concludes by suggesting that "there is no longer any such place as home: except of course, for the home we make, or the homes that are made for us, in Oz, which is anywhere, and everywhere, except the place from which we began" (WO, p. 57; emphasis in original). "Home", conceived in this way, is a positive diasporic fantasy that offers a form of solace in the face of the knowledge that "you can't go home again". But Rushdie's ambivalence remains. The story's use of the slippers as a central trope for the process of "reverse transformation" that

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might facilitate a return to an originary "home" evinces nostalgia for such a possibility. And more generally, Rushdie's desire to break down the barriers between adult and children's fiction in Haroun and the incorporation of the "oddball ... live-action cartoon" form of Fleming's film into the narrative technique of much of his fiction indicate the extent to which the film's mode, an aesthetic extension of its belief in childhood innocence and "home", continues to engage him. And, after all, when you watch Fleming's film, there's no doubt that Judy Garland is wearing a real pair of ruby slippers, which may or may not be lost to posterity. Perhaps the anonymous purchaser of the pair of slippers sold at auction in 1970 believes s/he possesses the genuine article. Perhaps s/he does.

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