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**Travelling from Utopia to (Dis-)Illusion: Rushdie's Heterotopias
in *The Moor's Last Sigh***

Travelling, utopia, heterotopia

In literary tradition, travelling and utopia are so closely connected that they become almost inseparable: paradigmatic utopias frequently employ the motif of a voyage and finding a better place beyond the horizon; Thomas Moore's *Utopia* is here a progenitor of a very long tradition. Similarly, cross-travelling, a fruitful exchange of views, customs, goods and characters who travel both to and from imaginary lands is another characteristic trait of utopian writing. Finally, travelling and utopia lie at the very core of not just utopian literature but also utopian projects, such as the colonial project. Numerous colonies were planned as practical, realisable utopias, better than home, well-arranged and just, unlike the countries from which the future colonisers fled. This was the utopian beginning of Puritan colonies in North America or the Jesuit missions in Paraguay: both of them set out to put into practice the utopian ideal of a perfect society.¹ Travelling, cross-travelling, utopia and the colonial project, then, seem to be the offspring of the same desire to look for perfectability in an imperfect world.

Strictly speaking, the colonies which started with the utopian impulse, should perhaps be rather called 'heterotopias', after the term

¹ Naturally, utopian colonies are but a small subset of the wide-ranging colonial expansion which included also such clearly non-utopian projects as the expulsion of unwanted people (e.g. Australia) or simply economic exploitation (e.g. European colonies in Africa).

introduced by Michel Foucault. Foucault points out that while utopia is literally a no-place, that is a place which physically does not exist, a site without a place (Foucault 24), in contrast heterotopia is a place which does exist in reality and “in which the real sites ... are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (Foucault 24). Hence the name ‘hetero-topia’: another place, different, a counter-site reflecting upon the common real places. Foucault mentions a number of examples illustrating such heterotopian places claiming that they usually perform one of the two functions in relation to the real places: either that of illusion, or that of compensation. According to him, it is precisely compensation that lies at the bottom of utopian colonies which were hoped to make up for the imperfections of the old world. As Foucault points out, “their role [was] to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled” (Foucault 27). It seems, however, that with time these heterotopias of compensation turned into heterotopias of illusion, or even disillusion, and instead came to expose the illusory nature of such hopes, of the really existing ‘utopian’ places, and of utopian ideas themselves. Travelling and cross-travelling, then, starting with the utopian premises, not infrequently turn into their far less utopian, heterotopian doubles, making the journey from compensation to disillusion. This process is perfectly dramatised in the 1995 novel by Salman Rushdie *The Moor’s Last Sigh* which via its family saga stretching from the 15th-century Andalusian Moors and Jews to contemporary Indian Christians depicts the story of a fall, confusion and dispersion of the utopian idea of a peaceful mixture and hybridity of races, people and religions. Interestingly, the fall is rendered not merely via the plot, but primarily by the depiction of places which are engaged in a dynamic interplay between utopia and heterotopia. This article argues that systematically constructing its places as first utopias, and then heterotopias, the novel points out that cross-travelling, mixture and hybridity are perhaps little more than utopian desires impossible to fulfil in reality.

Utopian and heterotopian places

The Moor's Last Sigh is a novel that tells the story of a fall from grace, the exile from the Garden of Eden, the collapse of paradise. This is the fate of the main protagonist, nicknamed the Moor, exiled from home; it is also the fate of his family, divided and dispersed, and more generally, of the whole country of India sliding dangerously towards nationalist disintegration. Dressed in the form of an eschatological myth, showing larger-than-life heroes trying to save their world, the novel shows the ideal state of a family and country, and then its subsequent collapse and annihilation, its 'last sigh'. The utopia, construed as peaceful coexistence, is gradually turned into the anarchy of political nationalism and personal confusion. The trajectory of this fall is marked in the novel by the presentation of four geographical places. Three of them, the city of Cochin in the southern Indian state of Kerala, Bombay, and the Andalusian village Benengeli are depicted in detail and are locations of most of the important episodes in the novel, while the last place, the historical Alhambra of the Moors in Granada, is shown as an ideal glimpsed only in the horizon. Each of these places is further on represented as a house which metonymically becomes its emblem, and the story of the very building and the characters inhabiting it enacts the larger fate of the utopia of hybridity which starts with coexistence and multiplicity, and ends with annihilation, the house turned into prison, collapse and exile. Each of these places and houses shares the same values which are on the one hand praised, yet on the other shown as impossible to maintain. Each of them, too, turns to be a heterotopia rather than utopia.

One of the features all of these places share is their geographical location at the crossroads of various routes, and hence their multiethnic character. They are shown as the result of complex mixtures of native people and various European nations who travelled to India or Spain running for their lives, in search of freedom, or driven by curiosity or riches. The city of Cochin is represented as a melting pot; the narrator himself wonders at some moment:

Christians, Portuguese and Jews; Chinese tiles promoting godless views; pushy ladies, skirts-not-saris, Spanish shenanigans, Moorish crowns... can this really be India? (Rushdie 87)

Cochin is a city with a two-thousand-year-old Jewish community, with the British, Portuguese from Goa, Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Parsis, Jews, democrats, Marxists and conservatives living side by side, all of them preserving their views, religion, customs and language. Like the Andalusia of the Moors, this is the land of hybridity and mongrelisation, of fruitful fertility and the victory of Many over One. Such is the portrayal of Bombay, too, full of people from all over the world, a gate to India, a port and a city open to everyone, cosmopolitan, liberated and tolerant. Finally, this is also the portrayal of the village of Benengeli in Andalusia, inhabited both by native Spaniards and by innumerable foreigners who almost invade it and treat it as their own territory. These are the places where numerous travellers arrive and stay, making them their home and enriching them with their buildings, customs, lives and ideas.

This portrayal shows also the values considered positive: all of these places are open and tolerant, favouring their multiplicity over any narrowly understood racial, ethnic or religious orthodoxy. Hybridity and mixture are presented in the novel as positive, the cross-travelling of people and ideas is perceived as enriching and developing. In an interview Rushdie openly declares that these features are for him worth praising; he explains:

What happened in the Arab period in southern Spain, in Andalusia, was that a kind of composite culture grew up. Although the Muslim Sultans were the rulers, there were Christians and Jews and Muslims living side by side for hundreds of years, and their cultures affected each other. ... And this composite culture of Andalusia is something which certainly in Spain and people who know about it have always found very attractive. Out of it came great poetry and great architecture and so on. ... Now, it seemed to me that the world I come from, India, the world this book comes out of, is also a composite culture ... which I find very rich and pleasurable, and which I enjoy. (Rose 203)

In contrast, narrow-mindedness, intolerance and all calls for 'purity' are seen as signs of degeneration and collapse. Andalusia never recovers from the loss of its Moors and Jews, its greatness being gone forever; Cochin is a sad place when its old Jews gradually die out. Singularity

and purity are shown not merely as morally wrong but first of all as counterproductive: they lead to impoverishment and infertility. Just as John Donne, the narrator of the novel seems to say that no man and no nation is ever an island, and that any loss affects always the whole community.

These positive values are specifically enacted in the descriptions of the houses the characters inhabit, which surprisingly also share many similarities. All three of them, the Cabral Island house in Cochin, Elephanta – the house on Malabar Hill in Bombay, and Vasco Miranda's fortress in Benengeli, are located in spectacularly beautiful scenery, surrounded with rich gardens, and overlooking the sea (or the plain that resembles the sea in the case of Benengeli). All of them enjoy a perfect climate for vegetation and people, all of them are secluded, too: they are located on an island or a hill, surrounded by walls and additionally guarded (e.g. by a fake pirate in Elephanta). Like true utopian places, they are not easily found or accessed, and their secret paradise remains open only for the initiated. Thus, their construction resembles typical utopian sites with their perfection and isolation.

The inhabitants of these houses, too, are specific characters, starting with their telling names or nicknames, reminiscent of many religions and histories (e.g. Abraham, Ezekiel, Aurora or the Moor, da Gama, Zogoiby, or Vasco). They are unusual protagonists, too: talented, beautiful and strong. In keeping with the professed value-system of the novel, they are open-minded, tolerant, bohemian and artistic, sharing modern, democratic, urban cosmopolitan views positively contrasted with those of religious and political fanatics. Their houses are open to artists, actors, politicians or simply eccentrics who come for parties but also to create there. The Cabral Island house welcomes an unknown young architect who later becomes known as Le Corbusier, in Elephanta many important Indian painters find their refuge. Yet, all of these houses fail and fall: on Cabral Island the house and the family are divided both physically (house parts are demarcated by lines and barricades) and metaphorically (literally deadly family conflicts), and discord ruins its material and personal prosperity. The initial garden of Eden first turns into a prison for its inhabitants (a real prison for the brothers Aires and Camoens jailed for the crimes committed by their relatives, an old-age

prison for mother Epiphania who cannot accept her daughter-in-law, and the prison of old customs for young Aurora who literally lacks air and cannot breathe in the house). Finally, all the family members leave it: either by simply running away (Francisco da Gama, Aires), dying (Epiphania, Henry the Navigator), or moving away (Aurora); the house is sold, turned into a cheap hotel for back-packers, and finally it collapses and falls into oblivion. Little is left of this former paradise: the utopia of a peaceful coexistence of various people ends with failure both on Cabral Island and in Cochin. A similar story is repeated in Elephanta: the paradise does not survive the separation of parents, their mutual disloyalty and betrayals, the escape of children, the exile of the youngest son, death, and finally the bomb explosions which blow the house and the family to bits. Just as Cabral Island, it too, turns into a prison: for Aurora abandoned by all her allies, and for the Moor incarcerated in the Bombay Central jail for the crimes he did not commit. Vasco Miranda's fortress in Benengeli, though admittedly less utopian to begin with (a vulgarised version of an Alhambra painted by Aurora Zogoiby, a copy of a copy, never open to anybody), repeats the same trajectory from a friendly settlement, through a prison both to Vasco himself and to his captives, to a death scene, finally abandoned by all the characters. Thus, the fate of the houses and their protagonists clearly demonstrates the limits and fall of a certain project – that of multiplicity, hybridity and cross-fertilisation.

The last places described in the novel are telling in this respect: the Moor on the run, deadly exhausted, rests in the graveyard overlooking the distant Alhambra. This is his last sigh – and his last sight. Both places are heavily symbolic: Alhambra represents all the values professed by the novel, it is an embodiment of a utopian idea of tolerance, finished, too, and glimpsed in the horizon only; a cemetery is a perfect heterotopia, a “dark resting place” (Foucault 25) where time stops and all illusions together with it. The last scene, then, symbolically encapsulates the trajectory of the main protagonist and, broadly, of the utopian project he represents: this is the last sigh of a utopia of hybridity and the sad reality of a heterotopia.

The fall of utopia

As the analysis above suggests, all the places presented in the novel are constructed according to the same pattern: located in specific geographical places known for their multiculturalism, embodied in fictional houses, they first start as a traveller's paradise of multiplicity only to be turned into prisons of 'unity' and finally abandoned. The depiction of houses shows clearly utopian features, but also points to their short-lasting, illusory character; prisons are typical heterotopias, really existing 'dark sides' of utopias exposing the latter's illusory nature. Similar, too, are the reasons why they all fall. The novel clearly points that these are not any special or supernatural forces that make utopias impossible, and that their limits are purely human: it is confusion, rivalry, unforgiveness, vengeance, lies, disloyalty or infidelity which ruin even the best of projects. What the novel clearly suggests is that utopia needs work, consent and union; in order to last, it has to be defended actively. One of the often repeated phrases in the novel is the supposed last words of Ayxa, the mother of Boabdil, the last Sultan of Granada, who upon his son's last sigh over the lost Alhambra was to remark bitterly: "Well may you weep like a woman for what you could not defend like a man" (Rushdie 432). The novel seems to warn that taking utopia for granted, not defending it properly, giving in to purely human vices and follies may make it impossible to maintain. And yet the last scene of the novel, the last sigh of the contemporary Moor over the distant Alhambra, except for nostalgia might leave a glimpse of hope, too: a hope for the future, the possibility, though distant, of another utopia of hybridity and another Alhambra. The Moor thus describes his last sight:

At the head of this tombstone are three eroded letters; my fingertip reads them for me. R I P. Very well: I will rest, and hope for peace. The world is full of sleepers waiting for their moment of return: Arthur sleeps in Avalon, Barbarossa in his cave. Finn MacCool lies in the Irish hillsides and the worm Ouroboros on the bed of the Sundering Sea. Australia's ancestors, the Wandjina, take their ease underground, and somewhere, in a tangle of thorns, a beauty in a glass coffin awaits a prince's kiss. See: here is my flask. I'll drink some wine; and then, like a latter-day Van Winkle, I'll lay me down upon this graven stone, lay my head

beneath these letters R I P, and close my eyes, according to our family's old practice of falling asleep in times of trouble, and hope to awaken, renewed and joyful, into a better time. (Rushdie 433-434)

Recalling the names of legendary heroes, the Moor recalls the greatest eschatological myths of humanity: the myths of paradise lost because of dissent and failure of people themselves. Yet, all these myths suggest that this loss is never ultimate, that the paradise might be regained when the right time and the right hero come, and that there is a hope for its resurrection. The plot of an eschatological myth is circular rather than linear: the ending suggests a pause rather than the stop, the beginning of the next cycle, and the death is but a sleep, however long it may seem. Evoking these myths the narrator shows the hope connected with all utopian projects which, although failing on numerous occasions, can perhaps be rescued in different times and in different places. Thus, although the particular utopia dramatised in *The Moor's Last Sigh* is presented as coming to its end, both the values it represents, and the possibility of utopias, are ultimately shown as universal and triumphant.

Hybridity regained

In his lecture "Of Other Spaces" Michel Foucault presents several aspects of his 'heterotopology', i.e. a number of principles connected with heterotopias (Foucault 25). He identifies them as universally existing in every culture, changing their functions in time, juxtaposing different spaces in one place, linked to special times, not easily accessible and reflecting upon society. Most of these features can be identified in relation to the places constructed in Salman Rushdie's novel which, formally, are heterotopias: the island, the garden, the prison or the cemetery are among the most characteristic of Foucauldian examples. All of them demonstrate certain aspects of real places, become their 'others' exposing their hidden nature. In *The Moor's Last Sigh* their function seems to be to point to the limits and delicate nature of the utopian project of hybridity which is shown as hardly possible to last.

Hybridity in Rushdie's novel is intrinsically connected with travelling and cross-travelling, it is a product of freely wandering ideas, of mixture and cross-fertilisation. Yet, such cross-travelling, both physical and intellectual, is shown as extremely fragile. The first travels the novel presents are those undertaken in the name of utopia: the Jews flee to India to start a better community there, the Portuguese and English seek fortune, the Moors - escape. Crossing and mixture are to compensate for the lost homeland, to bring riches or safety. India, then, just as a typical colony, performs a utopian function of compensation, it is a heterotopia, like a mirror reflecting utopian desires. Soon, however, the utopia is exposed as an illusion, the garden of Eden turns into a prison, and another travel has to start, that from utopia to reality, with the accompanying nostalgia and hope for yet another journey back to utopia. Rushdie's novel, then, showing the shift from utopia to heterotopia, from the imaginary to the real, reflects perhaps the fate of every utopia. Yet, his utopia is quite specific: it is the utopia of multiplicity, crossing, and mixture, and its fall indirectly questions the attainability of this project.

Interestingly, this hybridity is perhaps best preserved by the form of the novel itself which, from a generic point of view, is a mixture of numerous literary conventions and genres, starting with the saga (the story of two generations of the da Gamas), love story (the stories of Aires and Belle, Abraham and Aurora, the Moor and Uma), political novel (Raman Fielding as a thinly disguised caricature of the nationalist Hindu politician Bal Thackeray) and perhaps most of all, the myth (the eschatological story explaining the fall and the possibility of redemption). Incorporating the features of various literary conventions, *The Moor's Last Sigh* turns into a novel which cannot be easily classified as representative of any single one of them, and which thus becomes the very thing it praises: a celebration of hybridity and impurity. It might seem, then, that crossing and mixture, which are shown as failing in reality are, as all utopias, perhaps best preserved by literature where they find a rich soil to flourish.

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