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## Reading Salman Rushdie's Memoir

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### Abstract

This paper looks into Salman Rushdie's latest book, his memoir titled *Joseph Anton*. Rushdie put off writing his story of the *fatwa* years until September, 2012, when *Joseph Anton* came out. The title is a conflation of the first names of two writers, Rushdie's favourite authors: Joseph after Joseph Conrad, and Anton after Anton Chekhov. Before being a title, this used to be Rushdie's pseudonym when he had to recede into a fictional character during the period he spent in hiding.

Rushdie argues that in *Joseph Anton* he wrote about himself novelistically in the third person, putting a distance between his real self and himself as a character, through fiction. I purport to explore to what extent and in what sense Rushdie's memoir is fiction, and also what distinguishes it from a novel. According to Rushdie, unlike fiction, the book's arc was clear even before being written: the author knew its first and last scenes. Fiction shapes it in the same way as memory shapes and re-shapes life. Does that mean that literature is a form of escapism? Nothing would be more false, if we asked Rushdie, who has always considered writing a political act, because "we are radioactive with history and politics."

After its publication, a book is at the hands of readers. It is in this sense that books speak to us, being a form of communication. This study probes into how *Joseph Anton* has started to fare, and what it is likely to stir in readers who read about "a teller of tales, a creator of shapes, a maker of things that were not."

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## 1. Introduction

This article sheds new light upon the relation between memoir and autobiography as stories of one's life, on the one hand, and memoir and the novel, based on the similarity of autofiction, on the other. These associations and distinctions put the reading of Rushdie's latest book *Joseph Anton*, a memoir, into perspective. Delving into these aspects, this approach also explores essential features of Rushdie's texts, namely the complex ways in which writing absorbs history and politics, also reflecting them, looking at the same time into the dialogical nature of the text. Ultimately, I argue that what Rushdie does in *Joseph Anton* is to author himself, i.e. to create and project his own authorship through and into writing. From author, the approach moves to reader, who identifies with the projected author. This makes of story-telling, which is an essential activity in writing, a compelling reconfiguration for the reader.

According to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, memoirs and autobiographies, which are called "life narratives" (2010), bear the real life name of their author as their title.

Nevertheless, Salman Rushdie's memoir *Joseph Anton* is titled after an invented name, and the author glosses that "now by naming himself he had turned himself into a fictional character as well." (Rushdie, 2012) 'Joseph Anton' conflates the first names of two real life writers (Joseph Conrad and Anton Chekhov) into a fictitious secret name for a real life writer (Salman Rushdie). Thus, the troubled "new self" (Rushdie, 2012), which is a new version of him constructed by Ayatollah Khomeini and all devout Muslims who took the *fatwa* for granted, takes on a name that references "Conrad, the trans-lingual creator of wanderers" and "Chekhov, the master of loneliness and melancholy, of the beauty of an old world destroyed, like the trees in the cherry orchard, by the brutality of the new." (Rushdie, 2012)

Arguing that both *autobiography* and *memoir* are forms of life narrative, Smith and Watson distinguish one term from the other. While *autobiography* focuses on self-study, *memoir* "often bracketed one moment or period of experience rather than an entire life span and offered reflections on its significance for the writer's previous status or self-understanding." (Smith & Watson, 2010) More often than not, as Smith and Watson show, memoirs are stories about certain aspects and periods in people's lives that may strike readers as scandalous or titillating. Memoirs may be written by the socially marginal, which, in Rushdie's case, is a condition of "double unbelonging" he ironically assumed as a "migrated self" when he "often felt meaningless, even absurd" as "a Bombay boy who had made his life in London among the English." (Rushdie, 2012)

## 2. Autobiography, Memoir, Fact, Fiction, 'Faction'

Like Henry Adams in *The Education of Henry Adams: An Autobiography*, Rushdie refers to himself in the third person. This reinforces the distance the author takes from himself in order to tell the story of himself as a fictional character. Readers are supposed to accept the convention of the self-reflexive narrative through a distance which endorses the author's sense of his self as painfully incongruent and split in the wake of inflicted trauma. There are instances when the self reads as a palimpsested mosaic of divided selves whose fissures the life narrative both highlights and aims to make cohere into a story:

He was aware that the splitting in him was getting worse, the divide between what 'Rushdie' needed to do and how 'Salman' wanted to live. He was 'Joe' to his protectors, an entity to be kept alive; and in his friends' eyes, when he was able to see them, he read their alarm, their fear that 'Salman' might be crushed under the weight of what had happened. 'Rushdie' was another matter entirely. /.../ He was an effigy, an absence, something less than human. He – it – needed only to expiate. (Rushdie, 2012)

As a portmanteau of 'fact' and 'fiction', 'faction' is a loose genre, which evokes real life figures and actual events side by side with fictitious allegations and using the techniques of fiction (plot, dialogue, setting, characterization, etc.). In a memoir, the author's memory itself alters the 'facts', thus rendering the referential world of reality fictitious. In other words, 'facts', events and real life persons lose their recognizable contours and are re-shaped by memory in the same way as they would be by fiction. In Rushdie's book, the pact between

author and the reader of the life narrative is breached by the fictitiousness of Joseph Anton as an invented character. However, this invented name was designed to paradoxically hide and reveal at the same time the true essence of a 'new self' (brought about by the *fatwa*). Nevertheless, this new self has an old history of a hybrid man whose most intimate being has been shaped by the reading and writing of fiction.

### 3. The Memoir and the Novel; Politics, History and Fiction

The memoir and the novel are related genres. Despite the elements they share, the memoir and the novel differ in many other respects. Smith and Watson argue that "unlike novelists, life narrators have to anchor their narratives in the world of their own temporal, geographical, and cultural milieu." (2010) The "suspension of disbelief" which facilitates the reader's engagement with fiction, is not a prerequisite of memoir reading. On the contrary, a memoir engages the reader in "the world beyond the text, the world that is the ground of the narrator's lived experience, even if that ground is in part composed of cultural myths, dreams, fantasies, and subjective memories or problematized by the mode of its telling." (Smith & Watson, 2010) There is an essential truth underlying both fiction and memoir, but it is their frames of reference that distinguish them: while the text of fiction is a narrative projection which asks its readers to suspend their 'disbelief' and thus find some essential truth in its invented world, the text of the memoir references a world outside the text, whose no less essential truth the reader is invited to validate.

In each and every essay of *Imaginary Homelands* Rushdie insists upon the idea that politics, history and fiction are inescapably woven. In "Outside the Whale" the writer argues that "works of art /.../ do not come into being in a social and political vacuum; and that the way they operate in a society cannot be separated from politics, from history. For every text, a context /.../" (Rushdie, 1991); that "in our whaleless world, in this world without quiet corners, there can be no easy escape from history, from hullabaloo, from terrible, unquiet fuss." (Rushdie, 1991) In his essay "In Good Faith", a defense of *The Satanic Verses*, he declares himself "a bastard child of history." (Rushdie, 1991)

Looking at his first accomplished novel in retrospect when he writes his memoir, Rushdie accounts for its success in terms of its engagement with history:

History rushed into his pages, immense and intimate, creative and destructive /.../; He was a historian by training and the great point of history, which was to understand how individual lives, communities, nations and social classes were shaped by great forces, yet retained, at times, the ability to change the direction of those forces, must also be the point of his fiction. (Rushdie, 2012)

Like a lot of other contemporary writers (e. g. Philip Roth, David Lodge) or writers with whom he is affiliated (e.g. Joseph Conrad, James Joyce), Rushdie situates his narrators in a dialogical relation with the events and discourses of their context/environment. Whether he writes fiction or a memoir, Rushdie builds his books on the 'crossroads' of the public and the private, the political and the personal, and the language he creates engages the writing in this relation, reflecting it.

Rushdie's memoir performs the crucial role of shedding light upon the most essential aspects of his work. Tapping into the rich reservoir of memory, which helps him restore the past in writing, the author of the memoir realizes what the successful writing of *Midnight's Children* taught him:

The political and the personal could no longer be kept apart. This was no longer the age of Jane Austen, who could write her entire oeuvre during the Napoleonic Wars without mentioning them /.../. (Rushdie, 2012)

The memoir's narrator is also aware that, once written, "the book has gone out into the world and the world has remade it." This suggests that: "To write a book is to make a Faustian contract in reverse /.../. To gain immortality, or at least posterity, you lose, or at least ruin, your actual daily life." (Rushdie, 2012, p. 91)

The writing of a memoir is a self-reflective act whose main objective is accounting for one's self, and the self's identity. Delving retrospectively into his writing and dwelling on the landmark of *Midnight's Children*, whose narrator Saleem Sinai "had deliberately been created as an alter ego", the memoir explores the writer's own stance as hybrid, "heterogeneous, instead of homogeneous, belonging to more than one place, multiple rather than singular, responding to more than one way of being, more than averagely mixed up." (Rushdie, 2012)

According to Bakhtin's thesis that a self is forged from outside, that it is the other(s) and the world 'outside the whale' that validate one's perceptions of oneself, *the narrated self* of the memoir, which is the same as *the narrating self*, *authors himself* through writing. (cf. Debra Shostak quoting Bakhtin's commentator Michael Holquist, 2004)

#### 4. "Year Zero": Memory, 'Forgettery', Writing and Reading

In "Imaginary Homelands" Rushdie sees his writing as an engagement with the fragmented nature of memory, which, precisely by being partial, makes "trivial things seem like symbols," while the mundane acquires "numinous qualities." This suggests an analogy with archaeology, which builds the past out of "the broken pots of antiquity" (Rushdie, 1991), thus reconstituting, be it provisionally, an imaginary version of it. Writing his memoir, Rushdie brought his engagement with memory to a new stage, where he reconstitutes a past whose events gravitate around "Year Zero": "1989, the year when the world changed" (Rushdie, 2012) For its author, writing the memoir is an act of getting to grips with his whole existence before and after 'Year Zero'. For the readers, the book is a journey through 633 pages of Rushdie's authoring himself around the date when he received "his unfunny Valentine" (Rushdie, 2012) Actually, the memoir, Rushdie's latest book, is redolent not only of his own past and its context, calling to mind yet other events of a more remote past, but of his own other writings. In *The Ground beneath Her Feet*, a novel written during the *fatwa*, 1989 is a year of seismic shock in the most literal sense, the earthquake being a metaphor which translates a serious tremor in Rushdie's own life.

*Joseph Anton* opens with the ominous image of "the first blackbird", and as the story makes progress, other blackbirds join it in shutting out the light of the sunny Tuesday in London. The 16 pages of Prologue strike sinister visual and musical notes, which relate the dark event of the *fatwa* to Hitchcock's iconic film *The Birds*. The hyperbolic effect of the first blackbird is the news on the radio of the first casualties caused by the *fatwa* and the new word created by the media: "*extraterritoriality*. Also known as *state-sponsored terrorism*." (Rushdie, 2012) This signals Rushdie that the event inaugurated an age when "to live in a different country from one's persecutors was no longer to be safe. Now there was *extraterritorial action*. In other words, they came after you." (Rushdie, 2012) The last note struck in the Prologue is **meaninglessness**; the last lines musicalise the ultimate failure of language to convey meaning, Joyce-style:

Footsteps. Winter. A black wing fluttering on a climbing frame. *I inform the proud Muslim people of the world, ristle-te, rostle-te, mo, mo, mo. To execute them wherever they may find them. Ristle-te, rostle-te, hey bombosity, knickety-knackety, retroquoquality, willoby-wallaby, mo, mo, mo.*" (Rushdie, 2012)

Smith and Watson argue that the main components of the memoir as a genre are memory, experience, identity, space, embodiment and agency. (Smith & Watson, 2010)

Of all these components, memory is, of course, the one which gives a memoir its *raison d'être*. Driven by the same "Proustian ambition" (Rushdie, 1991) which made him write his first notably successful novel *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie revisited his old memory paraphernalia in order to write his memoir. He recalls that his mother coined a word in opposition to 'memory', which is 'forgettery', a faculty he seemed to develop, too, lacking "a memory for trouble." (Rushdie, 2012) However, besides 'forgettery', the memoir uses memory in order to make sense of "the unimaginable become imaginable" (Rushdie, 2012) and to account for the self's resilience, which is raised to the status of honour: "He too, like Hawthorne's great heroine [Hester Prynne], must wear the scarlet letter as a badge of honour, in spite of the pain." (Rushdie, 2012)

*Joseph Anton* is largely a book about Rushdie's unstoppable need to transform his experience through and into writing, and about the therapeutic role of writing in his life. Thus, the memoir teems with stories of false starts, failures, and various other writing acts. This is how the de-spiriting event of the *fatwa* sets him in a desperate writing mood: "He found himself composing a thousand letters in his head and firing them off into the ether like Bellow's Herzog, half-deranged, obsessive arguments with the world that he could not actually send on their way." (Rushdie, 2012)

Although the experience recorded by memoirs is largely personal, one should always bear in mind that any text is situated at the ‘crossroads’ between the private and the public. *Joseph Anton*, a memoir written by an author who foregrounded the intersection, compels the reader to take special heed of it. From that ‘crossroads’, readers embark on their journeys which take them to similar intersections. Thus, the border between the private and the public is blurred, and the writing itself reflects it. Reading, we look for ways of probing into our own concerns, troubles and dilemmas, which makes us identify with the experience narrated in writing. Since the main objective of writing is to ascertain meaning especially where it is contentious, the main objective of reading about one’s experience is to relate it to one’s own and also to (re)-locate the contexts they share.

Celebrating the human race and “man” as “the storytelling animal” (Rushdie, 2012), the narrator of the memoir traces a space larger than the individual, in which essential truths are to be found. This space is his to inhabit, but also his father’s, his mother’s and everyone else’s. This projected world is the rich repository of collective and individual identity, the cultural DNA of the human race: “Man was the storytelling animal, the only creature on earth that told itself stories to understand what kind of creature it was. The story was his birthright, and nobody could take it away.” (Rushdie, 2012) His mother, “a gossip of world class” (Rushdie, 2012), is remembered for her efficient story spreading, which made her secrets no longer hers, but the receivers’. Thus, foregrounding the role of storytelling and the experience of writing, which also caused the *fatwa*, the memoir also reinforces the role and experience of reading as an essential epistemological activity.

Being a key concept for some schools of phenomenology, our experience of ourselves as embodied becomes a vantage point for our theorizing about knowledge and experience. In Rushdie’s memoir, embodiment, like everything else, is problematic. Rather than “uprooted”, the narrator re-defines his condition as “multiple-rooted”, and the complicated issue of being “translated”, a migrant, a “fugitive”, a “nonbelonger” (terms he uses for his characters in fiction, which are projections of himself in various degrees) forces him to account both for his hybrid embodiment and at the same time for the embodiment of others who, unlike him, might be deeply rooted (e.g. Elizabeth West) Thus, our reading experience becomes a demanding probing into the constructedness of the self in the most diverse (albeit often scaring) forms of embodiment:

On this day there were crowds marching down the streets of Tehran carrying posters of his face with the eyes poked out, making him look like one of the corpses in *The Birds*, with their blackened, bloodied, bird-pecked eye sockets. /.../ He [Ayatollah Khomeini] needed a way to rally the faithful and he found it in the form of a book and its author. The book was the devil’s work and the author was the devil and that gave him the enemy he needed. (Rushdie, 2012)

Human agency is the capacity for human beings to make choices. Usually, it is contrasted to natural forces, which are causes involving only unthinking deterministic processes. *Joseph Anton* evokes a long episode of serious threat to human agency. Freedom of choice is drastically limited, protection calls choice making into question. However, the capacity to make choices is never fully suppressed despite precautions and protection measures. The memoir ends on the note of solidarity in the name of agency:

He had been defended by his fellow artists when he needed it. He would try to do the same for others in need from now on, others who pushed boundaries, transgressed and, yes, blasphemed; all those artists who did not allow men of power or the cloth to draw lines in the sand and order them not to cross. (Rushdie, 2012)

## 5. Conclusion

The title *Joseph Anton* is a conflation of the first names of two writers, Rushdie’s favourite authors: Joseph after Joseph Conrad, and Anton after Anton Chekhov. However, before being a title, this used to be Rushdie’s pseudonym when he had to recede into a fictional character during the period he spent in hiding in the wake of the *fatwa* issued by Ayatollah Khomeini. In *Joseph Anton* Rushdie wrote about himself novelistically in the third person, putting a distance between his real self and himself as a character, through fiction. Fiction shapes this memoir in the same way as memory shapes and re-shapes life. After its publication, a book is at the hands of readers, and it is in this sense that books speak to us, being a form of communication.

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