A Snapshot of Globalization: A Reading of The Enchantress of Florence

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“The fact is that to have your life shaped and defined by a journey or a series of journeys you’ve made, is a very particular way of living a life.”¹

In this way, Salman Rushdie concisely summarizes his own lifestyle, explains the vocation of millions of individuals currently engaged in globalizing cross-cultural encounters and maps the ideological territory of his own fiction. Variously described as “Indian-born, US-resident, British national, secular-Muslim, postcolonial and globalised novelist/polemicist/celebrity”² or else as a “cultural chameleon,”³ over the years, Salman Rushdie has strengthened his position among literary circles and readers, as a mainstream voice on the world-wide cultural scene. His masterpiece *Midnight’s Children* has been elevated to the status of literary classic of our age so that in recent times it has also been successfully adapted for the cinema. Most importantly, however, its being repeatedly awarded as a Booker Prize in 1981, as the Booker of the Bookers in 1993, and as the Best of Booker in 2008, while evidently stressing the achieved consolidated centrality within the literary canon, may also be interpreted as a (semi-official) investiture for a future Nobel Prize for Literature.

Over the last four decades Rushdie has become a recognizable point of reference in world literature because the essence of his works—both the successful and the less successful ones—directly flings his readers into becoming involved in the current debates in literary criticism surrounding postcolonialism, postmodernism and diaspora literature. At the same time, we should not underestimate the weight of the Ayatollah Khomeini’s infamous *fatwa* declared on him after the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, an intended punishment that, instead of silencing him, paradoxically largely contributed to expanding his fame and fortune, making the Indian novelist’s case an internationally-renowned loudspeaker for freedom of speech and for secularism against religious radicalism. Apart from his charming subtlety in the handling of a prose which investigates the innovative nature
of an altering identity, Rushdie’s case cannot exhaust his effect on a simply literary arena, but addresses a complex ideological terrain. The Indian novelist and his globalised literary output, in fact, have not only become increasingly connected with current social phenomena around the globe, but they have been identified with the encounter between the East and the West, and the war against terrorism that markedly (and dramatically) characterizes our times. His personal story, as well as his literary production, are therefore highly representative of social, ideological and cultural events occurring in the epoch of cross-cultural exchange. In short, Rushdie’s fiction is a political terrain of debate, in addition to a literary corpus so that, almost inevitably, among critics, his work has, over the years, become associated with that of Mr. Postcolonialism Himself.

The Enchantress of Florence, Salman Rushdie’s tenth novel, directly tackles many of these questions and, while it seems that its support and contribution to the author’s fame will in future hardly match that of his previous masterpieces, it cannot be denied that it has had its say in contemporary debates on the globalizing processes shaping an alternative concept of identity. As has oftentimes happened with Rushdie’s novels, the publication of his books has met extremely dissimilar and polarized reactions among his reviewers and critics, so that if someone writes that it still deserves “5 out of 5 stars,” the reviewer for The New York Times does not hide his lack of involvement, as he claims that the novel left him “unmoved,” while another scholar demonstrates that it is a disastrous failure.

Set in an illusory historical frame, the novel straightforwardly addresses concerns pertinent to globalization, hybridity and diaspora, and therefore overlapping—in many cases superimposing—present with past issues in such a way that a post-medieval stage is used to perform a postmodern and postcolonial comedy. Briefly speaking, The Enchantress of Florence deals with the relatedness of two apparently independent stories that take place on two slightly distinct time-levels in the 15th and 16th centuries in Fatehpur Sikri, elected as the emblem of the Orient, and Florence, proposed as the cradle of Western civilization. The respective protagonists are the Florentine Niccolò Vespucci, initially described as “a teller of tales,” and a couple of pages later as “the young rogue,” with Fatehpur Sikri as his final destination and the Indian princess Qara Köz, “which was to say Black Eyes, on account of the extraordinary power of those orbs to bewitch all upon whom they gazed,” travelling westward to Florence. Before being the protagonists of their respective stories, therefore, they are the protagonists of two extremely adventurous journeys that are repeatedly used by the narrator to remind the reader how precarious their positions are, so that we may well say that the novel does not merely
focus on two separate (but joined-up) stories, as on two separate (but inter-related) journeys. Since the perils they are forced to endure—narrated in a typical flamboyant, verbose and sometimes excessive Rushdie style—are described as permanent, the two travellers must seek a forceful remedy enabling them to survive, and, as Salman Rushdie has made it clear in the title itself of the novel, this remedy itself is found in seduction. In order for Niccolò to survive he seduces his listeners with his roundabout and implausible stories—again here Rushdie makes use of the archetypal literary model of Scheherazade—while Qara Köz enchants everyone with her jaw-dropping beauty. As an aside here, it may be interesting to stress that, as well as pointing at a wide-ranging sociological and ideological current scenario, the two protagonists also seem to reflect to some extent Salman Rushdie and his former wife Padma Lakshmi, from whom the broken-hearted Indian novelist was painfully divorcing at the time of writing *The Enchantress of Florence*. Returning to the novel’s structure, it is also worth-mentioning that while Qara Köz reaches Florence at the peak of its political power and Niccolò Vespucci arrives at Fatehpur Sikri at the zenith of its civilization, they both involuntarily concur in the demise of the two cities they have reached. However extravagant, convoluted and ostentatious the narration, the interrelatedness of the East with the West is clearly positioned at the heart of the work, in such a way that it may seem to suggest to the reader that the connection, albeit barely visible, is crucial. One cannot but agree with Reimer as he claims that:

> here is an attempt to reconcile East and West, to bring Renaissance Europe and Mughal India into alignment. Signs of that are everywhere: in the way that the magnificence of Akbar’s capital mirrors the splendour of Renaissance Florence; in the political ambition, wisdom and folly that bedevil both of these cities; and even in Rushdie’s lively accounts of Indian and Florentine whorehouses.  

Yet, if the weight of the connection between the East and the West is undeniable in *The Enchantress of Florence*, the agent that makes the connection possible is the journey, which therefore occupies a pivotal role in the construction of the twin narration. In this context, Adams’s observation that the “traveller is another Rushdie archetype” is full of significance. Rushdie’s trajectory—in this, as well as in a number of other novels—manifestly advocates the acknowledgment of an emerging hybridizing model of identity resulting from the mass displacements of migrant subjects moving towards the West. In opposition to a traditional mode of classifying identities that are based on a fixed and stable nucleus, late-modern societies have produced an epochal revolution in the way in which identi-
ties are formed and recognized, since they mostly appear in relation to how travelling brings adaptations and mutations to their previous status. This occurs in particular when itinerant cultures happen to negotiate approaches to other cultural formations. As a result, identities emerging out of these encounters show a variable, irregular, multiple, mixed, instable, fragmented, and therefore, a hybrid nature. In the theorization formulated by Hall, the shift in the manner in which identities are made is stressed in the following statement:

Though they seem to invoke an origin in a historical past with which they continue to correspond, actually identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from,’ so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves.12

The protagonists of the two journeys therefore are characters who, in a fashion similar to that used by Rushdie when he thinks about a proper self-definition as mentioned at the beginning of this paper, find their existential connotation within the ranges of their continuous passages, negotiating access across cultural spaces with social structures that are located, in Homi Bhabha’s peculiar phrasing “in the nations of others.”13 K. Srilata is correct when she argues that in “Rushdie’s universe, there are two kinds of people: those who travel and those who prefer not to,”14 an assertion that soon operates a literary discrimination within the boundaries of this strangely-assorted plot: Qara Köz and Niccolò Vespucci occupy a place of their own in the economy of the structure of The Enchantress of Florence. Along these lines, the discourse on the relatedness of journeying and identities may be extended by adding that Rushdie’s characters can also be identified as those who have a home and those who have not. While it would be ridiculous to claim that Qara Köz and Niccolò Vespucci are homeless, the two travellers can indeed be identified by their continuing, almost perpetual, lack of home. Nor, for the same matter, do they show any concern about their finding a home, because their conception of existence seems to be in keeping with the idea of a permanent flux and movement, without any stop interfering in the process. In this sense, The Enchantress of Florence perfectly works as a further validation of James Clifford’s theory whereby identities at the time of global exchange are no longer recognized according to their roots, but according to their routes.15 If they can claim to have a home, the concept needs to be re-formulated. Sushila Nasta’s contention that home “is not necessarily the place where one belongs but the place where one starts from”16 widens the coordinates
to our debate on the proper location of these fictional figures. If, in fact, the two travellers do not show any visible feeling of belonging, they are often depicted as starting a trip—Qara Köz more than Niccolò Vespucci. Nonetheless, it should also be remarked that whenever they are described as starting a journey, the narrator’s attention remains focused on their movement rather than on their departure point. What seems to me particularly relevant to stress, however, is that it is not so much the theoretical dichotomy of movement vs. stillness that is at stake here but, as Rushdie himself ingeniously writes in *The Satanic Verses*, the syncretic perspective that hybrid identities have of these opposite terms when Chamcha comes to the conclusion that “journeying itself was home.” ¹⁷

The discourse on hybridity as related to *The Enchantress of Florence*, however, is not confined to these theoretical premises only, but assumes that a number of consequences also be taken into account. In order to better plan my analysis, I have thought it appropriate to create two distinct points that work as catalysers of my next argument: I will, therefore, presently discuss the ways in which mutability and difference operate in *The Enchantress of Florence* as in relation to the agency of a hybridizing identity. Or better, since the area of debate within Salman Rushdie’s fiction cannot be restrained to a literary discourse only, I will discuss both the politics of mutability and of difference.

Of the many ways in which an identity can be discussed, an analysis of the characters’ names surely is a good starting point, the more so with Rushdie’s fiction. Within the name of Niccolò Vespucci, for instance, Rushdie hides the real nature of this untrustworthy itinerant narrator, as it seems likely that this is the combination of the author Niccolò Machiavelli and the traveller Amerigo Vespucci. Even so, the hybridizing agent of this name is not restricted to this evaluation alone, because the “gentleman of Florence, presently on business for England’s queen” ¹⁸ introduces himself, is known and called in different ways, according to the places where he moves or the people whom he meets. In fact, he fancies being called Mogor dell’Amore at Akbar’s court and translates his self-appointed nickname into Mughal of Love. Geetha Ganapathy-Doré perceptively observes that: “the very name Mogor dell’Amore is a hybrid one, combining the majesty of Mughal kings and the charm of the Italian lover who, in a way, mirror each other at least phonetically.” ¹⁹ On his way to India, however, he has others call him “Uccello”—“Uccello di Firenze.” ²⁰ Differently from his case, Qara Köz does not even have a proper name in view of the fact that this is her nickname by which she has been called from birth. This is translated into Lady Black Eyes for the sake of the Anglophone narrator, but on her way to Florence she is named Angelica by her new lover Ar-
galia (or Arcalia). Evidently, while characters move, also their identities travel with them, assuming an itinerant, multiple, variable nature with their names being translated and re-shaped, according to their surroundings and practical necessities: the narrator seems to gloat stressing the compound quality resulting out of this confusing mix as tongue-in-cheek he talks about “the hidden princess Lady Black Eyes or Qara Köz or Angelica,” an ironic attitude, that also surfaces when he refers to the “mighty Temüjin above all—Genghis, Changez, Jenghis, or Chinggis Qan.” Word-translations are not always trustable, or better, one never knows if the meanings expressed in the language of arrival are exactly the same as those of the language of departure and this largely affects the way in which the translation-process changes the names. It seems apt to stress here that while discussing name-translations, a minor character comments “who knows how the word may be twisted, knotted, and turned,” emphasizing the unreliability of the whole process of translation. Incidentally, this is also Rushdie’s case, the pronunciation of whose name has been Anglicized in Britain, and has maintained the same sound as the English word “rush,” ironically stressing the hurried nature of the migrant (novelist).

Yet, travelling does not only affect the naming of Salman Rushdie’s characters, but also their allegiances and reliability in general. Of course, volatility and mutability seem to be unchanging elements of characterization in Rushdie’s novels over the decades, but *The Enchantress of Florence* insists on the issue with particular intensity by making brothels a privileged trope, not only in becoming acquainted with the West and the East, but in providing a proper setting to the overall plot. The migrant’s predicament drives him/her from one place of origin to another settlement and, throughout his/her lifetime, he/she is called to acknowledge his/her devotion to one or another place and alternatively he/she obliges without, however, possessing that feeling of belonging and attachment that makes his/her commitment constant in time. In this sense, *The Enchantress of Florence* should also be read as an intentionally deformed mirror of the events that occur to its creator. It is no secret that in the course of his life he has been criticized for the ease with which he establishes and loosens cultural allegiances. The first to loudly disapprove of his fleeting loyalty to his supposed cultural roots were the Indians, who spread the voice that the Indian novelist was “more English than the English,” causing the Indian (or extremely English?) novelist to fly into a rage. The episode was also repeated a few years later when, after being (at the taxpayers’ expense) protected by the British secret service during the years of Khomeini’s death sentence, Rushdie decided to move to New York, when the danger appeared to have been removed from over his head, leaving behind him a
trail of resentment from a group of British citizens. This is the predicament of a novelist whom Kunow aptly calls “a multiply migrated man.” Therefore, freedom from long-term allegiances to cultural posts—an aspect, that his detractors view in terms of an ambivalent attitude—is metaphorically rendered in the novel by repeatedly taking the story into pleasure-houses where, as well as satisfying a somewhat misogynistic attitude on the part of the novelist, a fixed commitment is replaced by a temporary one, after the appropriate amount of cash has been duly laid down. This also explains why—without exceeding in a mellow sort of sentimentalism—the narrator(s) of *The Enchantress of Florence* generally throw(s) a positive light on ‘the whores,’ leaving the reader somewhat disoriented about the gap between the extremely negative semantic choice operated to describe their occupation, as opposed to the generally evident honest behaviour, that depicts their course of action. The following episode about Mohini, later on called the Skeleton, may serve as an example of this process:

In the early morning Mohini the sleepless whore of the Hatyapul brothel awoke her foreign guest. He came awake quickly and twisted her roughly into his arms, conjuring a knife from thin air and holding it against her neck. “Don’t be stupid,” she said. “I could have killed you a hundred times last night, and don’t think I didn’t think about it while you were snoring loud enough to wake the emperor in his palace.” She had offered him two rates, one for a single act, the other, only slightly higher, for the whole night. “Which is better value?” he asked her. “People always say it’s the all-night rate,” she replied gravely, “but most of my visitors are so old or drunk or opium-stupid or incompetent that even doing it once is beyond a lot of them, so the rate for a single will almost certainly save you money.”

“I’ll pay you double the all-night rate,” he said, “if you promise to stay beside me all night. It’s a long time since I spent the whole night with a woman, and a woman’s body lying beside me sweetens my dreams.” “You can waste your money if you want, I won’t stop you,” she said cold-heartedly, “but there hasn’t been any sweetness left in me for years.”

Rushdie’s half-serious half-joking attitude seems to be keen to stress here the paradox of the prostitutes’ reliability in unreliability. Un/Trustworthiness also markedly contradicts the way in which Niccolò Vespucci is generally seen in his role as a narrator of his chronicle to the Emperor Akbar. In order to survive, he needs to weave a phantasmagorical narrative, but it seems proper to point out at this stage that the topic of this dizzying tale is his (doubtful) origin. Unrecognized, blurry, if not totally mistaken, ancestry also typifies Saleem Sinai in *Midnight’s Children* in a process typical of Rushdie’s fictional art that seems intent on demonstrating the vacuity of the characters’ roots and favouring instead the weight of their routes. Un-
certain, arguable, equivocal, unproven, sometimes even false identities, recur in the pages of Rushdie’s novels and M. Keith Booker certainly hits the mark when he remarks:

[questionable parentage is one of the central ways in which Rushdie calls the illusion of identity into question. In Shame we know the identity of neither of Omar Khayyam’s parents. Meanwhile, both Iskander Harappa and Naveed Hyder are revealed to be of illegitimate parentage, and this theme is most strikingly emphasized in the scene in the women’s dormitory where the husbands enact conjugal visits en masse under a cover of darkness so absolute that proper pairing is highly problematic.]

Where Rushdie’s literary text becomes inextricably linked to an ideological commitment, up to the point that it becomes utterly impossible for the reader to separate the two threads, is in his handling of the discourse on difference. Every novel or literary work in general possesses a nucleus that most of the time is summarized in a sentence or in a paragraph, an extract (or two) around which the whole work gravitates and from where it unfolds: such passages then appear as the oft-quoted parts in critical debates dealing with those specific books. At the top of the hit-parade for The Enchantress of Florence’s quotes features a liberating observation by Niccolò Vespucci, a privileged loudspeaker for Salman Rushdie, called here Mogor: “This may be the curse of the human race,” responded Mogor. “Not that we are so different from one another, but that we are so alike.”

The erasure of difference, or the alikeness of people—to borrow from Mogor—seems to be the ideological line providing a palimpsest to much of this otherwise naïve and bizarre narrative. One cannot overlook the fact that in this novel one is also introduced to a character called the Mirror, Qara Köz’s servant and sharer of beds, who, faithful to her (nick)name “was just as beautiful and looked so much like her mistress.” Akbar’s rejection of Niccolò’s genealogy in the finale, re-writing the re-written (hi)story and asserting that the Florentine traveller is the son of the Mirror instead of the Mughal princess, may almost credit the Mirror with a role of primary importance. Yet, this consideration seems to be beside my point. The Mirror, in fact, is not so relevant for her assumed/real link of parentage to the Mughal of Love, but for epitomizing the concept of the double in The Enchantress of Florence. K. Srilata correctly identifies in the symbolism of the mirror a red line connecting many relevant issues in the novel:

The over-arching metaphor that binds these themes together is the mirror: the hidden princess has a slave girl who is her mirror, the Florentine Argalia is, to an extent, the mirror of Mogor dell’Amore, Jodha Akbar has
a mirror in the hidden princess, the Mughal artist Dashwanth who paints Qara Köz and the Florentine artist Filipepi who paints the other enchantress in the novel, Simonetta, are mirrors of one another, and so on.30

Qara Köz and Niccolò Vespucci, although in very different ways, and on slightly different time levels, also display mirror-like analogies in their endless erring through exotic places. Both are forced to operate through their enchanting qualities, because if Qara Köz needs to constantly conquer hearts, Niccolò Vespucci needs to conquer belief. Their respective seductive qualities are at the root of the plot: they both emanate sexual energy because, while the hidden Indian princess lures everyone—men and women—around her with her attractive black eyes, also the self-appointed “England’s ambassador”31 has a very voluptuous way of narrating stories: her seduction directly works on a physical level, also the semantic one. In addition, exactly like Lady Black Eyes, one of his nicknames points at a physical quality that seems to be an alluring sexual motif. No Italian reader—not even a naïve one—may overlook the twin meaning of the word ‘uccello’ but, lest his Anglophone readers miss the full potential of the allusion, the narrator clarifies: “in my city, this veil of a word, this hidden bird, is a delicately euphemistic term for the organ of the male sex, and I take pride in that which I possess but do not have the ill grace to display.”32 Although on an allegorical level, the act of narration for the Uccello di Firenze has a precise sexual implication.

The politics of erasing difference, in this specific work carried out through the allusion to the mirror, does not exhaust its message in this net of cross-references, of course. The city of Fatehpur Sikri mirrors itself in the lake, and it is highly significant that its downfall is declared at the time the pond is dried out. Self and other appear to be closely connected and their destinies inextricably linked together. The ideological implication of this discourse finds its most evident application in a wider context, because the West appears here to be portrayed as the East’s double: their magnitude and their disgrace, their rulers, their artists, their visitors and travellers, their women and courtesans, all are accurately created in such a way as to function as mirror-like representations of the other. Although the main characterization of the East and the West presents evident dissimilarities in the contextualization, the structures of the two stories in Fatehpur Sikri and Florence display a number of equivalences that cannot pass unseen, clearly working to demonstrate an erasure of difference between the two poles. The likeness of the West and the East evidently shifts the debate on this novel from a more literary terrain to an ideological field.

However, the distance between erasing difference and creating a system dominated by ambiguity is very short and Rushdie has made his pas-
sage a recognizable sign of his writing. His own philosophy of the leveling of traditional oppositions in favour of a mixture of connivance and compromise of the extremes, over the years, has become a trademark, and *Midnight’s Children* may possibly be referred to as the text in which the theory on ambiguity finds its most concrete articulation. In the following passage, Saleem Sinai discusses how the game of Snakes and Ladders should reflect the ups and downs of everyday life, but criticizes this view since this shows life’s course as too predictable and regular to seem plausible to him. Volatility, capriciousness and ambiguity in general are not part of this children’s game and this is a crucial flaw in his (Rushdie’s, as well as Saleem’s) point of view:

> implicit in the game is the unchanging twoness of things, the duality of up against down, good against evil; the solid rationality of ladders balances the occult sinuosities of the serpent; in the opposition of staircase and cobra we can see, metaphorically, all conceivable oppositions, Alpha against Omega, father against mother; here is the war of Mary and Musa, and the polarities of knees and nose... but I found, very early in my life, that the game lacked one crucial dimension, that of ambiguity—because, as events are about to show, it is also possible to slither down a ladder and climb to triumph on the venom of a snake.33

In this sense, Rushdie’s case becomes an important reference point in describing the ways in which globalization has brought about relevant changes to a traditional way of conceiving an identity, in view of the fact that the politics of ambiguity possibly reveals the position of the migrated subject, who has lost the coordinates of home-abroad and freely mixes arrivals with departures. Along these lines, I want to demonstrate how this discourse on ambiguity typically invests the Indian novelist’s writing, and I will therefore move from an allegorical to a practical area.

Of the many focal issues in *The Enchantress of Florence*, gender can hardly be said to be one, but the treatment of this theme in relation to Rushdie’s art has produced quite an elaborate body of work in time and it is in this precise perspective that I want to deal with it. Needless to say, a novel that chooses brothels as a typical background and mostly describes women as courtesans, lovers, if not downright whores and prostitutes, before reminding the Stockholm jury about its author’s name among the possible candidates for a Nobel Prize for Literature, has reminded gender-oriented scholars of the misogynous attitude of its writer. Among the contributions by scholars who have disapproved of this male-oriented vision, Marina Graphy seems particularly argumentative in her way of stressing how Rushdie’s view seems mostly in keeping with a consolidated sexist position:
While Rushdie insists that his female characters have agency and will, they really do not, for it is only in their sexuality that he finds their power. A provincial book, grounded in provincial ideas about sex and gender, the men in this book have all the power, money, and adventures, while the women wait for them in their chambers, lonely, aging, and easily replaced. In fact, women in Salman Rushdie’s novel can even be created out of nothing, out of desire, by men who have the power to give birth to a lover no one else can see.34

Justin Newman reaches a similar conclusion while discussing Rushdie’s secularism:

men in Rushdie’s Florence and Hindustan worship (and purchase) women—indeed, much of the novel is devoted to these activities—who supplant religion and history as the source of inspiration for art and action. The misogynistic implications of Rushdie’s portrayal of women, a common refrain in the scholarly responses to his work, here achieve a fevered pitch.35

Yet, there is also another side to the picture to which we need to give its true weight. While we cannot obliterate such positions, we should always take into account the allegorical importance of Rushdie’s text, where characters are not always simple human beings representative of their species, since most of the time they appear to be symbols, allusions, cross-references to other concrete or abstract agents. I have already mentioned Padma Lakshmi, Rushdie’s former-wife and beautiful model, as a possible (literary) model for Qara Köz, and this is important when we discuss the female character, not only in terms of a fairy-tale princess, but also in terms of a modern-day glamorous beauty. Qara’s liberty of movement and her libertine attitude, as well as her audacious use of sexuality in order to assess her own identity, may indeed seem to be more respondent to the latter than to the former. Qara Köz is not at all a neglected fairy-tale princess, nor is she a modern-day top-model, but a mixture of the two, where the conflicting and contradictory components are convincingly blended: I think it is important for any reader to recognize this twin, cross-cultural—and ultimately, ambiguous—element in her identity. In this sense, Tim Adams’s definition of Lady Black Eyes as “the Carla Bruni of her day”36 seems to be an ingenious intuition since it also recognizes the influence of present-time social agents in the construction of the female character. On the other hand, it should be remarked that if Carla Bruni has undoubtedly lived within a sexist environment, it seems arguable that her action is to be seen as subject to men, in full consideration of the end achieved. Next to the motivating observations of misrepresentation of women in Rushdie’s *The Enchantress of Florence*, I also propose here to consider the way in
which (at least some of) these female characters function, in relation to a possible model of a glamorous woman, aware of using allure in order to open an alternative way into a male-dominated society. Qara Köz in particular (but not only), although apparently perfectly positioned in a Renaissance context, shares a surprising number of elements in common with the archetype of these contemporary gorgeous and sophisticated show-biz chicks. It is curious to note, to start with, that when “it was first used, in the nineteenth century, the word ‘glamour’ meant something akin to sorcery, or magical charm,” an etymology that seems even more respondent to Rushdie’s fictional character than to the former première dame de France. In addition, in her thought-provoking study of the history of glamorous women, Dyhouse identifies three main elements characterizing these figures, i.e. “power, sexuality and transgression,” which in many ways also illustrate Qara Köz’s evolution across the plot. Finally, it is interesting to note that glamour has often created a remarkable disparity of judgement among commentators, divided between those who criticize these figures for their unabashed exploitation of norms created by a sexist environment to achieve social advancement and those who on the other hand focus their attention on the determination of these female subjects to emancipate themselves in a chauvinist society, whose rules were not created by women:

Amongst the range of different ideals of femininity available to women over the past century, what did the image of the glamorous woman signify? Did—and does—it simply imply the objectification of woman, subject to the male gaze? Did—and does—it represent the seduction or subjection of women as consumer in capitalist society? John Berger memorably defined glamour as a form of envy. Can ideals of glamour be blamed for feminine insecurities, body dysmorphia, eating disorders, addiction to cosmetic surgery, or a refusal to come to terms with old age? Or did glamour offer a kind of agency to women, even sometimes a way of getting their own back on patriarchy? If femininity can be seen as a form of belittlement, associated with the demure, the dainty and the unassuming, then glamour—it can be argued—could offer a route to a more assertive and powerful form of female identity. Glamour was often linked to a dream of transformation, a desire for something out of the ordinary, a form of aspiration, a fiction of female becoming.39

A chutney of a romantic fairy-tale-adoring princess and a present-day irresistible seducer, Qara Köz may be said to be Rushdie’s quintessential creation of a hybrid character, whose identity is a result of the blending of models belonging to different cultures (and different times) and, therefore, displaying characteristics that in various (elaborate) ways may be typical
of this or that cultural construction. Contradictions in Rushdie’s characterizations and construction of stories are the rule, rather than the exception, and this should not alarm any of his readers. In a parallel situation, Aijaz Ahmad reaches a similar conclusion when he discusses the impact and the implications of Sufiya Zenobia in *Shame* in relation to her fluctuating gender role as men’s victim and men’s predator. Aijaz specifically refers here to the passage where she is described having sexual relationships with four different men in order to silence her frustration:

She becomes, in this passage then, the oldest of the misogynist myths: the virgin who is really a vampire, the irresistible temptress who seduces men in order to kill them, not an object of male manipulation but a devourer of hapless men.\(^{[40]}\)

My personal point of view regarding the specific case of gender discourse in *The Enchantress of Florence* is that Rushdie’s female characters clearly appear to be moving in a biased system, whereby their existence seems to be in function of the male’s gaze or fantasy. All the same, I recognize that most of the time on a purely symbolic plane, they also express a noticeable emancipating force that seems to be effective in a distinctively intellectual realm, rather than on a radical ideological terrain: in other words, women’s power seems to be a very abstract energy. This said, one cannot underestimate the range of the text’s purely intellectual level while reading Rushdie.

Hybridity, however, in Rushdie’s novels seems to be a concept that traverses various areas of debate, and should not be confined to a discourse on identity only. The two most visible elements shaping this narrative are the historical account and the imaginary tale that combine together, cross literary barriers and shuffle cards up to the extent that Michael Dirda defines it “a romance,”\(^{[41]}\) Michael Upchurch “part fairy tale, part history lesson,”\(^{[42]}\) K. Srilata “a cross-cultural tale,”\(^{[43]}\) Tom Wilhelmus “another postmodernist, magical realist, baroque, allegorical, and jubilant fantastication,”\(^{[44]}\) and Justin Newman “a romance dressed in the guise of an impeccably researched historical novel,”\(^{[45]}\) just to quote a few. This notwithstanding, it does seem that the entire story concedes far more to the writer’s imagination than to a dedicated approach to history. Possibly, faithful to his past fears that “realism can break a writer’s heart,”\(^{[46]}\) Rushdie may have decided to avoid any risk during the writing of *The Enchantress of Florence* and shape his novel in terms of an imaginary account. Heartbroken for the loss of Padma, he may have chosen to steer clear of realism to avoid further complications.
Notes

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