

## Trabajo Fin de Grado

Faith versus Reason as Reflected in Salman  
Rushdie's *Two Years, Eight Months and Twenty-  
Eight Nights*

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## **Abstract**

The main objective of this Final Degree Dissertation will be to analyse the novel *Two Years, Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* by Salman Rushdie. A good example of the literary movement known as magic realism, it illustrates what the great majority of critics consider to be the main characteristic of this sort of texts: the gradual insertion of the magic element onto the apparently realist text until the total superposition/overlapping of reality and fiction takes place. This is here done in order to represent the rationalism/religion binary and, more precisely, to denounce the rejection of reason in order to impose religious fanaticism, which is currently booming in certain parts of the world. The shocking and strange lack of gravity with which the novel beings will progressively dovetail into a whole fantastic world, which will put into question, not only the rationalism on which our modern world is based, but also the mere relevance and existence of it. By means of the use of magic realism, the novel manages, in the first place, to send some warning about the potential danger of religious fanaticism taking control of the world and, secondly, to show that fiction can be a very useful tool/vehicle to bring to the surface the contradictions of the real world.

## **Resumen**

El objetivo principal de este Trabajo de Fin de Grado será analizar la novela *Two Years, Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights*, de Salman Rushdie, como un buen ejemplo del movimiento literario conocido como realismo mágico, ya que ilustra lo que la mayoría de críticos consideran como la característica principal de este tipo de textos, a saber: la introducción gradual del elemento mágico en una narración aparentemente realista hasta dar lugar al solapamiento/ superposición total de realidad y fantasía. Todo ello, en este caso, en aras a representar el binarismo racionalismo/religión, y más en concreto a cuestionar el abandono del primero con el objetivo de imponer el fanatismo religioso, tan en auge hoy en día en ciertas partes del mundo. La inicial y chocante falta de gravedad con la que la novela comienza dará paulatinamente lugar a todo un mundo fantástico, que no sólo pone en tela de juicio el racionalismo sobre el que supuestamente se basa el mundo moderno, sino también la propia relevancia y existencia de este. A través del uso del realismo mágico la novela en cuestión consigue, no solo advertir acerca del peligro que supondría que el fanatismo religioso acabara controlando el mundo, sino también demostrar que la ficción puede ser un instrumento muy útil para poner de relieve las contradicciones del mundo real.

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## Introduction

As if it were just a thin piece of silk, the veil that separates reality from fiction in Salman Rushdie's novel *Two Years, Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* is removed, thus allowing both worlds to meet. The fictional Fairyland gets opened and its magic permeates the real world. The incursion of this magical wave of irrationalism, mainly embodied by the four malefic Ifrits who eventually fulfil the promise they made to philosopher Ghazali of instilling fear in men in order to give them back to God, is a powerful allegory used by the author. Its main aim is to show that the multiform battle between reason and irrationalism, faith and disbelief, which has accompanied human beings over the centuries is still a reality, which in this case adopts the form of religious fanaticism fighting against a society whose worldview is exclusively based on rationalism. A situation that undoubtedly invites to draw some parallels with our present-day reality.

As was often the case in the past, Rushdie once again relies on magic realist elements and strategies for the writing of this novel. Christopher Warnes defined magic realism as "a mode of narration that naturalises or normalises the supernatural, that is to say, a mode in which real and fantastic, natural and supernatural, are coherently represented in an state of equivalence" (2009, 3). The crucial point here is, therefore, their state of equivalence or, to put it differently, the impossibility of establishing a clear-cut barrier and hierarchy between two antagonistic modes of narration/ systems of representation. The confrontation between these two realms creates an unresolved tension in which neither of them is subjugated to the other (Herrero 2003, 151). In what follows a brief explanation of the fictional component of magic realism and its capacity to blur the boundaries between time and space will be given, as these are determining factors for the construction of the allegory required to represent the clash between extreme rationalism and religious fanaticism in a subtle and challenging way.

With respect to the origins and development of the narrative mode of the novel, the term 'magic realism' was firstly used by Frank Roh in 1925 in an essay entitled "Magic

Realism: Post-Expressionism” with a view to designating a variety of art that emerged after World War I. As regards literature, however, it was an Italian poet, novelist and critic called Massimo Bontempelli who first used it. Although the term was originally coined in Europe, the boom of the so-called ‘magic realist novel’ occurred in Latin America in the 1960s with the works of Asturias, Prietri and Carpentier (Asayesh and Ararguç 2017, 1). Heavily influenced by European surrealism, which basically aimed to cross the consciousness boundary so as to penetrate the surreal and the realm of dreams, these writers found in magic realism the perfect vehicle to revive and revalidate the myths and indigenous culture of America (Faris 2004, 40). Finally, it was in the 1980s, after this Latin American boom, that magic realism spread abroad and became a worldwide known literary phenomenon.

As a matter of fact, it could be argued that magic realism eventually became one of the most representative literary modes of postcolonial literature. Its hybrid nature, as encapsulated in its capacity to embrace apparently antagonistic systems of representation and radically different cultural traditions, allowed postcolonial writers to reflect the complex and multifaceted social, political and personal situations that they experienced and embodied. According to Stephen Slemon:

colonisation, whatever its precise form, initiates a kind of double vision or ‘metaphysical clash’ into colonial culture, a binary opposition within language that has its roots in the process of either transporting a language to a new land or imposing a foreign language on an indigenous population. [...] Magic realist narrative recapitulates a dialectical struggle within language, a dialectic between ‘codes of recognition’ [...] the magic realist text can be read [...] as a speaking mirror. (1995, 411)

Most literary critics consider that there are two main magic realist branches in which fantasy plays a totally different role as regards the final objective of the work. On the one hand, the intellectual branch in which magic usually arises out of the confusion between reality and mere verbal constructions that do not exist outside the literary text. This branch shares a number of characteristics with fabulation and is represented by writers such as

Borges and the surrealists. On the other hand, the popular branch that mainly relies on myths, legends and oral traditions. In this category, the existence of the supernatural is explained on account of faith and superstition (Delbaere 1993, 76). In keeping with these ideas, these two branches have also been respectively labelled as ‘the scholarly type and ‘the folkloric type’ by literary critics such as Jean Weisgerber (Faris 2004, 27).

The aforementioned distinction can overlap with that offered by Christopher Warner (2009, 14). He also identifies two different branches on account of the binary faith vs. irreverence. ‘Faith-based magic realism’ calls for a suspension of disbelief in readers to prevent them from applying their critical faculties. In this way, the concept of reality is expanded because the supernatural is regarded as part of it. Very often, its aim is to revive and assert a non-western cosmological vision. As for the second type, called ‘discursive magic realism,’ it mainly tries to show the western claims of truth as merely cultural and historical constructions. By placing the ‘non-real’ and ‘real’ on an equal footing, some tension is generated that cannot be resolved. Although there is no hierarchy between the two systems of representation, the clash between them undermines the ontological foundations of both. Discursive magic realism is thus built on irreverence and its main aim is to put to the test and question the western worldview.

As was argued before, due to its capacity to encompass different systems of representation and cultural assumptions, as well as holding some kind of socio-political commitment, magic realism became a powerful decolonising agent (Herrero 2003, 150). Dominant western discourse and the set of beliefs attached to it accordingly get undermined by their confrontation with another kind of antagonistic discourse. This being said, magic realism can be, not only the means whereby primitive cultures can be reappraised, but also the discursive weapon that allows bringing to light important social and political issues that can alone raise people’s awareness. In addition, it should be pointed out that it is this social and political commitment that magic realism advocates that basically distinguishes it from fabulation. As Keith Maillard explains:

The spirit of fabulation is something like this: Nothing important can be said, so why

not have fun? The spirit of magic realism, in contrast, is: Something tremendously important must be said, something that doesn't fit easily into traditional structures, so how can I find a way to say it? (in Herrero 2003, 12)

In connection with this last feature, it could also be said that magic realism offers Salman Rushdie, not only the possibility of approaching a difficult and sensitive issue in a subtle way, thus giving this allegory a rather more universal meaning, but also the perfect means to give an important warning, namely, the risk that irrationalism, in the form of religious fanaticism, should end up dominating the world.

It is undeniable that magic realism has become "the most important contemporary trend in international fiction" (Warner 2009, 6). However, as Faris affirms (2004, 40), although its global dimension must be acknowledged, it is very difficult to speak about this literary trend in general terms, as very relevant differences must similarly be taken into consideration. As was argued before, magic realism has often been the narrative mode chosen to advocate diverse cultural needs and agendas. In Latin America, to give but one well-known example, it became the perfect vehicle to revive traditional cultures and reassure identities which had so far been given no space within western dominant discourse, whereas in Europe it has been often used as a means to question western authoritarian perspectives (Faris 2004, 40).

Notwithstanding all of these differences, in her book entitled *Ordinary Enchantments* Faris asserts (2004, 23) that most magic realist texts share five main characteristics. Firstly, the presence of an irreducible element that represents something impossible to explain by means of applying logic or common knowledge. Secondly, the fact that fictional components or realms are depicted with great accuracy in order to prove and ensure their authenticity (it is this aspect that clearly links magic realism to realism). This capacity to encapsulate and substantiate reality by offering numerous and extensive details was called *l'effet de réel* by Roland Barthes (Faris 2004, 15). The third characteristic that these works share is the hesitation that most readers experience when reading magic realist texts. As they portray a clash between two different discourses, neither of which seems to

be the dominant one, readers doubt as to how they should interpret the text's fantastic component. The fourth characteristic is the blurring of boundaries between the real and the fictional. As the fictional is created on a realistic basis, both discourses are questioned and therefore undermined. Finally, magic realism shakes the foundations of preconceived notions of time, space and identity.

All the aforementioned characteristics of magic realism can be easily found in this novel, as this analysis will try to show. The blurring of ontological boundaries and the gradual insertion of magic elements are the main pillars on which the construction of the allegory stands. Thus, the main objective of this essay will be to show magic realism as the perfect mode of narration to this aim, as the literary tool that can turn fiction into an invaluable vehicle to reproduce and convey the artificiality and relativity of what is generally regarded as 'truth', together with the ambivalences and contradictions of the so-called 'real' world.

## The Use of Magic Realism to Expose the Binary Rationalism/ Islamic Extremism

In *Two Years, Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights*, a narrator from a distant future tells us what happened centuries ago during 'The Strangenesses.' After a huge storm in New York City, a period of two years, eight months and twenty-eight nights begins in which illogical things happen. Geronimo, an Indian man who now lives in the United States of America and works as a gardener, no longer touches the ground. Moreover, many people begin to be struck by lightning. Jimmi Kapoor, a graphic novelist, sees how the hero of his comics appears in front of him. A baby-girl can identify corruption as the skin of the guilty ones begins to rot in her presence. The reason for all of these strange phenomena is the opening of the wormholes that communicate Fairyland with the real world. However, this was not the first time that something like this had happened. Many centuries before the wormholes opened and the Jinn, the geniuses who live in Fairyland, entered the real world. The Princess of the Jinn, Dunia, had a relationship with Ibn Rush, a philosopher who thought that reason was the only source of knowledge, which in turn led him to write a book against Ghazali's defence of God as the ultimate truth. Ibn Rush and Dunia had many children, who were known as the Duniyat. Unlike in the past, though, this time Dunia does not arrive alone, as four malefic Ifrits come with her. The two aforementioned philosophers, who are now living dead, play a crucial role in the unravelling of events. Zumurrud, the most malevolent Ifrit, is freed from a lamp by Ghazali, who is subsequently offered three wishes. The latter, who only wants to continue and win his dispute against Ibn Rush, asks the Ifrit to attack all those human beings who do not fear God with a view to converting them. At first, Zumurrud fulfils his promise because he regards this as his duty. However, in the end he becomes a religious fanatic, and such is the resulting chaos that he creates that Dunia eventually decides to bring all her descendants together in order to beat the four malefic Ifrits and thus save the world.

From the very beginning, two different belief systems are presented. The author makes use of two historical figures whose epistemological theories rested on totally

opposite views. On the one hand, Ibn Rush, a philosopher who worked as a physician for the Caliph Abu Yusuf Yaqub, defends reason as the main source of knowledge, thus following Aristotle's ideas. On the other hand, Al-Ghazali, who was also a philosopher and theologian, criticises Aristotelian science and claims that Muslim tradition should prevail. The narrator sets the action in Cordoba, at the time when Ibn Rush had a relationship with Dunia, the Princess of Jinn. At one point in the novel Ibn Rush explains to Dunia the enmity he feels against Ghazali, because he wrote a book titled *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* in order to attack the rationalist ideas that he so adamantly defends. Echoing the most celebrated critique of Aristotle's accounts of causation carried out by Ghazali and included in his book, Ibn Rush asks Dunia why cotton burns in contact with fire. As she does not believe in any God, she answers: "it's how things are" (8). Then, he explains to her that Ghazali assures that "the cotton caught fire because God made it so, because in God's universe the only law is what God wills" (8). Ghazali's answer clearly proves that he completely rejects empirical evidence when it comes to explaining world phenomena.

This epistemological divergence, set in 1195, is rapidly transported to the present-day world, which can be easily recognised on account of the many allusions to settings and elements of popular culture that are introduced in the narration, such as comic characters, actors, films, TV channels and social media. The malefic jinn, who will later on be revealed as 'the soldiers' of Ghazali, come to the world and interrupt the normal course of life. However, people are not aware of this at the very beginning. There are only small manifestations of their presence which, following Wendy Faris's theories, can be understood as irreducible elements, that is, strange or illogical situations that characters cannot understand or explain by using reason and common knowledge.

The lack of gravitation and the numerous lightening rays striking people randomly during and after the huge storm are the two supernatural phenomena which play the role of irreducible elements in the narration. The impossibility of considering them as part of reality leads characters to experience what Wendy Faris identifies as the second characteristic of magic realist texts, namely, a sense of uncertainty or hesitation. For example, the narration focuses on how Mr Geronimo copes with this unnatural

phenomenon: He “didn’t think of himself as being easily scared but the missing of footprints had him spooked” (24). This character’s nature and reaction allow many contemporary readers to identify with him: he is a working man, a gardener, who lives a simple life and does not need religion to find any sense of purpose and meaning for his existence. His beliefs, based on rationalism, seem to be determined, not only by his biological heritage as a Duniazat, but also by his religious experiences as a child. Being “the illegitimate son of a firebrand Catholic priest” (26), the Very Rev. Fr. Jeremiah D’Niza, who could not recognise him because “the decencies had to be observed” (27), the crucial ideological influence in his life was his uncle Bento.

I’m proud to be named after Benedito de Espinosa, Portuguese Jew of Amsterdam the Older. From him I take my famous rationalism, also my knowledge that mind and body are one and Descartes was wrong to separate them. Forget the soul. No such a ghost in the machine. (31)

Bento’s words clearly deny the binary body/mind in which many people believe. The spiritual dimension simply does not exist. There is nothing but matter. As a rationalist, Mr Geronimo refuses to accept the lack of gravity as part of reality and weighs up several possible explanations, such as having been “drinking” or being “asleep and dreaming” (24). Wendy Faris (2004, 101) defines the connection of irreducible elements with fantasy, in this case as a result of drinking or dreaming, as oneiric optic. It is, according to this critic, the rationalists’ most usual response to supernatural manifestations. Another example is Jimmy Kapoor who, after being informed of his true nature by Dunia, begins “to doubt his own memory. Maybe it really had been a nightmare” (69).

Before clearly revealing its ultimate aim, the novel prompts hesitation by multiplying the number of strange phenomena and blurring all kinds of clear-cut classifications and divisions. Thus, the ever-increasing amount of people who happen to levitate and be struck by lightning is on a par with the weird number of repetitions which blur the boundary between past and present. As is well known, in some postmodernist novels, such as Peter Akroyd’s *Hawskmoor*, the repetition of the same elements, settings and numbers at

different times generates a feeling of uncanniness. In line with this, Ibn Rush's work *The Incoherence of the Incoherence* contains several echoes and repetitions. The real name of Geronimo is Raphael Hieronimus and, curiously, Raphael is the Saint of Cordoba. He works for Lady Philosopher in a state called 'La Incoerenza.' In addition, his wife died of a lightning strike just as her father did, 1001 days after he began to work in the state. This period of time significantly coincided with that of the era of 'Strangenesses.' In the relationship he has with Dunia, both of them are a loving a replica of their respectively lost partners: Dunia takes the form of Geronimo's wife while his physical appearance is extremely similar to Ibn Rush's.

The barrier between past and present is not only broken by means of using repetition, but also by crossing the line that divides life and death. At the present time, centuries after their deaths, Ibn Rush and Ghazali speak. Ghazali's words wonderfully echo the blurring of boundaries that is taking place in the narration. "The barriers of distance and time no longer pose a problem" (57), says Ghazali after observing Ibn Rush's astonishment when he sees his rival. The breaking of this boundary is crucial to the thematic development of the novel. The fact that these philosophers have physically defeated death in a way suggests that they have become the personification/embodiment of their own respective beliefs. They somehow survived, just as their ideological conflict is still going on in the world. "The battle between reason and superstitions may be seen as mankind's long adolescence, and the triumph of reason will be its coming of age" (57), says Ibn Rush, to which his opponent replies that "the followers of truth know that it is reason and science that are the true juvenilia of human mind" (58). This might bring to mind the historical moment in which theism (this being understood as the belief in the existence of one god or gods viewed as the creative source of the human race and the world who transcends yet is immanent in the world) was defeated by scientific and rationalistic discourses, as when Dunia dares to say to Ibn Rush that "God may not exist" and also that "reason, logic and science pose a magic that makes God unnecessary" (9).

It is generally thought that it was Rene Descartes, followed by John Locke, who first tried to reconcile theology and modernity. As Christianity had always been a religion which

advocated a unique universal truth, the psychological effects that the Reform caused in Europe were devastating: both parts claimed to be in possession of the truth and, as a result, there was huge social and political upheaval, which dovetailed into the Thirty Year War. Having reached this point, the only peaceful solution seemed to be to try and find some epistemological scheme that might enjoy general consensus.

As was argued before, Rene Descartes was the first philosopher who tried to explain God's nature by offering rationalist arguments, although with little success. Then, John Locke tried his hand at explaining God's existence empirically (he even stated that the concept of God could only be reached from an empirical perspective). As Locke saw it, although we do not have a direct experience of God, we have the idea of infinity, which derives from that of numbers infinitely expanding. Should both be rightly combined, the idea of God as a being who has all cognitive abilities to an infinite degree might be defended and developed. However, all of these arguments were so complex and cumbersome that they failed to provide the much-desired convincing evidence of God's existence.

For his part, Immanuel Kant criticised both of them, arguing that to try and prove God's existence by using rationalist arguments was totally impossible. According to him, God was beyond the limits of human knowledge, and consequently coined the term 'transcendental illusion,' whereby he conceived God as an idea instead of a reality. In other words, we should live as if God existed although we find it impossible to prove or demonstrate its existence. He therefore turned God into a postulate of practical reason that gives meaning to human morality. However, it was Ludwig Feuerbach who most fiercely criticised Christianity. For him, the Christian God encapsulated an incoherent set of personal, almost anthropomorphic attributes, together with a non-personal reality whose characteristics were perfection, eternity and immutability. According to Feuerbach, all the attributes that the Christian God supposedly possesses are nothing but a mere reflection of the best human abilities projected to an infinite degree. Similarly, Karl Marx thought that theism was an ideology closely linked to economic power. On the one hand, it reinforced the capitalist order, as it justified and defended those who occupied positions of authority and power by claiming that they had been appointed by God. On the other hand, all of those

who now occupied the lower positions would be compensated after death. In a word, Christian beliefs and rituals relieved earthly suffering by promising eternal bliss. Marx believed that the collapse of capitalism would necessarily imply the disappearance of religion, as this would definitely lose its former social function (Hyman 2006, 33-42).

It is right after the conversation between the two living dead philosophers, in which they debate whether science undermines religious beliefs or not, that the crucial ideas on which the novel is based, very much in line with those of Kant and Feuerbach, are finally presented by one of the characters, Hugo Casterbridge, another descendant of Ibn Rush. Hugo Casterbridge writes an article to announce the creation of an intellectual movement whose goal is to analyse 'The Strangenesses,' the term they coin to refer to all the supernatural phenomena and changes that are taking place in the world after the huge storm. In his article, he exposes two crucial ideas: firstly, he assures that "god is a creation of human beings, who only exists because of the clap-hands-if-you-believe-in-fairies-principle" (83); secondly, taking on board that God is an invention, he states that the problem was that the creation "became more powerful than his creators and also more malevolent" (83). He wisely realises that all the catastrophes that are occurring are concomitant with the creation of a fictional divinity that has ultimately become an uncontrolled and uncontrollable destructive force. During an interview on an American TV show, he explains:

Suppose that one day god sent a storm, such a storm as could shake loose the moorings of the world, a storm which told us to take nothing for granted, not our power, not our civilization, not our laws [...]. And this is the great test we face –our world, its ideas, its culture, its knowledge and laws, is under attack by the illusion we collectively created, the supernatural monster we ourselves unleashed. (84)

As a matter of fact, all the 'Strangenesses' that manifest themselves in the world in the form of flying cars decapitating people, monsters swallowing ships around the Statue of Liberty, babies who are able to identify corruption and innumerable lightning strikes, to mention but some, shake the mainstay of our society, its laws and principles. This wave of

irrationalism that bursts into the world makes people call into question their sets of beliefs.

To state that God is a human creation also implies the end of religion as a metanarrative. This idea may bring to mind some of Francois Lyotard's theories. In his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), he argues that postmodernity is characterised by the incredulity towards metanarratives, as they are nothing but totalising stories whose ultimate aim is to legitimise official/established knowledge and cultural practices. They are quintessentially authoritative and therefore set the ground to uphold dominant political and cultural points of view, which are thus turned into unquestionable truths. Like History and Science, Religion is one of modern society's most important metanarratives.

Lyotard also distinguishes between two different types of knowledge: on the one hand, 'narrative knowledge,' which is based on storytelling and enjoys no official legitimisation; it basically becomes the main means whereby knowledge is transmitted in primitive societies. On the other hand, 'scientific knowledge,' which has been legitimated by scientific criteria, such as experimentation. The distinction between these two types of knowledge is crucial in Lyotard's postmodernist theories, as he argues that scientific knowledge has somehow taken the upper hand. As he sees it, this can be highly problematic, because scientific narrative cannot possibly capture reality's totality. Different genres or systems of representation are consequently needed to do so. In other words, Lyotard calls into question that science should be seen as a rather more legitimate source of knowledge than narrative.

In the novel, not only is religion undermined as a metanarrative, but also history. The era of 'Strangenesses' and the subsequent War of the Worlds are presented as a "story from our past" and told by a narrator in the future, who admits that there is no agreement regarding whether that story should be "call[ed] [...] history or mythology" or even "a fairy tale" (207). Within the debate, however, the non-disputed point is "that to tell a story about the past is to tell a story about the present" (207). Taking into account these observations, the narrator's point of view regarding history is made clear: history is not considered to be

an objective account of the past which scrupulously contains the truth, therefore becoming a source of legitimate knowledge. In other words, it is not a metanarrative or grand narrative. It is simply narrative, and thus on an equal basis to many others.

There is a moment in the novel when the narrator expresses even more clearly his irreverence towards the grand narrative of history. In the middle of the war, when the Grand Ifrit Zumurrud is planning to set the 'Foundation' with the aim of taking control of the world, and for her part Dunia begins to organise an army by bringing together all her descendants (Geronimo, Jimmy Kapoor, Teresa Saca) in order to fight against the Dark Jinn, the narrator says:

How treacherous history is! Half-truths, ignorance, deceptions, false trails, errors and lies, and buried somewhere in between all of that, the truth, in which it is easy to lose faith, of which it is consequently easy to say, it's a chimera, there's no such thing, everything is relative, one man's absolute belief is another man's fairy tale.  
(220)

As these words suggest, official history contains plenty of errors and inaccuracies and, when deemed as truth, it can even become society's dominant ideology, which thus leaves no ground for criticism or divergence.

If the echoes of Lyotard's ideas with regard to the questioning of metanarratives as ultimate truths can be clearly felt in the novel, the importance of narrative knowledge and the Indian oral tradition should not be underestimated either. Not in vain was the author of the novel born in India, "a land of stories" according to Enrique Gallud (2010). It is a fact that Indian culture permeates most of Rushdie's works. Like some other previous novels of his such as the internationally acclaimed *Midnight's Children* (1981), *Two Years, Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* heavily relies on the Indian oral tradition, that is, the powerful narrative ensemble written in Sanskrit during the Vedic period, which ran from 1500 BC to 200 AC, and the Classical period, which ran from the end of Vedic times to the XIII century. This oral tradition became the vehicle whereby knowledge was passed down from generation to generation. Although the fact that the stories were transmitted by word

of mouth and were based on memories of ancient Aryan communities undoubtedly conditioned the accuracy of their content, it is also true that these stories contributed to the spreading and perpetuation of a most culturally valuable legacy that might have otherwise got lost. As they should be easy to remember, the narrative techniques used to create them included the use of repetitions, intertextuality, symbols, popular refrains, and more particularly the structure known as frame narration or embedded stories ('a story within a story'). Highly characteristic of the Orient, this structure is concomitant with the idea of non-linear time. Among the most well-known collections are the *Brihatkathâ*, the *Kathâsaritsâgara*, the *Pañchatantra*, the *Dashakumâracharita*, the *Jâkata*, and the best known in the West, the *One Thousand and One Nights*. When speaking about the rich oral tradition of storytelling in India, Salman Rushdie explained how he connects stories and personal anecdotes with Indian mythology: firstly, a piece or fragment of a mythological legend is mentioned; secondly, this fragment is connected with a contemporary political event; then, a personal anecdote is added, and finally other digressions can in turn be made and included should the storyteller deem this fit or necessary. He concludes that "instead of being confusing to the audience, it's actually delightful," and also that "this playfulness, this multiple narration, turns out to be the better way of holding people's attention" (Rushdie, 2015b).

Going back to the novel under analysis, one should not forget that the narrator is not the only storyteller in it. There is a character, the Indian woman Blue Yasmeen, who is famous in the neighbourhood for holding events in which she gathers people and tells them stories. This is another clear example of the aforementioned frame narration. At this point in the novel, the narrative voice changes and readers have direct access to Yasmeen's words, which appear in italics. She makes some important remarks before telling the most relevant story in connection with this matter.

*We were all trapped in stories [...] each of us the prisoner of our own solipsistic narrative, each family the captive of the family story, each community locked within its own tale of itself, each people their victims of their own versions of history. (112)*

Yasmeen explains that our personal story is embedded in our family story, which is in turn embedded in the story of the community. In consequence, all the stories that in one way or another make up our identity are, not only interconnected, but also embedded into one another as if they were *matryoshkas*, the well-known Russian dolls. Then Yasmeen goes on to say:

they're all make-believe fantasies, the realist fantasies and the fantastic fantasies are both made-up, and the first thing to know about made-up stories is that they are all untrue in the same way. [...] this is our tragedy, she said in his words, our fictions are killing us, but if we didn't have those fictions, maybe that would kill us too. (113)

She makes it clear that, however fictional stories may be, they are absolutely necessary for the human existence. Moreover, even if they may be somehow related to reality, one should never forget that they do not necessarily contain the whole truth. She illustrates this in the story of the Unyaza people, which delves into the pros and cons of storytelling itself, as well as into the danger of taking as absolute truth what is not. The Unyaza people were infected by the story parasite, which entered the ears of new-born babies. As a consequence of this, once babies had grown up, they demanded a lot of harmful stuff, "fairy tales, pipe dreams, chimeras, delusions, lies" (113). In order to try to eradicate this plague, the first measure they took was to execute those who were heavily infected. Being unsuccessful, they decided to stopper with mud the ears of babies to prevent the parasite from entering. In the end, they were successful. Yet, with the passing of time, a strong pessimism took hold of the Unyaza population. The problem was that the world had become 'too real.' They began to kill one another until the tribe was totally extinguished. Interestingly enough, though, there was not enough information as to whether the story parasite had really existed or had been a mere illusion that had passed as truth among the Unyaza people, bringing about horrible consequences for them.

The second idea presented by Hugo Casterbridge is that God is a creation that has become even more powerful and dangerous than its own creators. He upholds the belief

that “the triumph of the destructive irrational manifests itself in the form of an irrationally destructive God” (84), which wonderfully encapsulates the novel’s main aim: to construct an allegory that warns against the risk that religious fanaticism should end up taking control of the world. Religious fanaticism is thus regarded as one of irrationality’s multiple potential faces. The climax of this allegory rests on several conversations between Ghazali and the malefic Ifrit Zumurrud Shah. The role of Ghazali could be equalled to that of a religious leader who tries to illuminate his devotees’ hearts with God’s light. As was explained before, after freeing the Ifrit from the lamp, he is offered three wishes. In order to carry out his mission of bringing men back to God, he asks the Ifrit to instil fear in men’s hearts because “only fear will move sinful Man towards God” (126). He believes that “fear is the echo of God, and whenever that echo is heard men fall to their knees and cry for mercy” (126). That is why he insists on the need to arouse this feeling in rationalist human beings.

In some parts of the earth, God is already feared. Don’t bother about those regions. Go where Man’s pride is swollen, where Man believes himself to be godlike, lay waste his arsenals and fleshpots, his temples of technology, knowledge and wealth. [...] Go and show them the truth. (126)

However, it is also true that, when fear is intentionally used as a means to obtain something, it may just as well turn into terrorism, as Zumurrud’s transformation clearly shows. At the beginning, he accepts Ghazali’s petition because he considers this to be his duty. With the passing of time, though, he begins to experience and enjoy the power of terror for the sake of a superior cause. As he explains to his three companions:

We are in the process of instituting a reign of terror on Earth, and there’s only one word that justifies that as far as these savages are concerned: the word of this or that god. In the name of a divine entity we can do whatever the hell we like and most of those fools down there will swallow it like a bitter pill. (230)

According to this, religion is just a weapon often used to control the masses and achieve certain goals. It therefore becomes an ideology that serves to reinforce and support tyranny, that is, an authority that should never be questioned. When taken to extremes,

one of its main objectives seems to be the destruction of the First World's welfare state, as this is interpreted as an excess of Man's pride, an intent on the part of human beings to become semi-gods, and thus a grave sin. Contrary to this, a British historian called Peter Watson (in Sabogal 2015) affirms that "behind Islamic fanaticism there is no faith in any god, but rather revenge on account of many centuries of failure as suffered by people who no longer have any place to go". According to Watson and other well-known critics such as Alan Badiou (2016), this desire for revenge has its roots in poverty and lack of education. Religion grows stronger and spreads rather more quickly in poor countries whose people feel that all international organizations have failed to solve their problems.

The re-emergence of religion challenges two crucial assumptions of modernity. First, that humankind would eventually become fully secular, which would in turn make religion totally irrelevant. Secondly, that since religion and politics belong to two different spheres, neither of them would ever interfere with the other. This is, as López Ruf (2016) argues, the idea that lies at the core of 'The Westphalia Presumption,' by Scott Thomas. After a century full of political and religious conflicts, the treaties signed in Westphalia in 1648 determined the nature of future international relations. The Thirty Years War had made it clear that religion and politics should never be mixed up, and that religion should exclusively pertain to the private domain. From that moment onwards, secularism set the basis for all political relations. However, it seems that secularism has not been as successful as it was then thought, since religion has never quite lost ground in mankind's history.

The real problem occurs when religion takes control of the public domain and begins to be used as the rightful justification for violent acts. As we all know, several religious terrorist groups, such as Al-Qaeda, Hezbollah and DAESH, among others, have become quite powerful recently. Salman Rushdie has openly confessed his worries about the re-emergence and radicalisation of religion in the last decades. In an essay titled *In Good Faith* (1990) he declares that he does not believe in any God, and describes himself as "a modern and a modernist urban man 'who accepts' uncertainty as the only constant, change as the only sure thing" (405). More recently, in an interview offered in 2015 he went as far as to assert that he had never imagined that religion could reach such a relevant position in the

world again. When he was young, he said, “nobody ever talked about religion. Religion just sort of disappeared. The idea that religion would return to become a colossal force in the world would have seemed absurd fifteen years ago and yet there it is, sitting in the middle of the room” (2015c). It was this worrying global situation that led him to write this novel, among other motivations.

## Conclusion

This novel was written as a response to the worrying present-day reality to which political authorities of all kinds do not seem to be able to offer any solution. It should be pointed out, however, that the novel does not intend to bring the much desired-solution nor does it criticise any particular government, although it cannot be denied that some kind of critique transpires on its pages. It could be argued that the main objective of the novel is to send a warning or, to be more precise, to raise people's awareness about the danger posed by the possibility of religious fanaticism taking control of the world. It is also clear that Salman Rushdie's choice of magic realism as the main narrative mode in this novel is by no means accidental, as the 'magic' component allowed him to deal with a very sensitive issue in quite a subtle way. Readers may feel on the whole detached from the problem (worldwide terrorist acts and religious indoctrination) as they are much aware of the fact that this is nothing but a tale, a product of the author's imagination. On the other hand, however, magic realism allows for the gradual construction of the final allegory, from the introduction of an irreducible element in the narration to the creation of a whole parallel fictional world, whose internal coherence further invites readers to identify with the characters who, in spite of their 'magic' characteristics, nonetheless echo the 'realist' situation of many contemporary people. As is often the case, although most readers cannot possibly regard magic as part of reality, they will nonetheless feel overwhelmed and will not know how to interpret all of this, which will make them wonder how they would have coped with this if they had undergone a similar situation.

One of the most important characteristics of magic realism, especially as seen in this novel, is its capacity to blur the boundaries between time and space, which in this case helps, among other things, to show that the ideological conflict between faith and reason has existed for centuries, no matter the different forms and faces that their instigators may have taken. Furthermore, it also serves to prove that human nature has not changed so much over the centuries, at least as regards spiritual needs. The need to find answers to

crucial existential questions and, by extension, some kind of consolation that might help to endure earthly suffering has led many people to embrace religion. Yet, religious discourses often give simple explanations based on divine revelation to very difficult issues, such as the meaning and purpose of life and the origin of humankind. In our current era, in which according to Rushdie uncertainty is the only sure thing, because science still cannot give definite answers and changes happen so fast that it is extremely difficult to know how to adjust to them, the certainty and immutability that religion provides become a comforting haven for many people. Unfortunately, though, some opportunists take advantage of this spiritual need, as well as other unfavourable socio-economic conditions, with a view to controlling the masses and hold absolute power over them.

The blurring of time and space also makes readers ponder the importance of history because, if one really wants to understand what is happening nowadays, it is of crucial importance to get to know what happened before, as the present is always a consequence of the past, and somehow conditions what will happen in the future. Not in vain does the novel show this clear interconnection between the three periods of time: past, present and future.

The last aspect worth mentioning in connection with magic realism is the important role played by fiction, so often discarded by many as being unable to reproduce reality. As this novel shows, fictions are lies that often manage to tell the truth lot better than 'realist' or 'historical' accounts. By offering us this 'magic' universe, Rushdie's novel succeeds in illustrating and criticising what is actually happening in our contemporary world, at the same time as it wonders what kind of response society should give to such a challenging situation. As can be seen in this novel, fiction is a powerful tool that can be used positively to create wonderful things or, on the contrary, a weapon used by unscrupulous people to manipulate the masses and foul the meaning and relationship between reason and spirituality and, by extension, ethics.

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