



## RE-SHAPING CULTURE AND IDENTITY IN POSTCOLONIAL FICTION: SALMAN RUSHDIE

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**ABSTRACT**

One of the most fascinating, rapidly developing, and difficult areas of literary and cultural studies today is postcolonialism. Focused on postcolonialism and designed especially for those studying postcolonial studies, *Re-Shaping Culture and Identity in postcolonial Fiction: Salman Rushdie and Abdulrazak Gurnah* introduces key subject areas of concern such as culture and identity in a clear accessible and organised fashion. It provides an overview of the development of postcolonialism as a discipline and takes a close look at its important authors, Salman Rushdie and Abdulrazak Gurnah, and their selected oeuvres, *Fury*, *Midnight's Children*, *By the Sea* and *Memory of Departure*. With a palimpsestic analysis of culture and identity as crucial features of postcolonial texts, *Re-Shaping Culture and Identity in postcolonial Fiction: Salman Rushdie and Abdulrazak Gurnah* argues how postcolonialism functions in allowing the formation of a new perspective on the contemporary world. Besides, it offers an alternative perspective on their works, one that promotes the importance of the issue of postcolonial agency. Finally, is it the novel about (effects of) globalization, or a kind of globalized novel? Perhaps the global novel is all these, but many of these issues also characterize cosmopolitan and world literature, which may lead to further terminological confusion. To be able to understand them more clearly and to explore Rushdie's fiction primarily through the prism of its cosmopolitan ethos, one needs to consider briefly the wider context of cultural and literary globalization.

One of the most fascinating, rapidly developing, and difficult areas of literary and cultural studies today is postcolonialism. Focused on postcolonialism and designed especially for those studying postcolonial studies, *Re-Shaping Culture and Identity in postcolonial Fiction: Salman Rushdie and Abdulrazak Gurnah* introduces key subject areas of concern such as culture and identity in a clear accessible and organised fashion. It provides an overview of the development of postcolonialism as a discipline and takes a close look at its important authors, Salman Rushdie and Abdulrazak Gurnah, and their selected oeuvres, *Fury*, *Midnight's Children*, *By the Sea* and *Memory of Departure*. With a palimpsestic analysis of culture and identity as crucial features of postcolonial texts, *Re-Shaping Culture and Identity*

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in postcolonial Fiction: Salman Rushdie and Abdulrazak Gurnah argues how postcolonialism functions in allowing the formation of a new perspective on the contemporary world. Besides, it offers an alternative perspective on their works, one that promotes the importance of the issue of postcolonial agency.

In the 2005 edition of their guide to contemporary literary theory, Selden, Widdowson, and Brooker point out yet again that we live in a time of post-theory, when “theory [...] seems anyway not to be about literature,” “the days of theory [...] are over,” or rather we have reached “the end of theory” (267), with literature, once at the heart of the theoretical project, being neglected by what theory there is and politicized: “the distinctive mark of the literary has been overlaid by the imperatives of race, sexuality, gender” (Selden, Widdowson, and Brooker 269). One need not despair, though, the authors assure us, for it is not an apocalypse but a reorientation (267). A significant contribution to that reorientation is made by a now-substantial body of works in the field of cosmopolitan theory—Berthold Schoene’s *The Cosmopolitan Novel*, Philip Leonard’s *Literature after Globalization*, Katherine Stanton’s *Cosmopolitan Fictions*, and Vinay Dharwadker’s *Cosmopolitan Geographies* are some noteworthy titles—which takes late twentieth and twenty-first century literary cosmopolitanism as one of its foci of interest in the context of contemporary forms and discussions of globalization, while also looking back to earlier times and traditional notions of cosmopolitanism.

As a phenomenon, “an attitude and disposition,” or “a strategy of resistance” (Schoene 2, 5), cosmopolitanism is no novelty. Like globalization, with which it is inextricably and as yet indeterminately related, it can be traced back to the Renaissance, according to Leonard, the Middle Ages, as suggested by *Cosmopolitan Geographies*, or antiquity—the very word “cosmopolitan” derives from the ancient Greek word “kosmopolitēs.” What in Schoene’s opinion distinguishes contemporary cosmopolitanism is that it signals “a departure from traditional internationalist perspectives while stressing the significance of local culture for the development of any meaningful and viable world-communal future” (1). Schoene detects its beginning in 1989—the fall of the Berlin Wall marking the end of an era and inspiring “the utopian cosmopolitanism of the early 1990s” (Leonard 11)—but points to September 11, 2001 as another turning point, one that called for a more realistic sense of cosmopolitanism and initiated its recasting (6–7). Although post-9/11 cosmopolitan theory may still stray away into naïve imagining of conviviality, intercommunal, multiculturalism, and ethnic diversity, which “serve as mere exotic wallpaper to the self-fashioning of middle-class identities, whose quality of life and sense of self are appealingly enhanced by being able to ‘feel cosmopolitan’ due to the apparent, yet far from actively neighbourly, proximity of ‘others,’” new cosmopolitanism has “grown realist” (Schoene 5, 9) in that it is rooted in contemporary realities. Vinay Dharwadker undisputedly agrees, stating that “the accelerated globalization of capital and material production and consumption after the fall of the Berlin Wall” and the rapid change of “the economic and political relations among old and new nations” is also one of the three major developments that changed the image of the world in the last quarter of the twentieth century and instigated the “transformation of cosmopolitanism” (1).

Disassociating this discussion from the apprehension of cosmopolitanism as “collusive with the neoimperialist project of American world domination” (Schoene 10),



Schoene focuses on the emergence of its peculiarly British form resulting from Britain's unique position between America and old Europe, followed by the arrival of what he sees as "a new kind of novel" (11), the world-encompassing and world-creative cosmopolitan novel. If the novel is traditionally linked with the rise of the nations, then this new subgenre, "less homebound and territorialist" (Schoene 12), can be associated with the weakening of nations, especially when understood as places of belonging, and even more so where access to digital living creates a feeling of one's independence of a specific place (Leonard 35). This perception of a new cosmopolitan literature can be seen as reflecting Bruce Robbins's argument that "instead of an ideal of detachment, actually existing cosmopolitanism is a reality of (re)attachment, multiple attachment, or attachment at a distance" (3). The idea that the cosmopolitan novel reinforces a sense of belonging and communality across national borders, departing from the novel of the nation, which either asserts or deconstructs national(ist) myths, seems strongly supported by the trajectory followed by Salman Rushdie's fiction, away from his earlier narratives of the nation toward more cosmopolitan works. Such works transgress the boundaries of any single imagined national community to take (much of) the world as their *mise en scène*, their forms and structures reflecting the world's kaleidoscopic cellularity, fragmentation, and/or compositeness. In a time when it is increasingly more difficult to pinpoint what the novel is, and even more strenuous to classify it, the kind of crossover fiction, to borrow Lodge's term, that Rushdie's work epitomizes is regarded as a "literary expression of the global age" (Leonard 11) and, at times, termed global and world literature.

This clearly indicates that in addition to national borders, disciplinary boundaries in relation to cosmopolitan literature are to be discussed as well. Analyzing what he sees as "the absence of the cosmopolitan idea in world literature studies," César Domínguez contends that, although "cosmopolitanism and world literature are so closely related, to the point where one may wonder whether 'cosmopolitan literature' is synonymous with 'world literature,'" one of the reasons why "the concept of cosmopolitanism plays such a minor role in world literature discussions" lies in "the boundaries between comparative literature" (whose key concept cosmopolitanism is) "and world literature" (244). In his article "World Literature and Cosmopolitanism," Domínguez offers a detailed account of the intersections between these closely related concepts, using the platform of David Damrosch's tripartite definition of world literature and Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen's summary of key developments in cosmopolitan theory between "the two 9/11 events" (Schoene 6–7), that is, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the World Trade Center attacks.

Writing about world literature in their essay titled "World Lite. What Is Global Literature?," the editors of the literary magazine *n+1* appear to be illustrating Domínguez's contentions, since the term cosmopolitanism does not figure per se in their analysis. Linking world literature to global capitalism and observing the ever-present financial root of literacy but also of literary production and consumption, the authors of "World Lite" draw a distinction between the roles of strengthening and weakening of national boundaries and languages, ascribed to and undertaken by literature, that constitute the difference between vernacular and world literature. Recounting the condition of world literature after World War II, the authors draw the same boundary as Schoene and distinguish between the "earlier era of World Literature, when things were still 'postcolonial'" (and whose major exponent is Salman Rushdie), *The Satanic Verses* representing a kind of literary watershed, and "a post-





cold war, globalized World Literature” typified by novels such as *The Ground beneath Her Feet* whose association with anti-imperialism is waning. The editors specifically date this new literary globalism to the late 1990s and the economic growth of developing countries, which took literature on a “Jason Bourne-like tour through the emerging financial capitals of what used to be the third world.” In this new literature springing from the new world order, the homelands have been transcended, “the clammy cells of provincialism” have been escaped from, and a universal relevance of a literary work has been acquired. Not only the progress of global capitalism, however, is mirrored by the progress of world literature, but also its inequalities and deformations, the editors claim. Given the fact that today’s world literature cannot but reflect “global capitalism, in its triumph, inequalities, and deformations,” it “might better be called Global Literature,” “implying worldwide processes that polarize the conditions of the world’s people.”

A brief survey of English department curricula shows that there are now a variety of largely comparative courses titled “Global Novel,” “The Global Novel,” or “The New Global Novel,” focusing, for the most part, on the so-called transnational, global literature and authors such as Salman Rushdie, J. M. Coetzee, Kazuo Ishiguro, Zadie Smith, or Haruki Murakami, whose works frequently feature in discussions on literary cosmopolitanism. Such courses testify to an increasing popularity and perhaps predominance of transnational, international, transcultural, or multicultural literature—there is certainly no shortage of terms—in a time when the novel has never been more hybrid. Hybridity in literature today is not simply a matter of mixing genres, literary conventions, and traditions from different cultures, of blurring the border between high and low or serious and popular culture and literature, or of blending fiction and nonfiction. It is also about combining different artistic media, which is not new in itself but is certainly more experimental now than it was in the past, what with the wider choice of devices at hand. This blending occurs, for instance, in ever more daring juxtapositions of text and image—what William Blake did, placing himself well ahead of his time, is taken to a whole new level by writers such as Mario Vargas Llosa and W. G. Sebald, or artists such as Cy Twombly and Barbara Kruger—or in the application of cinematic techniques to the narrative, using the globally understood language of film. At other times, hybridity is a matter of uniting music and narrative in performance poetry, thereby returning to the very beginnings of literature, to oral poetry accompanied by music and created solely to be performed, or of incorporating the techniques of orature into the novel.

Such forms of hybridity complicate the question of what the global novel is. Is it the novel as a global genre? Since the issue is rarely taken up outside Anglophone cultures, can we say that the global novel is, in fact, the novel in English as a global language or the language of globalization? Is it perhaps the novel from around the globe, or the novel of global settings and concerns—some courses search for “global themes, issues, and processes,” states the “The Global Novel” course overview in English and Comparative Literary Studies at the University of Warwick? Finally, is it the novel about (effects of) globalization, or a kind of globalized novel? Perhaps the global novel is all these, but many of these issues also characterize cosmopolitan and world literature, which may lead to further terminological confusion. To be able to understand them more clearly and to explore Rushdie’s fiction primarily through the prism of its cosmopolitan ethos, one needs to consider briefly the wider context of cultural and literary globalization.



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