



# Salman Rushdie's *East, West*: Binary Opposite

ENGE 5850

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# Recap

Identity as a concept that ...

- Resist definitions
- Entangled with both the past & the future

Identity as

- a variance
- a narrative

➔ Slippery and Contested !!

# Lecture Outline

- Situates Salman Rushdie as a postcolonial writer
- How Rushdie presents identity as binary opposite
- How Rushdie plays with the binary opposite between the east and the west



# Salman Rushdie (1947 - )

- Born in India in 1947
- historical and philosophical issues
- magical realism
- controversial religious and political figure
- *Grimus* (1975)
- *Midnight's Children* (1981)
- *Shame* (1983)
- *The Satanic Verses* (1988)



# Salman Rushdie (1947 - )

- *Imaginary Homelands* (1991)
- *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990)
- *East, West* (1994)
- *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995)
- *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999)
- *Fury* (2001)
- *Step Across This Line* (2002)
- *Shalimar the Clown* (2005)
- *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008)
- *Luka and the Fire of Life* (2010)
- *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* (2015)



# On Literature

“Salman Rushdie in Conversation with Sarah Crichton” (1995)

- “Literature is where I go to explore the highest and lowest places in human society and in the human spirit, where I hope to find not absolute truth but the truth of the tale, of the imagination and of the heart.”



# On Literature

- “Literature may be weak because it has no real power in the world, but in a way it is the grandest narrative of all, in that it puts ourselves into question with fiction. We challenge ourselves and refuse to take the world as a given. We challenge all correctives of opinion, all appeasements, all fears. Literature is the unafraid form.”



# On Postcolonial Literature

- In “The Indian Writer in England” (1983)
  - “What does it mean to be an ‘Indian’ outside India? How can culture be preserved without becoming ossified? How should we discuss the need for change within ourselves and our community without seeming to play into the hands of our racial enemies? What are the consequences, both spiritual and practical, of refusing to make concessions to Western ideas and practices? What are the consequences of embracing those ideas and practices and turning away from ones that came with us?”

## Discussion

In what ways does Rushdie's conceptualisation of postcolonial literature echo our discussion of identity in the previous lecture?





## Binary Opposite

- Dominant since the time of the ancient Greeks
  - mind VS body
  - nature VS culture
  - internal VS external
  - present VS absent
  - literal VS metaphorical
  - speech VS writing
- ➔ PRIMARY (FUNDAMENTAL)  
VS SECONDARY (DERIVATIVE)

# Jacques Derrida

- “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” (1966)
  - “The passage beyond philosophy does not consist in turning the page of philosophy...but in continuing to read philosophers in a certain way.”
- Not reversing but reconstituting or reinscribing



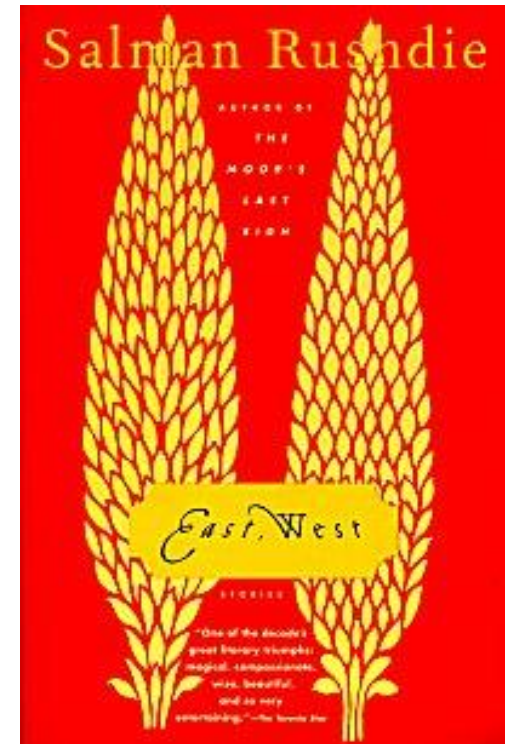
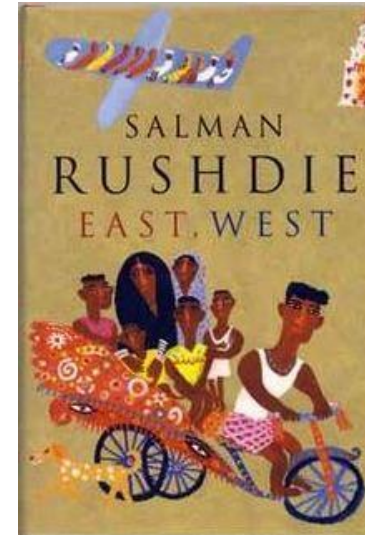
## Discussion

In what ways does Rushdie deploy *East, West* to respond to Derrida's conceptualisation of binary opposition?

# *East, West*

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- Various styles, genres, structures and techniques
- Orient and Occident
- deconstruct the binary division between East and West?
- Rushdie in *Imaginary Homeland*
  - “literature is, of all the arts, the one best suited to challenging absolutes of all kinds”
- the world as an intricate, interrelated system



# Part 1 – “East”

- cultural and religious traditions
- some try to break the rigid social system
- “Good Advice Is Rarer Than Rubies”
- “The Free Radio”
- “The Prophet's Hair” involves



# “Good Advice is Rarer than Rubies”

- Immigration
  - Miss Rehana, a house servant,
  - Muhammad Ali, a self proclaimed adviser
  - deliberately fails the Consulate’s test and gets herself banned from entry to England
- Bruce King
    - “There is no complexity, no irony beyond the contrast between the woman's decision and the assumption by others that she would want to emigrate to Bradford. Rushdie's exaggerated fairy-tale-like style and caricatured characters contribute to the obviousness.”

## Discussion

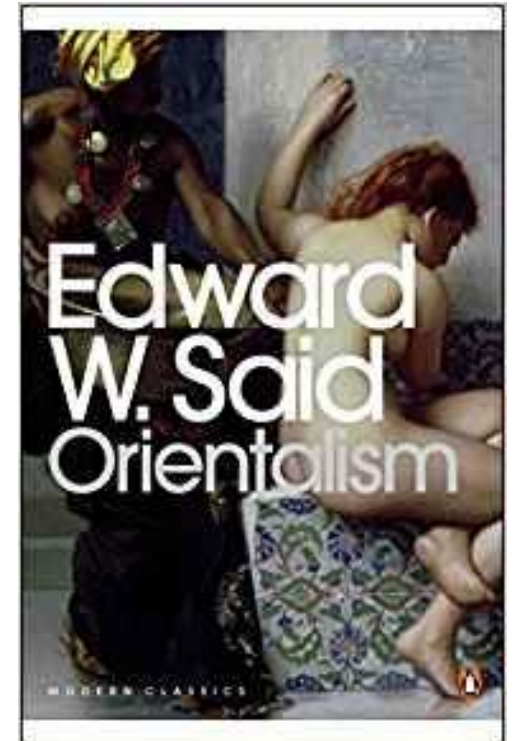
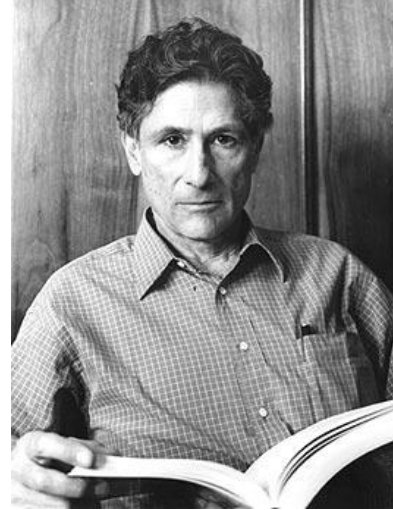
In what ways do you (dis)agree with King? Why?

Is the short story a successful deconstruction of binary opposites? If yes, what kind(s) of binary opposites does it speak to?

# Edward Said

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- *Orientalism* (1978)
  - sexually promiscuous and exotic
  - East = Feminine





# “Good Advice is Rarer than Rubies”

- I was nine years old when my parents fixed it. Mustafa Dar was already thirty at that time, but my father wanted someone who could look after me as he had done himself and Mustafa was a man known to Daddyji as a solid type. Then my parents died and Mustafa Dar went to England and said he would send for me. That was many years ago. I have his photo, but he is like a stranger to me. Even his voice, I do not recognize it on the phone. [...] Now I will go back to Lahore and my job. [...] “But this is tragedy!” Muhammad Ali lamented [...] “It is spoilt, and it could have been so easy if advice had been accepted in good time.” “I do not think” she told him, “I truly do not think you should be sad”.

# “Good Advice is Rarer than Rubies”

- “I work in a great house, as ayah to three good boys. They would have been sad to see me leave.”
- “Her last smile, which he watched from the compound until the bus concealed it in a dust-cloud, was the happiest thing he had ever seen in his long, hot, hard, unloving life”

# “The Prophet’s Hair”

- Hashim
- finds a hair from Muhammad’s head and gets himself and his family destroyed in his fanatic obsession
- Daughter, sons, and wife as the victims of his fanaticism
- What does this do with the binary opposites or the notion of cultural identity?

# Destabilisation in “The Prophet’s Hair”

- Hashim
  - is “not a godly man living honourably in the world”
  - asks for interest rates of over seventy percent
- his wife and children
  - live a secular life
- Huma
  - goes to the cinema and does not wear a purdah.
- No one in the family prays five times a day

# Destabilisation in “The Prophet’s Hair”

- Changes in Hashim
  - accidentally finds the relic of Prophet Muhammad’s hair
  - starts forcing his family to live according to the laws of Islam
  - starts beating his wife and daughter
  - merciless to his debtors
- the Prophet Mohammad
  - leads to death and ruin
- Do you think it offends Muslim beliefs?



# Salman Rushdie

## *In Step Across This Line*

- “it is absolutely wrong [...] of [Muslims] to demand that their belief-system –that any system of belief or thought – should be immunized against criticism, irreverence, satire, even scornful disparagement”

## Part 2 – “West”



- defamiliarized perspective
- a detached view of a significant Western myth
- Western fiction, history, and myths
- “Yorick”
- “At The Auction Of The Ruby Slippers”
- “Christopher Columbus And Queen Isabella Of Spain Consummate Their Relationship (Santa Fé, AD 1492)”



“Yorick”

- an unconventional version of Hamlet
- Bruce King
  - “offers a version of Hamlet, in a mixture of pseudo ancient styles”
- Digressive and self-interrupting narrative



## Discussion

In what ways is it comparable with the last short story in “West,” “Christopher Columbus and Queen Isabella of Spain Consummate Their Relationship (Santa Fé, AD 1492)”?

# “At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers”

- a surrealistic parable of the American consumerist dream
- The narrator:
  - “because of their powers of reverse metamorphosis, their affirmation of a lost state of normalcy in which we have ceased to believe and to which they [the slippers] promise us we can return” (92)
- constant repetition of Dorothy’s famous line in *The Wizard of Oz*, “there’s no place like home”

## Discussion

What is the function /  
significance of this  
highlight of the idea of  
home?

Linda Hutcheon  
and Mario Valdés  
in “Irony,  
Nostalgia, and  
the Postmodern:  
A Dialogue”

“the aesthetics of nostalgia might be less a matter of simple memory than of complex projection” since it “depends on the irrecoverable nature of the past [which is] idealised through memory and desire”



# Magical Realism

# Elleke Boehmer

- “combine[s] the supernatural with local legend and imagery derived from colonialist cultures to represent cultures which have been repeatedly unsettled by invasion, occupation, and political corruption” which therefore “are used to indict the follies of both empire and its aftermath.”



# Michael Valdez Moses

- “express[es] the nostalgia of global modernity for the traditional worlds it has vanquished and subsumed” which “allow[s], indeed encourage[s], their readers to indulge in a nostalgic longing for and an imaginary return to a world that is past, or passing away.”





# Terry Eagleton

“Magic realism is usually thought of as a Third World genre, appropriate to a place where the supernatural is still taken seriously, where fable and folk tale still flourish and where fantasy can provide some pleasurable relief from a harsh social reality. But the genre is equally at home in a West for which fantasy is a major industry, where reality – or what tattered remnants of it we have left – seems endlessly pliable, where fact is shot through with fiction and where, for technology or consumerist ideology, all things seem equally possible. The comma between ‘East’ and ‘West’ in Salman Rushdie’s title thus forms a bridge as well as marking a gap, as we move within the book – itself divided into three sections (‘East’, ‘West’ and ‘East, West’) – from an Eastern to a Western way of dividing up the real.”





## Terry Eagleton

“reality *is* impoverished, but the grim allusion to immigration controls is enough to disqualify the comment and leave us without a position. ‘At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers’ contains the ghost of a love story, but there can be no real narrative in this world, since the time of the commodity is the time of eternal recurrence. There can be narratives of a sort in the East, but these are crafty parodies of storytelling, as in ‘The Prophet’s Hair’, fables as exotically packaged as products in the auction room, or tales so lean and dwindled that they have space only for a single totemic object.”

# Rushdie in *Imaginary Homelands*

- “If one is to attempt honestly to describe reality as it is experienced by religious people, for whom God is no symbol but an everyday fact, then the conventions of what is called realism are quite inadequate. The rationalism of that form comes to be seen like a judgement upon, an invalidation of, the religious faith of the characters being described. A form must be created which allows the miraculous and the mundane to coexist at the same level - as the same order of event”



## Conclusion

### Terry Eagleton

- “The comma between ‘East’ and ‘West’ in Salman Rushdie’s title thus forms a bridge as well as marking a gap, as we move within the book – itself divided into three sections (‘East’, ‘West’ and ‘East, West’) – from an Eastern to a Western way of dividing up the real.”

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