

NEELK

BOOK OF THE MONTH

The Enchantress of Florence

by Salman Rushdie

Review by Jörg-Dieter Riemenschneider - December 2008

Kan ma kan fi qadim azzaman: it was so and it was not, in a time long forgot: Gibreel Farishta's comment in *The Satanic Verses* holds also true for the events in Rushdie's novel released earlier this year. While one part of the action circles around historical figures and episodes in Florence at the end of the 15th and the beginning of the 16th century, a second one follows events at the court of Akbar the Great in Fatehpur Sikri around 1584-85. In both story lines we do not only come across historical events and personages but also encounter invented happenings and characters embellished besides with magic and fairy-tale elements, for example the magic power of water, perfume or lances.

Rushdie's skilful handling of both narrative strands by alternately moving from one to the next and back again and by inserting various sub-plots raises the question as to where history ends and fiction sets in, even makes us doubt the power of language telling the truth – and attracts our attention to the meaning of story telling itself. The omniscient narrator questions the veracity of the reality he portrays as much as do several of his characters who experience their very own and differing versions of true love and sexuality, home and abroad, dream, enchantment and reality, secret and betrayal, past and present: all interwoven in a story about the enchanting Qara Köz, also called Lady Black Eyes, Angelica and the Enchantress of Florence. At the same time, the central narrative figure of Mogor dell' Amore ('Mughal of Love') is convinced that he "would die without telling his story" because all "men needed to hear their stories told." Even Akbar, his most patient listener, believes that Mogor "wants to step into the tale he is telling and begin a new life inside it." The basic motif of story telling then is our human need to establish our identity, our home with family and friends, our own city, country and world since if all our stories faded away, we would drift "vaguely into the white." Even Akbar feels this need although he had, as he ruminates, until recently conceived of himself as "this swallower of worlds, this many-headed monster who referred to him in the first person plural" – but who had of late begun to "meditate [...] about the disturbing possibilities of the first person singular – the 'I'."

Rushdie, we realize, has once again taken up topics and questions of his earlier writing that he pursues now and for the first time in a story where he looks far back into the past, to about 1584-85; a past that is both historically reconstructed and spun as a vastly entertaining yarn in this rich and meandering narrative. The young Florentine Mogor arrives at Fatehpur Sikri to hand over a letter from Queen Elizabeth to the Mughal Emperor, in truth however, to reveal that he is Akbar's uncle, son of Babar's sister Qara Köz or Akbar's great aunt, who had been "erased from [...]the] family history." Bringing the two men together serves the omniscient narrator's purpose to introduce the courtly atmosphere at Fatehpur Sikri with Akbar and his "Nine Stars", to relate contemporary events and sum up Qara Köz's early years as remembered by Birbal and two royal ladies: all of which make up the first part of the novel. Mogor's own story is then taken up from the beginning of the second and followed through the third and last part of the book, not however without being interrupted ever so often by his listener. It spans the years 1479 to 1519 and focuses on three friends: Niccolo 'il Macchia' or Machiavelli, Agostino Vespucci and Antonio Argalia.

It is not his own story, however, but what he has learned from his father Agostino who in turn had reported to his son what his friend Niccolo had told him about Antonio's years away from Florence between 1479 and 1513 and what he himself remembered of their early friendship and his

friend's life till his death in 1519. Niccolo in turn had come to know about Antonio's fate from a young woman, a prostitute and slave at the Ottoman Sultan's court called "memory palace". Her story, finally, included the one of Qara Kōz as a young princess living with her brother Babar and family in Samarkand, thereafter at Shaibani Khan's court and after his defeat by Shah Ismail of Persia in Herat. When the Shah himself was defeated by Antonio, leader of the Sultan's army, he and Qara had fallen in love and she followed him first to Turkey and then to Florence. Here, named Angelica by her lover, she at once began to enchant the people around her, "becoming all things to all people, an exemplar, a lover, an antagonist, a muse", and was soon known as the Enchantress of Florence. Mogor winds up his narrative by retelling his father's story about the couple's final years together, her escape with her servant and Argalia from Florence to the new world, *Mundus Novus*, his mother's death when he was nineteen and the following ten years of his own life in Florence and the Old World. His mission, he ends, to India would be fulfilled once he had revealed the secret about his mother and received from the Emperor "what was rightfully his."

The visitor's Florentine-European-western narrative, as can be explored further, highlights the fate of people as individuals; the Muslim-Indian-eastern narrative, on the other hand, grants insight into an historical period, which contrasts sharply with the Renaissance epoch of Florence. The city state's manifold political, social and religious upheavals cause great insecurity among people whose thoughts, hopes and actions are all directed at assuring their identities and granting them security. Akbar's military, political and administrative pursuits, on the other hand, have resulted in a period of peace and security, at least in his capital, which allows him, his household and advisors to find sufficient time and leisure for literature, music and painting, games and, above all, lively and controversial debates about religious questions and beliefs – a pastime of the greatest importance for the Emperor.

The novel's basic structure of two intersecting narrative strands suggests the idea of its enlightening if not pedagogical function as a postcolonial story 'writing back' to the West. For one, such an assumption is nourished by Rushdie's precise references to established historical facts and analyses of the person of Akbar and the period observed (as the bibliography at the end of the book documents). For another, even fictional episodes and figures underline this purpose, for example the arrogant response to Akbar's flood of love letters to Elizabeth elicited among European nobles and princes about "the Emperor of India's [...] megalomaniac fantasies of creating a joint global empire that united the eastern and western hemispheres." Similarly, the fictional figures of Antonio and the Enchantress, "l'ammaliatrice", are not averse to bringing both hemispheres closer together as Argalia tells Lorenzo de' Medici: "She comes here of her own free will, in the hope of forging a union between the great cultures of Europe and the East, knowing she has much to learn from us and believing, too, that she has much to teach". Mogor on his part, modelled after two English merchants who visited Akbar's court in 1585 and 1603 respectively to hand over messages of their Queen, has set himself the goal to make his mother's home his own. Nonetheless, as we know from history and as is corroborated in Rushdie's novel, such attempts relating back to the beginning of the colonial period, have failed; as do both, Angelica's stay in Florence and Mogor's visit to Fatehpur Sikri: The Enchantress is forced to flee while Akbar disbelieves the Florentine's claim since Qara Kōz had told him in his dream that she had never had a child. Besides, being much too young to have been her son, Akbar reasons, he must be Agostino's son fathered with his own daughter born by Angelica's servant. Yet banned from the court and escaped from his adversaries Mogor and his lover, Skeleton the prostitute, might nevertheless make their home somewhere in India.

The Enchantress of Florence, Rushdie's ninth novel, historically accurate as well as imaginatively conceived, rich in detail, opulent in style, masterfully crafted, filled with credible if often magical characters and held together by a string of recurring motives such as love and enchantment, magic power and secrets or story telling and journeying, is proof again of his many literary talents and his unceasing interest in probing into possibilities for a mutual understanding of cultures as different as those in the West and in the East.

Salman Rushdie, *The Enchantress of Florence*, London: Jonathan Cape, 2008; with a bibliography; 359 pp., £ 18.99