

‘Location Dislocation’¹ in Salman Rushdie’s Novel *Quichotte*



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Abstract

This article explores how the concept of the *Third Space* might be applied to discuss the motif of the American road trip in Salman Rushdie’s novel *Quichotte* (2019). The term *Third Space* is used by multiple authors within the theory of post-colonialism with reference to the concept of liminal space; the works of post-colonial theorists Edward Soja and Homi Bhabha are taken as a theoretical basis of this work. In Salman Rushdie’s novel *Quichotte*, two protagonists of the story Quichotte and Sancho embark on a road trip across America in search of the Beloved. The internal struggles of the characters, their encounters of hostile communities along the way and searching for ways to adjust to the world are discussed through a lens of spatio-temporal transformations they undergo while travelling.

Key words: Rushdie, *Quichotte*, post-colonialism, *Third Space*, space, time

The post-colonial literary theory puts a lot of emphasis on the concept of place in (post) colonial literary texts. Multiple terms such as “liminal”, “third”, “in-between” are used in reference to the topic. As this essay employs the term the *Third Space* to refer to location in the post-colonial discourse, it will be discussed in more detail here. In his book *Thirdspace* (1996), the American geographer and postmodern political urbanist Edward Soja provides an extensive overview of the concept of *Thirdspace* discussed in the works of the most prominent theorists of postmodernism ranging from Michel Foucault to bell hooks. Soja defines the *Thirdspace* as “an-Other way of understanding and acting to change the spatiality of human life, a distinct mode of critical spatial awareness that is appropriate to the new scope and significance being brought about in the re-balanced trialectics of spatiality-historicity-sociality” (Soja 1996, 10). He claims that a certain set of attributes defining the concept reoccur in the texts of all major theorists of postmodernism, including

a knowable and unknowable, real and imagined lifeworld of experiences, emotions, events, and political choices that is existentially shaped by the generative and

¹ Rushdie 2019, 137.

problematic interplay between centers and peripheries, the abstract and concrete, the impassioned spaces of the conceptual and the lived, marked out materially and metaphorically in spatial praxis, the transformation of (spatial) knowledge into (spatial) action in a field of unevenly developed (spatial) power. (31)

What stands out in Soja's definition of the *Thirdspace* is its complexity as it incorporates elements that would otherwise be mutually exclusive as they form traditional binary oppositions. The theoretical framework which Soja uses to justify such a description of the *Thirdspace* is based on Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction which interprets the connections between concepts/signs as supplementary rather than excluding. Edward Soja as well as bell hooks, Homi Bhabha and multiple other representatives of post-colonial theory and literature rely on deconstruction, a method of research in conceptualising the post-colonial space. Edward Soja explains the approach the post-colonial critic uses to examine the concept of space:

It seeks instead a multiplicitous "alterity", a transgressive "third way" that is more than just the sum or combination of an originary dualism. At its best, such critical spatial thinking seeks to undermine its own authority by a form of textual and political practice that privileges uncertainties, rejects authoritative and paradigmatic structures that suggest permanence or inviolability, invites contestation, and thereby keeps open the spatial debate to new and different possibilities. (Soja 1996, 117)

The undermining of the authority, rejecting binary oppositions and introducing the element of uncertainty in a scientific discussion appear to be central to this approach to analysing narratives.

If Soja delineates the principles of approaching the *Thirdspace*, the works of Homi Bhabha give us insight into the inner workings of the phenomenon. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha points out that the appearance of the *Third Space* introduces an element of ambivalence in the established discourse which is characterized by "the historical identity of culture as a homogenising, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People" (Bhabha 2007, 54). Under the influence of the *Third Space*, the elements of such a traditional discourse are subjected to transformation.

Regarding the concept of the *Third Space*, hybridity is often considered to be a key to understanding Bhabha's ideas about this phenomenon. In *Changing the Terms* (2004), Michaela Wolf suggests that Bhabha introduces the idea of cultural hybridity as a cultural encounter "when *self and other* are inseparable from mutual contamination by each other. The colonial encounter is therefore embedded a priori in power relations, and requires constant awareness of the limits and possibilities of representation" (Wolf 2000, 114). Wolf explains that the moment two cultures collide,

hybridity emerges as not a single agent in this process remains the same after the interaction with the other. The duality of the binary opposition self and the other loses its meaning as both of its elements are affected by another and transformed (37). It is clear that the existence of hybridity is embedded in conflict as Bhabha describes "hybridity as camouflage, as a contesting, antagonistic agency functioning in the time-lag of sign/symbol, which is a space in-between the rules of engagement" (Bhabha 2007, 277). In short, hybridity, a product of the collision of two different cultures, emerges in the *Third Space* which enables it to transform both cultures affected by it through contesting the established norms which pre-exist the merger of the cultures. The process of transformation originates in conflict and opposition rather than peaceful coexistence; however, it produces novel meanings as a result.

The choice to discuss Salman Rushdie's novel *Quichotte* within the theoretical framework of the *Third Space* has been made following the discussion of Rushdie's works by Homi Bhabha. He identifies the writer as a representative of the concept of the in-between space. Bhabha writes that Rushdie "is the history that happened elsewhere, overseas, his postcolonial, migrant presence does not evoke a harmonious patchwork of cultures, but articulates the narrative of cultural difference which can never let the national history look at itself narcissistically in the eye" (Bhabha 2007, 241). Being a migrant who is caught between different cultures, who articulates his experience through a medium of English, an acquired language, making it his own enables Salman Rushdie to become a voice of cultural hybridity which functions in the *Third Space*. In my article titled "Home as a Liminal Space in Salman Rushdie's *Quichotte*", I investigated liminality as a set of features attributed to the *Third Space*. This essay continues the research of this concept with the view to the theoretical implication attributed to the motif of the road trip.

The description of the protagonist's travel starts with Quichotte rejecting a sedentary life for the sake of travel: "He no longer had a fixed abode. The road was his home, the car was his living room, its trunk was his wardrobe" (Rushdie 2019, 9). It continues with the detachment from people: "The truth was that he had almost no friends anymore (...) On his Facebook page he had 'friended' or 'been friended' by a small and dwindling group of commercial travellers like himself" (9). The final stage of the process includes disregard of societal pressures: "he had lost all personal ambition and curiosity, found big cities oppressive and craved only anonymity and solitude" (10). The road trip Quichotte embarks on serves a specific purpose in the process of alienation: "Invisibility is a thing he clearly wishes for, he wants to disappear, there too is the origin of his desire to follow a wandering star. I will diminish and go into the West and remain Galadriel. To be a person not seen, of no import, going where he will, remaining himself" (89). Thus, before the road trip Quichotte nulls his social connections and obligations, rejects societal norms to discover his true self through the road trip. Consequently, the introduction of Quichotte as a protagonist of the novel creates an image of a romanticized traditional

character of the American road trip who embarks on a quest to reinvent himself and who treats travelling West as seeking the expansion of personal boundaries as well as geographical (social and political) frontiers he feels pressured by.

At the start of the trip, it becomes obvious that Quichotte feels an urge for human connection. It is a son that he longs for to share his experiences with and teach life lessons. Miraculously, a son appears; first, he is only visible to Quichotte, but gradually he acquires physical characteristics that make him noticeable to people they meet on their road trip. The appearance of Sancho serves several purposes in the story. First, he provides a critical evaluation of his father's decisions and ideas, by engaging in conversations with Quichotte over the claims he makes about the society and human nature as well as the purpose of their trip. Secondly, Sancho supplements Quichotte, yet their duality is complex as initially they might be seen as two opposites: a youngster and an old man, one concerned with practicalities of life and another one being a dreamer, the son learning and the father teaching him.

However, the duality of their relationship is more ambiguous than it might appear at the start of their trip together. Although Sancho is both younger than Quichotte and fully dependent on him financially, he is the one who provides a down-to-earth evaluation of their American Dream in the fictional narrative.

The motif of the road trip has been widely discussed in the field of American studies. In a historical overview of the development of this trope, Gordon Slethaug maintains that it has been a part of the American narrative since Walt Whitman's "Song of the Open Road" (1856) which established a set of motifs attributed to the trope such as an individual traveller, nature and culture as well as travel as a symbol of progress (Slethaug 2012, 18). Advancement of technology in the period of modernity transformed the trope by adding the motif of the automobile as a symbol of individualism and an ability to impact both the environment travel takes place in and the personal destiny of the traveller (25). The postmodern interpretation of the American road trip tends "to restore some of the romance of the road while still paying attention to contemporary social and economic shifts, without letting them overpower the narrative" (36). In addition to this, Slethaug mentions that the contemporary narrative about the road trip is more inclusive: it used to focus on portraying a white male protagonist in pursuit of the American dream; however, recently it tends to "address multiplicity, heterogeneity, self-contradiction, and self-difference – each establishing its own use with less dependence on conventional understandings of genre" (37). To overview the key aspects of the transforming trope of the road trip, it can be observed that the narrative about this type of travel preserves certain elements such as romanticizing the road, inclusion of the motif of the car to symbolise individual freedom. However, now it does embrace change through inclusion of more diverse characters and circumstances.

Regarding typical characters embarking on a road trip, Ronald Primeau suggests that travel is a solitary endeavour because of the goal the traveller pursues. In his article "On American Road Literature", he maintains that "most journeys are still undertaken not in groups but as a solitary escape from routine, an effort to clear one's head, or a quest for meaning in one's life" (Primeau 2013, 9). Although such a description is true about the majority of narratives on the topic, it must be noted that an addition of a travel buddy is not rare in such texts. Slethaug mentions the motif of "the transgressive buddy" whose role is established in Kerouac's *On the Road* (Slethaug 2012, 30). Over time the portrayal of a travel friend who does not comply with the norms of society is altered as the focus of narratives changes from drugs and rebellion to identity and family (35). Another type of character who appears in road stories is that of a fool. Origins of such a character are traced back to Cervantes' Don Quichotte, they are still relevant in today's fiction. To provide an example, in the article "Fools on the American Road: "Gimpel the Fool", The Frisco Kid, and Forrest Gump", Wendy Zierler discusses two films The Frisco Kid and Forrest Gump which feature a fool as the protagonist of the road story. To generalise the role of such a character, Zierler maintains that foolish characters typically have more intelligent counterparts to travel with and be introduced to the culture and landscape of the locations they visit. As far as his role is concerned, the gullible character acts as "a reactionary and a revolutionary, a keeper of the system and one who explodes all systems as imaginary and false" (Zierler 2012, 221). Hence, regarding protagonists in road stories, writers typically include a lone traveller who is on a quest to rediscover himself; sometimes he is paired with another character described as somebody that does not adhere to social norms or is considered to be a half-wit. This character functions in the narrative to reveal the state of the society both characters live in.

Critics writing about the postmodern road trip point out that the conditions of the trip often appear to be threatening. In contrast to the idealised and romanticized vision of the road trip in the 19th century, postmodern narrative reveals that the American dream is hardly possible for contemporary characters embarking on a quest to reach it. Skidmore discussed the road trip undertaken by Black Americans and claims that for people of colour "the implied capacity for mobility and autonomy on which a road trip ought to rely cannot be taken for granted" (Skidmore 2012, 135). Similarly, in the book *Empty Spaces: Confronting Emptiness in National, Cultural, and Urban History*, Martin Walter asserts that "the motif of the journey is not just a convenient means to move the narrative to another setting: it also introduces us to the unfamiliarity of (...) space, from which we can then establish a feeling of loss" (Walter 2019, 143). Another insight that is important for this argument is that "moving to the fringes is commonly seen as a form of securing the body, while urban settlements are often rendered as dangerous places" (143). Rushdie's novel *Quichotte* depicts a journey of two characters of Indian descent across America, from the city to the countryside and back. Quichotte, a city dweller, embarks on a journey to

conquer his Beloved by leaving the city, travelling through the valleys of self-discovery and returning to the city to face the object of his affection. The space he travels in reminds us of the postmodern space of Walter's and Skidmore's descriptions as it is unfamiliar and hostile to the protagonists of the novel. Throughout the trip Quichotte battles a feeling of loss by replacing his social connections with Sancho, a creation of his imagination. It is the elements of loss, its supplementation through creation and the hostility of the space that link the postmodern interpretation of the trope of the road to the post-colonial concept of the *Third Space*.

In the novel Quichotte starts his road trip by alienating himself from society through travel and society's point of view about them, thus, presenting a more mature and grounded understanding about how society works. It is Sancho who understands the importance of money and legal documents for him to become an independent person. He also correctly interprets social situations which can become unsafe for them, whilst Quichotte is lost in his thoughts and disregards the social environment completely. In contrast, Quichotte often appears to be unable to cope with challenges they face during the trip and often hides from making decisions in the world of fantasy provided by television. Cervantes's Don Quixote is the narrative which adds a character of the fool to the trope of the road trip. There Sancho represents the reason while Don Quixote is the one which is considered to be the fool. Rushdie's protagonists both have the features of the fool and the reasonable one. Quichotte is a dreamer and a marginalised character, but he is also a grown-up who provides financial stability to Sancho and aids in resolving issues they encounter throughout the quest. Similarly, Sancho lacks knowledge of the world as he is young and inexperienced, but he is able to decode social cues and guide Quichotte to making decisions when required. They both appear to have characteristics which are typical of the protagonist of the road trip and his buddy, thus, supplementing the qualities that each one lacks.

Despite the fact that Quichotte seems to have detached himself from society at the start of the trip, the introduction of Sancho as a character reinforces the importance of the social aspect of place in the narrative. What Sancho does first and foremost is create a connection between Quichotte, himself and society. However, the rapport appears to be fractured and ambiguous for both of them. Initially, Sancho is only seen by Quichotte, which results in people considering him to be insane for talking to thin air. As Sancho observes, "people look at him. That look people use on crazy people. Like he's talking to himself, and I want to yell out, see me. I'm standing right her. But to other people I'm, apparently impossible to sense. I'm what's the word. Imperceptible" (Rushdie 2019, 82). At the same time Quichotte deals with the impossibility of fitting in the society and embarks on his quest to resolve this issue. According to Sancho, "he wanted a quest. There are people who need to impose a shape upon the shapelessness of life. For such people the quest narrative is always

attractive. It prevents them from suffering the agony of feeling what's the word. Incoherent" (89). Imperceptible and incoherent are the features that characterize Sancho and Quichotte, two marginalized characters, on their road trip across America. The two qualities are revealed from different perspectives although both of them emphasize the fragmented nature of the protagonists. Sancho feels imperceptible in relation to society rather than Quichotte. The latter is immediately capable to acknowledge his existence and commence meaningful communication. On the other hand, to the rest of the society, Sancho is invisible, which affects both protagonists negatively: Sancho is unhappy about being invisible, hence, irrelevant; as far as Quichotte is concerned, his ability to see and communicate with Sancho puts him in a vulnerable position with respect to other people who regard him crazy and dangerous as he is seen to be talking to an invisible interlocutor.

Regarding Quichotte's feeling of incoherence, it manifests itself in his relations with Sancho and strangers they meet on their way as Quichotte appears to be unable to fit in: he speaks too loud in public spaces, his ideas and motives are not fully explained and seem to be strange and unsettling to Sancho. In rare moments when Quichotte decides to refer to his deeply buried past and chooses to express his ideas eloquently and provides well-grounded justifications for them, he offers a short relief from the stress of the incoherence of his everyday communication. The difference in the quality of Quichotte's communication seems to stem from the time and place he exists in or refers to. His past which includes his childhood in India and school years in Britain can be glimpsed in the sophisticated and eloquent language he on rare occasions resorts to. Quichotte's present life in the US is reflected in his fragmented everyday language infested with references to popular culture such as soap operas and TV series. The temporal-spatial element is introduced through the language Quichotte employs, but it is not restricted to it as throughout the road trip its significance is emphasized in multiple episodes.

At the beginning of the road trip, the perception of time and place the travellers have enhances their sense of alienation. Sancho remarks about the location they have selected for the start of their trip: "We're out here in the middle of nowhere, (...). There's nothing to do and no reason to be doing it" (Rushdie 2019, 97). However, it is in that location where Sancho becomes visible to everyone. His transformation from a monochrome phantom discernible only to the eye of Quichotte to a full-colour, high-definition teenager is described in technical rather than human terms. This description relates Sancho to a dream that Quichotte has had of becoming a father rather than the reality of the relationships between Sancho and Quichotte. The multiple references to TV and films locate Sancho in the present that Quichotte inhabits as a fragmented and marginalised traveller whose mind is clouded with the content of American TV and films. However, as far as time is concerned, Quichotte explains to Sancho that for him existing outside time has a purpose: "To be separated from the present, past and future is to entertain the eternal, to allow the eternal to

enter one's being" (106). Despite being drawn to timeless eternity, Quichotte embraces that the gift of becoming a father and resumes their road trip following a mapped route along the interstate.

The journey of Sancho and Quichotte is depicted through the alternation between private spaces the travellers create from themselves and public spaces. Their automobile becomes the safe space they can exchange their ideas in and shelter from hostile attacks of the locals. Traditionally, the automobile has been a crucial element of the American road trip symbolizing freedom and progress. However, it is not its speed but privacy the car grants that is emphasised in the narrative. Similarly, hotel rooms the travellers stay in ensure anonymity, safety and access to television as a key to understanding how to behave in the American society. While travelling, Quichotte often refers to American TV shows, series and movies to explain the models of behaviour that the travellers have to follow. Marginalized from the society, Quichotte turns to TV for advice how to function in the society he does not feel a part of. The role of TV as a prescription of "what is acceptable/off limits to say and do in public" (Ford 2012, 164) is taken to extreme by Quichotte who consistently refers to TV shows to provide explanation for real life events as other means of comprehending the world he lives in seem to be unavailable to him.

Throughout the quest Sancho and Quichotte undergo two transformative experiences, both of which are related to racial conflicts in public spaces which are shown as opposites of the private spaces the characters create for themselves. The first incident, a racist attack on Sancho and Quichotte in a local campsite, results in the detachment of Quichotte from Sancho and the disruption of spatial-temporal order. Sancho acknowledges that "after the confrontation at Lake Capote it's like the balance of his [Quichotte's] mind got disturbed. If he was at least partly clear-minded before, he's all unclear now" (Rushdie 2019, 131). What it means for Sancho is that he is no longer capable of accessing Quichotte's mind in order to understand his way of thinking. This change affects both of them as Quichotte starts driving recklessly thus putting them in danger; also, Sancho is unable to communicate with his father, which puts him in a vulnerable position. As a result, their road trip loses its purpose: "that's all there's going to be, the endless drifting and watching and no arriving" (131). The disruption impacts the world beyond the travellers, which Sancho identifies as "some error in space and time" (133). The transformation is first seen as local: "the world outside the motel room has totally ceased to be straightforward. (...) When I wake up in the morning and open the door of the motel room I can't be sure of which town I'll find outside, or what day of the week or what month of the year." (134-135) Further in the narrative the transformation seems to affect a part of the society: "maybe (...) this is the way things are these days in America: that for some of us, the world stopped making sense. Anything can happen. Here can be there, then can be now, up can be down, truth can be lies. Everything's nothing to hold on to" (138). Overall, the disruption of a personal quest results in detachment from people closest to one, loss

of the purpose of life, disorientation in time and space. On the other hand, a transformation of one story leads to the alteration of a larger community which is affected in the same way as an individual is: the logics and balance of their narrative is destroyed, which results in enhanced vulnerability and a sense of displacement.

The first altercation on the basis of race is quickly followed by another one. It not only affects the protagonists of the novel but also impacts other people. During a racist attack in a bar, Quichotte and Sancho are insulted by local men; however, it is other Indian people in the same bar that are shot at, and one of them does not survive. The incident is triggered by an exchange of the Indian guests in their native tongue. Language becomes a trigger of a conflict and a key to reducing alienation. Sancho recognizes the importance of language in the creation of detachment by devising a strategy to use it as a tool to reduce it. Addressing Quichotte, he asserts: "I want us to speak to each other in that language, especially in public, to defy the bastards who hate us for possessing another tongue" (Rushdie 2019, 151). Although at this stage it seems that Sancho views language as a means of resistance, the process of learning about the country through language proves to have multiple effects on the student and the world he functions in. The learning process enables Sancho to appropriate America as he feels that "to redescribe the country in their private language was also to take ownership of it" (152). Conversely, the English language inserts itself into Indian and Bambaiyya through the process of translation: "when there were shootings, heh learned that a gun was a ghoda, which meant 'horse', a bullet was a tablet, or sometimes a capsule. So English, in such mutations, found its way into Bambaiyya too" (152). The discovery of language as a tool to aid adjustment and inclusion re-establishes relative harmony between public and private spaces for both travellers. Sancho feels that "their linguistic act of possession made the country begin to make sense again. The random spatial and temporal dislocations stopped. The world settled down and gave Sancho the illusion, at least, of comprehensibility" (153). In general, it is through a native language as a tool to describe the world that the protagonists of the novel are able to reduce detachment and alienation from the American culture as well as merge their private *Third Space* with the public space outside of it.

The road trip of Quichotte and Sancho ends with them reaching New York, "an object of great desire" (Rushdie 2019, 154). At the beginning of the quest Quichotte leaves the city to find himself, while he returns to the city he has transformed: he has a son, an interpreter between him and America, he also has language as a tool to cope with the volatile and dangerous public space that needs to be entered for the quest to be complete.

In summary, in the post-colonial theory the concept of liminal space acquires multiple names, one of which the *Third Space* is employed in this research. According to Edward Soja, the *Thirdspace* is determined by several dimensions which include the historical, the spatial and the social and includes numerous elements such as real

and imagined, knowable and unknowable, abstract and concrete, etc. Although it might seem that the constituents of the *Third Space* include binary oppositions, Soja employs the method of deconstruction to analysing the concept, pointing out that the elements of the *Third Space* exist outside of the traditional hierarchy. It is disorder and openness that define the essence of the phenomenon. Another post-colonial theorist, Homi Bhabha, proposes that the *Third Space* is inhabited by hybridity which is always dual as it is contaminated by the Other.

The trope of the road trip which is selected for the analysis in this article has its unique set of features which include the images of the automobile, the frontier, freedom associated with driving and a male white protagonist with a friend who is either a misfit or a fool. Since the 19th century, the trope has undergone changes; the postmodern interpretation of the road trip includes more diverse characters regarding gender and race as well as a more negative portrayal of space which is shown as dangerous and unpredictable.

The analysis of the portrayal of the road trip in Salman Rushdie's novel *Quichotte* reveals that the narrative of Sancho and Quichotte's travel includes several traditional elements of the trope such as the automobile, the frontier and male protagonists. On the other hand, the interpretation of spatial-temporal elements within the trope of the road trip reveals certain unique characteristics attributed to the trope in the novel. Although the novel tells a story of two male protagonists, the aspect of them being people of colour is important as it triggers the main conflicts of the narrative. The relationship between them does not fit a traditional description in which characters exist in a binary opposition. In Rushdie's novel, both Sancho and Quichotte supplement rather than oppose each other, for example, although Quichotte is supposed to be his parent, Sancho often takes the role of a teacher or a mediator who has profound understanding how society works.

Space and time play an important role in the narration of the trip. Initially, Quichotte embarks on the road trip pursuing a goal of expanding his frontiers, leaving his past and society behind. On the other hand, he longs for company, for a son he could impart his wisdom to, which leads to a magic appearance of the son. Their trip together starts in the middle of nowhere where time has stopped, a perfect space for dreams to come true: the son materializes acquiring human features and Quichotte sees a sign signalling the start of the trip. Throughout the trip, Sancho and Quichotte transition from safe private spaces such as their automobile and anonymous hotel rooms to dangerous public spaces such as campsites and cafes.

It is in public places that both characters encounter racial attacks which lead to major alterations in time and space. The first racist attack they encounter disrupts the balance between public and private places. The world through a hotel window becomes unrecognizable, the comfort of the moving car no longer shelters the travellers from the craziness and aggression of the outside world. The change disrupts communication between the protagonists as well as between them and the

society. The second attack results in a death of a person. The incident both deepens the emotional turmoil and offers a solution. Sancho discovers language as a means to cope with the danger of the outside world, and Quichotte's lessons in Hindi and a local dialect of Bombay enable Sancho to appropriate the alienated American society. Sancho's linguistic appropriation of America stabilizes time and place which start making sense again.

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