

EASTERN/WESTERN PLACE AND PLACELESSNESS IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S “AT THE AUCTION OF THE RUBY SLIPPERS”

Ana-Blanca Ciocoi-Pop

anablanca.ciocoipop@ulbsibiu.ro

“Lucian Blaga” University of Sibiu

Abstract:

Written in 1994, Salman Rushdie's story “At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers”, part of the volume suggestively entitled East, West, perfectly thematizes and predicts the East-West cultural conflict which would dominate most of 20th and 21st century politics, economy, and discourse. The story deliberately blurs the dividing line between real and fictional in a magical realist text which masterfully narrates Rushdie's lifelong identity struggle. With much irony and wit, the multicultural author dwells on what he perceives as obvious shortcomings of both the Eastern and the Western culture. The cultural discourse is permanently intertwined with the one related to ethical versus immoral behavior, and our cultural conditioning which makes us have obviously biased views towards both, as well as with the importance of spatial and cultural paradigms and senses of belonging. Rushdie's story transposes historical and cultural realities into the realm of the fictional, drawing heavily on nowadays' global understanding of the terms “home” and “identity”, which have become painfully fluid concepts. Place and placelessness thus become the central axes around which the story's culturally tinged narrative evolves.

Keywords: Salman Rushdie, cultural conflict, identity, moral degeneration, globalization, place

“At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers” is a short story written by Salman Rushdie and included in the volume *East, West*, published in 1994. As the title of the collection suggests, the stories comprised in this volume all deal with the central topic of locality, place and placelessness, both from a geographical, and, above all, from a cultural point of view. Concepts such as “identity” and “home” become painfully fluid in Rushdie's volume, mere chimeras in a globalized world where no culture is truly capable of understanding and accepting the other. Rushdie obstinately refuses to take sides in *East, West*, and instead goes for an ambiguous, blurred approach, suggesting that identity, in a geographical and a cultural sense, may be too grand a term to comprehend for any of us. Place- and homeless himself (having been exiled from his native Pakistan where he is sentenced to death for his volume *The Satanic Verses*), Rushdie understands maybe better than anyone else

what it means to be caught up between East and West, between spirituality and consumerism, between home and homelessness. In the present paper we will attempt to apply Edward Relph's terminology of place and placelessness to the short story "At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers", in order to prove that geographical identity cannot exist in the absence of cultural identity, and that place bears symbolical meanings which decisively shape and influence one's feeling of belonging.

According to Seamon and Sowers ("Place and Placelessness, Edward Relph"), the importance of place has always been a major focus of geographers, considering that geography as a discipline underlines the vital importance of place "as a unique focus distinguishing geography from other disciplines. Astronomy has the heavens, History has time, and Geography has place." The two critics go on stating that one central question remains, nevertheless, unanswered: "What exactly is place?" Is the term synonymous with location, or is it a mixture of nature and culture, or something else entirely?

In the late 70s, geographer Edward Relph started to notice that the conventional definitions of place were "philosophically and experientially anemic". (Seamon and Sewers) This trend of thought, commonly referred to as humanistic geography, underlined the central role of place in human experience. The result of Relph's thought process was the volume *Place and Placelessness*, which continues to have far reaching influence both inside and outside the study of geography. The book was based on Relph's PhD dissertation, focusing on "the relationship between Canadian national identity and the symbolic landscapes of the Canadian Shield, especially those represented by lakes and forests". (Relph) Relph soon realized that there was little philosophical consideration when dealing with the notion of place. He considered the studies and concepts in his field superficial and unsatisfactory, when considering the central importance place plays in everyday human existence. He was especially interested in concepts such as "place attachment, sense of place or place identity", (Seamon and Sewers) and thematized these concerns in the 1976 volume *Place and Placelessness*, based, in the author's own words, on a "phenomenology of place". (Relph 4-7) In the words of Seamon and Sewers, "Relph steps back to call into question the taken-for-granted nature of place and its significance as an inescapable dimension of human life and experience." (4-7) Overall, we could state that the main aim of Relph's work is to prove that place must be explored according to how people experience it.

Attempting to apply Relph's phenomenology to Rushdie's text, a brief overview of the story might be helpful. "At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers" is set in an auction hall, where the

famous ruby slippers are being auctioned. We are told that other valuables have been auctioned off in this room, including the Taj Mahal, the Statue of Liberty, the Alps, the Sphinx, wives, husbands state secrets and human souls. The world the narration takes place in is a dystopian one, where people rarely venture out of their bunkers. The attendees are assisted by various cupidors and psychiatrists in confessional boots, ready to help those who would get sick or need solace (no priests are allowed at the auction). Most people populating Rushdie's dystopian nightmare are sick, therefore a large number of obstetricians and straitjackets have been prepared, should anyone give birth or go mad. The slippers themselves are hidden behind bullet proof glass. When one of the guests tries to kiss the glass box, he dies of an electric shock. People in attendance include Hollywood actors, individuals in costume (Wizards, Lions, Scarecrows and Totots), celebrities, billionaires, exiled, displaced, orphans, social outcasts, political refugees, conspirators, deposed monarchs, poets, bandits, imaginary beings, aliens and homeless people. SWAT teams are employed to beat up the homeless and keep them from attacking the fancy buffet. The homeless will then be taken outside to the city, to "that smoking no man's land surrounded by giant advertising hoardings into which we venture no more" (Rushdie 91). All attendees worship the slippers because they are believed to hold magic powers and to protect their wearer from the witches. What all of them also have in common is their belief that the ruby slippers could restore their lost sense of home. The narrator himself, who remains nameless, is there in a desperate attempt to restore his own sense of "home", which he lost when he found out the love of his life, his cousin Gale, cheated on him. The bidding begins and shortly degenerates into a violent fight, which however seems to be a normal thing in the dystopian society painted by Rushdie. In the grip of hysteria, people sell their children in order to be able to keep bidding. In the end, the narrator, who was one of the last bidders, gives up – both on the slippers, and on Gale. After all, next week there will be another auction, of lineages and family trees.

Place and placelessness are the two main elements of Rushdie's story. The bidders present at the auction have one goal: to return "home", whatever the illusive term might mean for each of them. They all experience a longing for a space they cannot properly name or describe, an essential dissatisfaction and depression, a lack of meaning. In a typical Western fashion, they believe that this sense of emptiness can be filled with buying things: be they a pair of "magic" slippers, a family name, or the Swiss Alps. Anything and everything is on sale in this nightmarish universe, where life becomes a constant obstacle run from one "auction" to another. The intertextual reference to *The Wizard of Oz* also plays on the place-placelessness dichotomy: in the original story, the ruby

slippers' heels could be clicked together, and thus transport their wearer back home. In Rushdie's text, the slippers may not have any powers at all – the only thing that ultimately matters is how much money they are finally bought for. The sense of "home" lies eternally out of the reach of those who long for it.

The story also contrasts the Western and Eastern cultural spaces, a narrative obsession Rushdie most often chooses to follow. Essentially, the story presents a dystopian Western contemporary world, where capitalism has led to absolute dehumanization and depersonalization. Western culture is depicted as a mechanism based on primitive and irrational values, such as the cult of money and worshipping celebrities. From a postcolonial point of view, the story is a slap in the face of colonialist assumptions which seek to justify the "civilizing" missions of Westerners in supposedly "uncivilized" territories. In fact, Western civilization itself seems to be barbaric and uncivilized, and even if it prides itself on having jettisoned religion, it has merely replaced it with science, worshipped in an equally irrational fashion: "(...) psychiatrists of varying disciplines have been installed in strategically located neo-Gothic confessional booths to counsel the sick at heart." (87) Science is thus just another façade meant to mask and hide the West's inherent irrationality. Another aspect of Western culture which is harshly criticized is the cult of celebrities: "When one of us collides with a star's priceless (and fragile) aura, he or she is instantly knocked to the floor by a security team and hustled out to the waiting paddy-wagons." (88) The ruby slippers themselves can be seen as a powerful symbol of idol-worship and even religious fanaticism: "The system pumps a hundred thousand volts of electricity into the collagen-implanted lips of the glass-kisser, terminating her interest in the proceedings". (89) The loss of a human life is an insignificant trifle, the only thing that matters is that the precious slippers are properly guarded and can only be touched by the one who has enough money to do so. The world Rushdie paints is one of violence, chaos, and extreme hypocrisy, where everything can be bought and sold, even souls, state secrets or one's own children: "It is to the Auctioneers we go to establish the values of our pasts, of our futures, of our lives." (101)

What permeates the entire story is the painful feeling of homelessness, a nostalgia for a long-lost feeling or state of mind which can never be regained – at least not in this nightmarish reality. The narrator longs for his lost romance with Gale, whom he has intensely fictionalized. He is rather in love with his idea of Gale, than with Gale herself. He most probably realizes this in the end of the story, where even the act of bidding seems mere fiction to him. The moment he realizes

that nothing of all that surrounds him is “real”, he is able to let go of his attachment to it – which is a highly Eastern (Buddhist) realization to reach: “I am aware that, after all these years of separation and non-communication, the Gale I adore is not entirely a real person. The real Gale has become with my re-imagining of her, with my private elaboration of our continuing life together in an alternative universe devoid of ape-men”. (96) Rushdie masterfully hints here at the fact that West’s self-obsession can only be overcome by embracing other cultural paradigms. We can also notice in the previous quote that space and time are subjective constructs, giving birth to chimeras which may eat up the human soul. The past is more real for the narrator than the present, and the “placelessness” he inhabits as part of his dystopian universe starkly contrasts with the space he inhabits inside his mind and memories.

In the end, the narrator starts doubting the slippers’ magical powers and their capacity of restoring the long-lost sense of home: “How hard can we expect even a pair of magic shoes to work? They promised to take us *home*, but are metaphors of homeliness comprehensible to them, are abstractions permissible? Are they literalists, or will they permit us to redefine the blessed word?”. (93) What Rushdie seems to imply here is that in a globalized world, home is no longer one’s place of birth, or even a geographical space. If lineages and the supposed “purity of blood” can be bought at an auction, our fixed concepts regarding “home” and geographical, as well as cultural belonging, have to be redefined. The problem is that in the end of Rushdie’s story no real alternative definition of “home” is offered. The end remains open, with the narrator distancing himself from his imaginary homeland (represented by Gale and his past), but not seeming to gain any alternative sense of home. The implication here is that there can be no coherent, stable, or satisfactory sense of home anymore, for anyone, in nowadays’ world – at least not in the Western part of it. As long as commodities will be placed higher than human life, as long as everything and everyone will be on sale for the highest bidder, as long as the very pillars of human spirituality will be crushed by an all-encompassing, morally bankrupt, capitalism, home will at best remain a memory.

“At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers” perfectly mirrors Edward Relph’s discussion of place as a phenomenological concept. The protagonists of the story long not so much for a physical home, but for a spiritual one. Home is not a geographical location, as the narrator himself points out, but a state of mind. Thus, the story is perfectly aligned with Relph’s considerations, according to which place is what a person or a group experiences it to be. If we want to feel “at home”, we need to

build a home for ourselves, to create a culture which would make us feel at home. Any geographical spot can be a home, as long as it satisfies the soul's needs.

Selected Bibliography

Relph, Edward. *Place and Placelessness*. London: Pion, 1976.

Relph, Edward. "Reflections on Place and Placelessness". *Environmental and Architectural Phenomenology Newsletter*, 7, 3, 14-16 [special issue on the twentieth anniversary of the publication of *Place and Placelessness*], 1996.

Relph, Edward. "Author's Response: Place and Placelessness in a New Context [Classics in Human Geography Revisited, *Place and Placelessness*]". *Progress in Human Geography*, 24 (4):613-619, 2000.

Rushdie, Salman. *East, West*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1994.

Seamon, David. "A Way of Seeing People and Place: Phenomenology in Environment-Behavior Research". In S. Wapner, J. Demick, T. Yamamoto, and H. Minami, eds., *Theoretical Perspectives in Environment-Behavior Research* (pp. 157-78). New York: Plenum, 2000.

Seamon, David and Jacob Sewers. "Place and Placelessness, Edward Relph", https://www.researchgate.net/publication/251484582_Place_and_Placelessness_Edward_Relph, last accessed 12.09.2021.