

*Quichotte*, by Salman Rushdie (Alfred A. Knopf Canada- Penguin Random House Canada Limited, 2019), \$34.95 CAD (hardcover), 396 pages, ISBN- 10: 0735279314

Chaotic, kaleidoscopic, and short-listed for the Booker Prize, Salman Rushdie's newest novel *Quichotte* (pronounced "key-SHOT") is a reimagination for the modern age of Miguel de Cervantes' literary canon *Don Quixote*. Heightened to his own celebrity status by Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa in response to his work *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie takes his reader through a modern love quest filled with popular culture references, obsession, and even Bill Cosby (347). Filled with the modern-day rot that inundates the mind, Rushdie makes sure to overwhelm the reader with the reminder of just how pervasive modern reality television and internet-based references are in the current America, leaving the reader ashamed at the mere fact of recognizing them, and, moreover, accounting for their vapidness.

Our title character, Quichotte, is a man of Indian origin who works as a travelling pharmaceutical salesman. He lives in America and, emblematic of the entire culture, he possesses a loose grip on reality, in evidence by his spending most of his days in forgettable motel rooms, addicted to television. Quichotte, a pen name for our geriatric nomad Ismail Smile (recalling David Lodge's character in *Small world*), sets off on a quest to win the love of a rising TV star Salma R, a fellow Indian-American whose talk-show has earned her the title of "Oprah 2.0". In the first of many parallels to contemporary American reality, Salma R is unknowingly feeding into the stroke-riddled brain of Ismail (recalling *Moby Dick*), as she continues to deliver content to viewers as a television personality. Transfixed on her persona, Ismail journeys across America accompanied by Sancho, an imaginary son. Along the way, he vacillates between the current issues of racism, populism, and the opioid crisis. Paralleled with Cervantes' Hidalgo, who renames himself Quixote after being consumed by madness, Quichotte's absurdity, nourished by the endless hours spent in front of the television screen, is revealed to simply be a novel within a novel being written by Brother, a second rate Indian-American novelist whose unsuccessful production of spy thrillers has led him to write a radically different novel, on that is "unlike any other he has written."

Rushdie's multi-layered structures echo and mirror one another, such that the parallels of Quichotte's and Brother's versions of fiction and reality become so intertwined that ultimately the stories merge into one questing narrative. Uniquely American, Quichotte travels in a Chevy Cruze through Racist America in search of an impossible love. Rushdie's invocation of love helps him to navigate the vicissitudes of this era of consumption, reality television, and soap opera and can be simply derived as an evolutionary need of the human spirit. Bound by a journey towards unrequited love, Quichotte's idiosyncrasies leads us down a path to understanding Brother. As he navigates relationships, his desire to be wanted by his self-proclaimed lover (Salma R) reveals Brother's own desire to be loved by his sister. Brother's writing is veiled in his own anxieties as his own paranoia about the state of the world's affairs is visible as he writes about Quichotte adventuring his way to his penultimate doom.

Ismail, Salma R., and Brother are Indian-Americans, providing a starting point to explore the "you're either with us or against us" mentality, and demonstrating the politicization of fear and security within issues associated with migration. When asked why he's not wearing a turban at a campsite stop, he replies that he doesn't subscribe to Sikhism as a religion, a notion that is immediately dismissed by the deafeningly ignorant white character, who then berates Quichotte for his pigmentation. The Indian-American identity is lost in the turmoil of exclusionary politics as emphasis is placed upon the grouping of skin tone as opposed to the acknowledgement of distinct cultural markers. Bigotry and intolerance are also generated when out-groups or racial

entities are socially constructed as threatening. Since national identity is preserved by demonizing a consensually agreed upon enemy, Quichotte's pathway to doom is made to be parallel to the doom of society. Following the death of another Indian-American character in the novel, Sancho and the storyline surrounding his love interest develops creating a narrative around of acceptance in modern America. Muddled between the classic black/white racial tropes of America lie Indian-Americans who are dark by pigmentation, yet under the influence of British colonizers, they possess the dominant hair characteristics of whites. Even more menacing, Indian-Americans have been grouped as religious fanatics, despite the fact that Muslims are a minority group in India. Characterized by the religious effects of the "turban" and "ISIS", neither of which are affiliated with the dominant Hindu group of India, Rushdie both draws attention to ignorance, which is personified in racial discourse and American ignorance. As racial discourse is used by politicians rallying their base or social movements empowering their followers, the power of language continues to manifest itself as veiled structural violence<sup>1</sup>.

Quichotte's journey through neoliberal America takes him through New Jersey, where he comes across the transformation of its citizens into mastodons. Symbolic for the unrecognizability of our neighbours in the modern political landscape, this obfuscation from reality is merely the representation of polarized politics<sup>2</sup>. Deeply entrenched in its history, the United States' racial lines come to mirror many of its political entrenchments. Although communication and persuasion have been longstanding vital elements to political discourse, the terminology of phrasing and rhetoric used in social and political movements can be deemed as metaphorical double-edged swords that carve out pathways for political players to characterize and demonize critics, minorities, and disenfranchised groups. The language of political movements signifies the "in" and "out" groups of society, creating wider divides amongst those lacking a sense of place amongst society as viewed through the paradigm of those in power. The impact of language isn't merely an instrument for the description of events, but rather a component of the events themselves. Despite satirical in nature, the scientific fiction narrative explained through the transformation of humans in to mastodons very realistically illustrates the transformation of social bodies as issues become political. A transformation occurs where the tribal nature of one's group overcomes reality and rationality by ensuring that one's ideology is embodied by the collective whole. Even as the cure to the mastodon transformation is deemed to have potentially fatal effects on their neighbours, the mob overrule this dissent, and push to reclaim their town from new, unknown entity. The citizens of New Jersey allude to Rushdie's point that there is no longer a place of refuge for "the other" in America, only for the nationalistic body emboldened by populist leaders and parties.

Rushdie's employment of reality in fiction is most importantly displayed through the opioid crisis. As the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services declared the opioid crisis an epidemic in 2017<sup>3</sup>, Rushdie's telling of Quichotte and his internalization of good and bad, addiction and love, is symbolic of the harsh reality addiction manifests in to when endured. Quichotte's employment as a salesman of a fentanyl spray described as providing instantaneous relief of pain, is a reflective narrative to addiction that appears in almost every re-telling of how one's addiction began. As his company possesses the means of distribution of fentanyl to his

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<sup>1</sup> Vorobej, Mark. "Structural Violence." *Peace Research*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2008, pp. 84–98. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/23607799](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23607799).

<sup>2</sup> Toward the anthropology of white nationalist postracialism: Comments inspired by Hall, Goldstein, and Ingram's "The hands of Donald Trump". By Jeff Maskovsky. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*. 7 (1): 433-440.

<sup>3</sup> Brand, Jeff. "The Opioid Epidemic as Collective Trauma: An Introduction to the Crisis." *Group*, vol. 42, no. 4, 2018, pp. 291–309. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.13186/group.42.4.0291](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13186/group.42.4.0291).

beloved Salma R., Quichotte manipulates the desperation of addiction and achieving the next high in to coordinating a meeting with his love, as his final employment task. Beyond the glamour of Hollywood and her rising celebrity status, Salma R's addiction to opioids is hidden and revealed to be one of the secrets not available to be seen through her persona of openness and vulnerability much akin to her audience. Crippled with the need to feed her addiction, Salma R., despite her understanding of Quichotte to be a stalker, agrees to meet the character in order to satisfy her desire. Although well intentioned and wanting to exhibit good character, we see his mental illness displayed through the use of a talking gun appropriately personified, as he takes Salma hostage leaving the uncertainty of her fate to the complexity of a brain damaged mind.

Beyond just a retelling of Cervantes' Don Quixote for the modern time, Quichotte is a snapshot of the current climate in America. Riddled with polarization, rot, and crises, Quichotte's character is unbridled optimistic about a society where anything can happen, where even good can prevail and an impossible love can be captured, where the conditions of reality can be reversed, and the inevitable doom avoided. Quichotte's glimpse in to renewal and resurgence comes together with the fantastical nature of a blue fairy and Italian speaking cricket. Regardless of form, the appearance of these characters gives shape to the idea that in a reality where Mastodons seem perfectly symbolic, Italian speaking crickets may yet be the hope we need.

Constantly shifting, switching realities, and confusing at times as to the which story you're reading, at its core Quichotte remains a story of hope, a story of love, and a story of an old man who remains hopeful and desiring the need to love and be loved- a simple commonality not just shared by Quichotte but by everyone. Having tackled almost every negative issue presently facing contemporary society, you are left feeling optimistic despite the feeling of having society crumble all around you, a masterful effect achieved by Rushdie leaving you enchanted like a lucid dream within your own reality.

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