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## **The Hybrids of Postmodernism**

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# The Hybrids of Postmodernism

Dana BĂDULESCU<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

*Hybridization is a fundamental characteristic of postmodernism, included by Ihab Hassan in his “catena” of features. This paper looks into the hybrids of postmodernism, which are the result of migration, displacement and uprooting, the re-visitation of myths, folklore and legends, or projections of their author’s imagination. The hybrids used as examples here are drawn from several novels written by Salman Rushdie, especially The Satanic Verses, two short stories, one by Márquez and the other by Donald Barthelme, Borges’s Book of Imaginary Beings, Cărtărescu’s Encyclopaedia of Dragons and Michelle Cliff’s No Telephone to Heaven. Diverse as they may be, these hybrids emphasize a defining characteristic of postmodernism, which is its pluralism. I conclude that the hybrids of postmodernism are aesthetically or politically subversive. Besides, what makes them difficult to grasp is their unfixed and protean nature. They ask for high leaps of the imagination, a total suspension of disbelief and a complete surrender to the powerful seduction of imagination on the reader’s part.*

## Keywords:

*Hybrids, hybridization, hybridity, postmodernism, dream, imagination, suspension of disbelief.*

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### Preamble

Postmodernism, although a rather slippery term, displays a series of features that allow it to pass for a concept with a certain panache. As Ihab Hssan (1986) saw it, the term displays a series of features that “may overlap, conflict, antecede, or supersede themselves” (p. 504). Indeed, the eleven defining characteristics of postmodernism delineated by Hassan (1986) form such a closely knit “catena” that “hybridization” (p. 506), the seventh in the series, links symbiotically with all the others.

In Hassan’s (1986) account, hybridization is “the mutant replication of genres, including parody, travesty, pastiche” (p. 506). From this perspective, hybridization is one of the many aspects of the “pluralism” which gives Hassan’s article its title. Other theorists of postmodernism speak of related aspects of eclecticism and impurity with aesthetic and stylistic connotations, or ‘miscegenation’ with cultural, postcolonial, or more recently transcultural connotations. Informally, the word used may be ‘hodge-podge’ or ‘patchwork’, etc.

Of course, hybridization cannot be seen in separation from what Hassan (1986) calls “indeterminacy, or rather, indeterminacies” (for the sake of the pluralism under scrutiny), “which include all manner of ambiguities, ruptures, and displacements affecting knowledge and society.” (p. 504) While “indeterminacy” is obviously underpinned by physics and mathematics, with larger philosophical implications, hybridization, which is also a form of ambiguity, may relate to styles and aesthetic principles, but also to languages and cultures. Hassan (1986) himself points to the close relation between indeterminacy and “fragmentation”, explaining that the latter may derive from the former (p. 505). “Decanonization”, illustrated by Lyotard’s “*petites histoires*” superseding metanarratives, is yet another form the postmodernist hodge-podge takes when it revels in the “heterogeneity of language games.” (Hassan, 1986, p. 505) “The unrepresentable, unrepresentable” may be another name for the postmodernist hybrids, which are often so utterly queer and dubious that they could be what Hassan (1986), quoting Kristeva, calls “That which, through language, is part of no particular language...That which, through meaning, is intolerable, unthinkable: the horrible, the abject” (p. 506). The ironical mode, which may take various forms, “carnivalization”, which Hassan (1986) borrowed from Bakhtin’s theory, “performance, participation”, “constructionism”, relying on Burke, Pepper and Goodman (p. 507),

and “immanence”, underpinned by Marshall McLuhan’s approaches, by intertextuality, and explored by various sciences (pp. 507-508), complete the picture, which is essentially a kaleidoscopic one.

The postmodernists’ propensity for hybridity and hybridization has its roots in a rejection, or at least a suspicion, of all forms of fixity, determinacy, authority and purity, be it cultural, linguistic, aesthetic or artistic. Because nothing has an absolute value, and therefore nothing is a given, everything can be “constructed” instead. As Linda Hutcheon (2003) argues, “Postmodernism works to show that all repairs are human constructs, but that, from that very fact, they derive their value as well as their limitation” (p. 7).

### **Hybridity, Impurity and the Double**

Like everything else, hybrids are constructions of the mind, or else fictions or fabrications. To a fixed perception of one’s self, a postmodernist such as Salman Rushdie (1992) prefers situations when “we can dream versions of ourselves, new selves for old”, and that is so because

*Waking as well as sleeping, our response to the world is essentially imaginative: that is, picture-making. We live in our pictures, our ideas. I mean this literally. We first construct pictures of the world and then we step inside the frames. (pp. 377-378)*

Rushdie himself and his characters are hybrids, i.e. cultural and linguistic mutants permanently morphed by their never ceasing travel from one space and time to another. Two of them, the protagonists of *The Satanic Verses*, have stirred virulent reactions. Saladin Chamcha and Gibreel Farishta shake their readers from their complacent reading habits and cultural assumptions throughout the novel, starting with the opening scene, when they tumble onto the very heart of England out of the blue. As they fall down they undergo transformations, and as the novel progresses it becomes clear that Saladin turns into a devil, while Gibreel becomes his Christian namesake, the Archangel Gabriel.

Rushdie (1988) played upon manifold hybridity when he conceived this pair of characters: not only are they culturally and linguistically “impure”, but as they morph, they transgress all borders, shifting forms, losing and regaining their human traits, only to change

them again in a metamorphic process on a cosmic scale, in which all elements partake:

*Hybrid cloud-creatures pressed in upon them, gigantic flowers with human breasts dangling from fleshy stalks, winged cats, centaurs, and Chamcha in his semi-consciousness was seized by the notion that he, too, had acquired the quality of cloudiness, becoming metamorphic, hybrid, as if he were growing into the person whose head nestled now between his legs and whose legs were wrapped around his long, patrician neck. (pp. 6-7)*

This is an image of a contorted hybridity of the double, meant to unsettle all the previously settled notions and perceptions of fixity and purity. As Marina Warner (2002) argues in *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds: Ways of Telling the Self*, “tales of metamorphosis often arose in spaces (temporal, geographical, and mental) that were crossroads, cross-cultural zones, points of interchange on the intricate connective tissue of communications between cultures” (p. 17).

Accounting for *The Satanic Verses* in his essay “In Good Faith”, Rushdie (1992) states that it “is the story of two divided selves.” (p. 397) The inner split is a form of doubling, or, in the case of Saleem Sinai of *Midnight’s Children*, of the multiplication of the self, impurity or hybridity. If Saladin Chamcha is torn between East and West, Gibreel Farishta suffers from a spiritual dilemma, which eventually drives him to the final gesture of committing suicide. In other words, while Chamcha is a cultural hybrid, whose physical metamorphosis into a goat-like being indicates his gradual transformation into a Satanic figure, Farishta, as his given name Gibreel suggests, is “a secular equivalent of angelic half-divinity” (Rushdie, 1992, p. 397). Farishta is a spiritual hybrid, torn between a faith he has lost and a desire to regain it. His postmodern hybridity is one of the most dangerous forms of impurity.

### **Postmodern Angels**

In the very first line of his short story “On Angels”, Donald Barthelme (1981) writes that “The death of God left the angels in a strange position” (p. 135). In less than three pages, Barthelme explores the angels’ post-Nietzschean condition in a postmodernist ironic tone,

which sheds light upon the ontological fissure opened by God's death, which left the angels with the question of their own nature. In the rhetoric of what is meant to read like a brief treatise on the issue of the nature of angels, Barthelme dips his postmodernist quill deeper into the ink of irony and invokes Swedenborg, who claimed that he saw angels and that they look like human beings. However, the reliability of Swedenborg's contention is dubious if we consider Barthelme's (1981) suspicion-raising remark that "a man cannot see angels with his bodily eyes, only with the eyes of the spirit." (p. 136) As for the angels' names, a useful reference is Gustav Davidson's *Dictionary of Angels*, while "angelic consciousness" (Barthelme, 1981, p. 136) was described by Joseph Lyons in *The Psychology of Angels*. Nonetheless, the narrator carefully argues that what was previously written about angels can no longer hold in our present times, thus foregrounding a typically postmodern distrust in the tools offered by science. The last page of the text dwells on the actually hybrid nature of angels, which may shed some light on Rushdie's Farishta: "It is a curiosity of writing about angels that, very often, one turns out to be writing about men." (Barthelme, 1981, p. 136) In the next paragraph, the readers are ironically reminded within brackets that "this is impure speculation" (Barthelme, 1981, p. 136), which signals the impurity of the postmodern reasoning, "tarnished" by post-Nitzschean assumptions. After "painting" the angels in the colours of corruption and dubiousness, the closing paragraph brings the postmodernist *coup de grâce* with the image of a media technological angel seen on television talking about "the situation of angels now." (Barthelme, 1981, p. 137) What the last line gives is a sense of postmodern irresolution: today's angels, thrown into question and into questioning by the death of God, will be "continuing to search for a new principle." (Barthelme, 1981, p. 137)

Márquez played upon the ambiguity of men and angels in his short story "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings." The title foreshadows and foregrounds the ironical dissonance between the purity of the angel and the decrepit condition of human old age. The hybrid being in the title appears without any divine warning in the rear of Pelayo and Elisenda's courtyard after some heavy rains. He seems to have been brought there by the rains, together with dead crabs. When seen by Pelayo, the old man was "lying face down in the mud" and "couldn't get up, impeded by his enormous wings" (Márquez. (1997). "A Very Old

Man with Enormous Wings”. R. V. Cassill & Joyce Carol Oates (Eds.), *The Norton Anthology of Contemporary Fiction*, p. 218). The story dwells on the implausible discrepancy between the miraculously grown wings and the otherwise miserable condition of the old man. He is obviously a hybrid who confounds everybody, and the story dwells on the impossibility of extricating this intricate coexistence of the old man’s mundane and angelic features. The mundane ones do prevail, and although his miraculous wings make him look like a bizarre half human-half ornithic being, the divine aura still clings on him. It is this strange mix of features that attracts visitors to Pelayo and Elisenda’s place. The spouses charge the visits, and the very old man with enormous wings becomes a rather sad exhibit, who occasions carnival events in the most Bakhtinian postmodernist spirit. The carnival pulls down even the slightest traces of demarcations, dissipates any sense of order, and installs a moment of havoc put down to “the angel”, whose miracles are associated with mental disorder. His days of carnivalesque “glory” come to an end and its aftermath is a period when Pelayo and Elisenda try to cope with the angel’s messy ubiquity and the problem of disposing of dead angels. Twisting expectations, the very old man with enormous wings recovers from a lethargic state, and takes his flight. What he leaves behind is his own absence, and as he flies further and further away, he becomes “an imaginary dot on the horizon of the sea.” (Márquez, 1997, p. 223)

### **Dream and Imagination**

Writers of magic realism or fabulation like Borges, Márquez, Rushdie, and others, create fantastic hybrids, drawing on folklore, mythology, a post-Freudian association of dream with the unconscious and literature, and their own imagination.

All of Rushdie’s novels follow the logic of dream, his protagonists are deeply engaged in day-dreaming, and thus their world is a Möbius strip. So steeped in dreams is Gibreel Farishta that “they infect his daytimes: that is, they drive him mad.” (Rushdie, 1992, p. 398) Thus, the cultural, linguistic, spiritual impurity and hybrid nature of the characters spin around themselves a hybrid space where fact is interwoven with fiction, dream, imagination and magic, the circadian rhythms are altered, and continents are dream projections. In *The Enchantress of Florence*, for instance, America is as unreal as Sikri, a city

imagined by Akbar, who also imagines a wife, Jodha, who, although imaginary, is more “real” than his “real” wives until she is erased by a hybrid Angelica/Angelique/ Lady Black Eyes, whose nature is now angelically good and now evil, depending on perspective. Cities are as hybrid as the characters and as the genre of magic realism, and Rushdie’s hybrids never stay put in one place or one time anyway. By plane, magic carpets, or in their dreams, they cross continents, countries and realms. The three protagonists in *The Ground beneath Her Feet* travel through a “membrane” (Rushdie, 2000, pp. 256-76), and Ormus Cama, the Orpheus figure in the novel, develops a “double vision”, which grants him access to several worlds at once and drives him beyond the verge of sanity.

Rushdie claimed that *The Satanic Verses*, the book whose supposedly “blasphemous” nature put his life in jeopardy, is essentially a celebration of “hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs,” in short “a song to our mongrel selves” (1992, p. 394). Migration, whose main effect is hybridity, comes with globalization, of course, but in Rushdie’s view it will always be, as it has been, a condition from which “can be derived a metaphor for all humanity.” (1992, p. 394)

Postmodernist writers are very alert to mythical and legendary echoes. Borges, considered a “father” of postmodernism or a venerated master, anticipated many of its quintessential features. One of them is a strong fascination with the most fantastic or mysterious aspects of the universe, all of which are human constructs. Thus, in his Prologue to *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, Borges claims that the name of the book could include virtually everything there is in this world, i. e. Prince Hamlet, a fictitious character, but also the dot, the line, the surface, the hypercube, any of us, and maybe even the divinity. The book is an incomplete but exemplary inventory of imaginary entities, and the author invites us to a “kaleidoscopic” reading of this fantastic postmodernist *miscellania*. The 116 imaginary beings are collected from world mythologies and from writers, across ages. Borges describes each of them, gives their mythological origins, and shows not only how they travelled in time and space, but also how they were transformed by their traveling. Of the many hybrid creatures in the book there is the Hydra, a hybrid born of Typhon and Echidna, half a beautiful woman and half a snake, there is



Lilith, the snake-woman who was Adam's wife before Eve, and who, in the Middle Ages, stopped being a snake and became the spirit of the night. There is also the Egyptian and the Greek Sphinx. The Egyptian Sphinx is a lion with a human head, though on the roads from Karnak there were Sphinxes with the head of a ram, Amon's sacred animal. The Greek Sphinx has the head and breast of a woman, bird feathers, while its body and paws are those of a lion. Borges's *Book of Imaginary Beings* is a synthesis of the most representative fantastic projections of the human mind. Their nature is essentially hybrid, since they blend zoomorphic and anthropomorphic features; some of them, for instance the mandrake, a plant whose forked root resembles a human in form, are deemed to be mainly anthropomorphic. What Borges traces here is an archetypology of the human imagination as a universal propensity towards a pre-logical thinking, related to dreams, which, in literature, counterpoints realism, and in culture opposes the logic of science and positivism.

What magic realists actually do is to undermine and twist logic, suggest the illusory nature of knowledge by reason, exalting the imagination and its workings. Maybe the uttermost hybrid of all the hybrids in Borges's *Book* is the Dragon. Borges (2002) himself deems it to be "a necessary monster, not an ephemeral or accidental one, such as the three-headed chimera or the catoblepas." (p. 14) The European one is a thick and long snake, with claws and wings, which, as years passed, has lost its prestige. Thus, the dragon probably is, or so Borges thinks, the best known, but also the most ill-fated fantastic being because dragon stories seem so childish. It is so, Borges warns us, because of the dragon inflation in fairy tales. The incomparably more serious descriptions of the Dragon appear in *The Book of Revelation* and in Saint Augustine. Jung contended that by blending the features of a snake with those of a bird, the Dragon unites air and earth.

Romanian postmodernist writer Mircea Cărtărescu wrote a whole book about dragons, where he ironically claims that this imaginary creature can be scientifically accounted for and studied, which makes it an encyclopaedia. The first part delineates the universe of the dragons, looking into their "biological, economic, social, cultural and linguistic reality" (Cărtărescu, 2007, p. 6), while the second "reproduces *ad integrum* a famous epic cycle of original dragon literature, titled *The Coiling Zurba of*

*Meer-Tscha*” (Cărtărescu, 2007, p. 6)<sup>2</sup>. Of course, the postmodernist readers are expected to suspend their disbelief and read the stories for the fun of it. The fun is of a genuine postmodernist kind: Cărtărescu’s narrative reads as a re-visitation of fairy-tale, which eclectically combines archaic language with technological jargon, inserting poetic pieces of supposedly folkloric sound, anagrams which mimic Chinese or English, ludic signs that are meant to make sense only in the context of this text, some of them mimicking the Cyrillic alphabet, phrases in English and French. Hybridity is the mode in which the *Encyclopaedia* is written on all its levels: as known from folklore, the dragons mate princesses, and new hybrid dragons are the result; the narrator claims that the dragons’ bodies might have resembled human bodies if it hadn’t been for a careless female who fell under the spell of a Komodo dragon. Genres blend into one another, languages and registers combine in a Bakhtinian heteroglossia and polyglossia. In Hassan’s terms, Cărtărescu’s postmodernism is “ludic” in the sense that it is “highly ironic, playful and eclectic, advocating a pluralism of ‘anything goes’ and excessive relativism and subjectivism.” (1986, pp. 26-27)

Cărtărescu’s postmodernist fantastic bestiary ironically marginalizes the poet, called “*puah*”, a phonically suggestive lexical coinage like a lot of others in the book, with an invented original meaning, which is “*losers pushing the stars with their chin*” (2007, 69). There are recurrent mentions of the *puah*, whose being looks hopelessly useless and whose role and occupations are derided. The *puahs* can never be hybrid, but their purity does not actually count for anything in the dragons’ world, as their most valuable occupation is war. However, the reader is expected to make an analogy between the fantastic and fictitious *puah* and the author of the book, who ironically ridicules both his own stance and also the obtuseness of dragon, alias human societies in their treatment of poets. The book ends on an image that tips the scales in favour of the poets, and the product of their imagination, which is literature, showing us a party of mighty dragons mesmerized by the only original copy of the famous “Coiling Zumba of Meer-Tscha” chiseled on a dragon’s bludgeon. “Meer-Tscha” is of course Mircea, the

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<sup>2</sup> All quotes from Mircea Cărtărescu’s *Encyclopaedia of Dragons* in this paper are my translation.

author's given name, and the reputed Zumba is the book we have just read. This metafictional trick restores the prestige of literature, apparently for ever, or at least in the world of the dragons, who, oblivious of all the other duties and occupations, start reading the zumba, and they keep on "reading and reading" (Cărtărescu, 2007, p. 168)

Although they may suggest fragmentation or split consciousness, hybrids may be the symbol of a painfully desired wholeness instead. This is the case of Harry/Harriett in Jamaican writer's Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven*. Harry/Harriett, who is always called by this double slashed name pointing to his/her hybridity, is sexually a gay, and racially a miscegenated hermaphrodite. As Angeletta K. M. Gourdine (2002) accounts for it, "For Harry/Harriett the issue is not a homosexual attraction, but some hybridization of the two: biological male's heterosexual desire conflated with female gender identification" (p. 92). Gourdine argues that "Harry/Harriett also reflects Cliff's interrogation of the relationship between sex and gender. Born a man, Harry/Harriett works as a medical officer but once served as a nurse, both gender-cast jobs. Described by 'an old woman who penned Harriett's history' as 'Mawu-Lisa, moon and son, female-male deity,' Harry/Harriett chooses to become Harriett, to ignore biology: 'Harriett live and Harry be no more.'" (as cited in Gourdine, 2002, p. 92). Harry/Harriett's role in the book is to draw Clare, the protagonist of the novel, back to Jamaica. Conscientiously assuming womanhood in spite of biology, Harry/Harriett also identifies his/her own body with the territory of Jamaica, which is "ruinate", a deserted place in ruin. Raped in his/her past, as the country had been "raped" by colonists, what Harry/Harriett tries to achieve by his/her hybridity is to salvage his/her own (and Clare's) body, and by analogy his/her own country's (and Clare's) territory from ruin. Stylistically, *No Telephone to Heaven* is a fragmented narrative, linguistically it is "...a text of pulsional incidents, the language lined with flesh, a text where we can hear the grain of the throat...a whole carnal stereophony; the articulation of the tongue, not the meaning of language" (as cited in Bhabha, 2005, p. 259), in fact it is not one but several languages, while aesthetically it is a collage/montage. It is a book where hybridity is the metaphor of a fractured humanity living in, or rather across a cracked universe and aspiring to salvation and the recovery of a lost unity.

### Conclusions

This study is an approach to hybridity, which is an essential characteristic of postmodernism. It is seen in close connection with pluralism, indeterminacy, ambiguity, dream and imagination.

Hybridity is highlighted through its hybrids, which are aesthetically or politically subversive. Aesthetically, they undermine the conventions of realism, verisimilitude and representation. Politically, in Homi Bhabha's terms, the hybrids, who are unsettled migrants travelling for insecurity, develop "an evil eye", which in Ormus Cama's case is his "double vision" that "cuts across the boundaries of master and slave"; in poetry it "opens up a space *in between* the poem's two locations, the Southern Hemisphere of slavery and the Northern Hemisphere of diaspora and migration, which then become uncannily doubled in the phantasmic scenario of the political unconscious." (1994, p. 55) Sometimes, these hybrids can be perceived as cultural, spiritual, sexual or gender aberrations, sometimes they may be fantastic creatures, steeped in mythology, folklore and legend, while other times they may be both and even something more than that - imaginary projections of the writers' minds, which elude the reader's comprehension. What makes them difficult to grasp is their unfixated and protean nature. Since they are unsettled, their effect is unsettling: they jolt us from our binary schemes and logical knowledge. They ask for high leaps of the imagination, a total suspension of disbelief and a complete surrender to the powerful seduction of imagination on the reader's part.

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### Biodata



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