

Salman Rushdie's "the enchantress of Florence": a humanitarian interpretation

Abstract

The article presents a reconstruction and analysis of Salman Rushdie's well-known book «The enchantress of Florence». It is not entirely clear why it is so named, as the novel contains more significant figures, such as Emperor Akbar. The question is raised regarding the integrity of the artistic reality and the peculiarities of readers' understanding of the novel. In connection with this problem, the author recalls his distinction between two ways of constructing a modern work of art: in the first, the artist recreates a world opposed to him (including, in some cases, himself, but as an alienated figure); in the second, he creates a reality that reflects the peculiarities of his own consciousness (this approach is termed "private realism"). It is proposed to carry out a reconstruction that allows one to understand the work of art in terms of how it is constructed, what its author wanted to say, whether it is possible to reconstruct what he was doing, whether his plan succeeded, what his creative process was like, and so on. The implementation of this program results in an analysis of the peculiarities of Rushdie's personality, as well as a characterization of the main tasks he addresses (revitalizing history, entertaining readers, expressing his own convictions). Rushdie creates characters who live in two different realities—historical and contemporary—as a result of which history is partly distorted, and the characters acquire contradictory traits. The techniques used to create the novel's artistic reality are analyzed in detail. The first technique is the identification of historical subjects with non-historical ones; the second is the author's deliberate connection of plot lines; the third technique, widely used by Rushdie—and not only for linking different lines and realities, but also for his other two purposes (entertaining readers and expressing his own thoughts)—is magic and fantasy. The question of why many readers poorly understand *The Enchantress of Florence* is examined. There are two reasons here. One is connected with the very approach to understanding: readers begin reading Rushdie's works believing they are dealing with an ordinary novel, whereas in fact it is a matter of the genre of private realism. The second reason lies in readers' unpreparedness to work with such complex material, which presupposes the reconstruction of an integral work and reality based on the images, plot lines, themes, and other expressive means offered by the author.

Keywords: understanding, misunderstanding, work, artistic reality, plot, reconstruction, fairy tale, fantasy, fiction, history

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Introduction

Statement of the problem

Anna Fedotova, who wrote excellent commentaries on Rushdie's novel *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights*, writes that "It is a pointless task to look for meanings in Rushdie's novel. It is better to surrender to the ocean of stories and allow it to carry you, caress you, enchant you, awaken your imagination and feelings".¹ On the one hand, this is correct; almost all of Rushdie's novels contain so many different planes, independent plot lines, and various insertions of all kinds that if you try to sort them out, you will lose the sense of the whole and the unity of experience so necessary for a work of art, even if it is classified as "magical realism." On the other hand, comprehension of a work is an organic aspect of its perception and experience, as the great Aristotle first showed in his *Poetics*.² Usually, the comprehension of a work (commentary) after reading it consists of a retelling of its plot or striking themes with an interpretation of the content and form of the given work. As, for example, in Maya Stavinskaya's commentary: "The settings of the novel are India and Italy, more precisely—the capital of the legendary Shah Akbar's empire, Fatehpur Sikri, and Florence, and so on everywhere. Constantinople, which at that very time is becoming Istanbul, Samarkand, whence the heroine, the beautiful Princess Qara Kōz, hails, the deck of a Scottish

brig, and the ships of Amerigo Vespucci setting sail for the shores of the New World. The characters are also in perfect order. Besides Akbar and Amerigo, there is also Niccolò Machiavelli—yes, the very one who wrote the treatise *The Prince* and enriched world politics with the term Machiavellianism. And how does all this coexist on one plane? Well, anyone else would have hitched a bull and a tender doe to the same cart, but this is Rushdie, the greatest of modern storytellers. And therefore, the story of the greatest beauty of all times and peoples, Qara Kōz, intelligent, independent, and self-reliant, who, in the company of her servant-double and friend (and not only, hmm, friend) Mirror, will illuminate the entire inhabited universe with the radiance of divine charm, changing men and constantly, unfailingly betting on the winner. But not out of cunning and self-interest, but in an effort to protect herself and her dignity, not to allow the male world to trample her, and whoever condemns her, it is not I".³

Due to my profession (philosophy and the humanities), I am not satisfied with an ordinary reading; as a rule, I also try to understand the work of art in terms of how it is constructed, what the author wanted to say, whether it is possible to reconstruct what he was doing, whether his plan succeeded, what his creative process was like, and so on, all in the same reflexive spirit. This case was no exception. Moreover, I wanted to address another problem—the integrity and organic nature of the artistic reality of *The Enchantress of Florence*.

As Stavinskaya put it: "Well, anyone else would have hitched a bull and a tender doe to the same cart," and Aristotle in his *Poetics* directly wrote about the integrity of a work of art: "...the parts of the events must be so combined that if any part is transposed or omitted, the whole is changed and disrupted. For that whose presence or absence explains nothing does not constitute any part of the whole" [2, p. 2078].

Now specifically regarding «The enchantress of Florence». Some readers note in their comments that they failed to combine the various plans and compositional structures of the novel into a whole. For example, a reader with the nickname varvarr writes: "An incredibly vague plot, a message I did not understand, a host of names, Eastern and European, a bunch of nicknames and their translations... Probably, I was not ready for a tender doe and a horse in the same harness called 'magical realism'... Rushdie the 'rebel,' in my opinion, went too far and did it for opportunistic reasons..." Or another with the nickname iri-sa: "Everything is so contrived, fairy-tale-like, and absolutely uninteresting! Tricks, potions, a fictional wife, heirs suddenly appearing out of nowhere, about whom no one ever knew anything... Although... Confirmation from relatives, after all, these inventions did receive. So much has been woven here into a single Eastern knot, and I cannot find the words to tell it. Fiction upon fiction. I did not like either the book or the genre to which it is assigned".⁴

If someone thinks this is only about Rushdie and this novel, they are mistaken. A similar reaction from many readers occurred, for example, with the novel *My Children* by our well-known young writer Guzel Yakhina. Here is just one review. Galina Yuzefovich: "The phantasmagorical reality inside the novel turns out to be a metaphor, but a metaphor without a key, referring to nothing and hanging in the air... <...> Having become entangled many times in magical subtexts, and then extricated themselves from them, having swum across the river of adjectives and adverbs, having overcome the sea of poetic images, lovingly detailed descriptions and other verbal beauties, the reader is faced with a disappointing conclusion: at the level of the idea, *My Children* again reduces to the banal 'in any circumstances, a person has a chance to live his own life with all its sorrows, joys, acquisitions, and losses'... Only if last time Yakhina managed to illustrate this simple thesis with a sparse and understandable Siberian settlement, this time she for some reason needed to construct an entire big-budget fantasy world, vaguely resembling the world of the German Volga region in the 1920s. In principle, it is certainly not punishable, but we understood it quite well the first time".⁵

In the article "The Artistic Reality of Guzel Yakhina's Novel *My Children*," I show that currently a new way of constructing a work of art and artistic reality is gaining ground.⁶ The artist (writer, painter, composer) does not so much recreate the events of a world opposed to him (which may include himself, but precisely as an alienated figure) as create, on the basis of these events, a world that expresses his own personality and consciousness (let us call this approach and genre "private realism"). As a result, the logic organizing these events is more subordinate to his personality and consciousness—more precisely, it is a hybrid logic, since it is necessary to satisfy the peculiarities of the events of the opposing world as well. Thus, Rushdie, even at a superficial glance, operates within this new tradition (in which case it is better to classify his work not as magical realism, but as private realism), and I wanted to use *The Enchantress of Florence* as an example to better understand the hybrid logic of his creativity. This perspective is supported by broader literary criticism; for instance, one scholar has examined the novel as a case study for "digimodernism," a cultural movement that also sees a regression to primal forms of narrative and a prominence of fantasy, which are

features Rushdie masterfully employs to lure contemporary readers into the novelistic world.^{5,7}

Main part

Something about the author of the enchantress of Florence

Rushdie, as is well known, is a man of two civilizations and cultures—the West and the East, which, incidentally, is reflected in his novel. He studied history while at King's College, Cambridge, which again had an impact on the creation of *The Enchantress of Florence*. It must be agreed that when describing the Mughal dynasty, the life and capital of Padishah Akbar, the events in Italy at that time, or, for example, the vicissitudes of Niccolò Machiavelli's personality, Rushdie strictly adheres to real history as described by historians, whose works he cites like a scholar at the end of the book [5, pp. 375-380]. True, it is unusual: a novel with elements of fiction and even mysticism, and at the same time with references to scholarly research.

Rushdie began his career as a media young specialist: an actor in theater, a journalist, a copywriter in advertising agencies, "where he came up with 'irresistible' for Aero chocolate bars and Naughty but Nice cream cakes, wrote the slogan 'That'll do nicely' for American Express, and in collaboration with musician Ronnie Bond, Rushdie wrote the lyrics for an advertisement for the now-defunct Burnley Building Society, which was recorded at Good Earth Studios in London (the song was called 'Best Dreams' and was sung by George Chandler)".⁸ Having become a writer, Rushdie did not forget the skills he had acquired in organizing public communications; almost all of his works are oriented toward entertaining the public. In «The enchantress of Florence», this task is solved in two ways. On the one hand, the events are organized according to detective logic: one of the main characters, the rootless Niccolò Vespucci, declares himself to be the uncle of the great Akbar, and the reader tries to understand how this is possible almost until the end of the novel, and only at the end is this intrigue resolved, although it is prepared gradually. On the other hand, the novel is saturated with a mountain of interesting information, situations, and vicissitudes, both real (historical) and fictional of two kinds—fantastic, fairy-tale-like, and quite realistically possible. New and interesting information, as well as experiences of extraordinary events, rain down on the reader, who barely has time to digest and comprehend it all.

It is not so easy to understand Rushdie's attitude toward history and modernity. It is not religious; he is skeptical about faith, and simply considers religious fundamentalism a social evil. In an interview, Rushdie said: "Instead of one Iron Curtain, many communities arose, ready to kill and die for their limited ideas about the structure of the world".⁹ "The idea of sacredness is one of the most conservative ideas in any culture, because it seeks to turn all other ideas—doubt, progress, change—into crimes... The fundamentalist believes that we believe in nothing. That he has absolute values, and we are mired in sybaritism and compromise. To prove him wrong, we must agree on common values: public kisses, bacon sandwiches, modern fashion, literature, generosity, water, equal distribution of resources, freedom of thought, love. This is our weapon. We will win not by war, but by a life without fear for our values".¹⁰

However, one can always ask the question: on what are Rushdie's own values based, on what whales or turtles do they stand? I personally have not found an answer to this existential question. It seems that Rushdie interprets history in the spirit of modernity, since in Rushdie's novels the characters often think either in a modern way, or on the

basis of some unclear logic, but not medieval. Modernity, it seems to me, Rushdie understands as social chaos and meaninglessness—wars, suspicions, grievances, intrigues, conflicts, sufferings, and other actions and processes, unconditioned and incomprehensible. Thus, in *The Enchantress of Florence* it is hardly possible to understand the conditionality of what is happening. More precisely, specific reasons are indicated: love, sex, thirst for adventure, desire for power, vanity, fear, curiosity, and so on; however, overall a picture of the elements and fate emerges, incomprehensible, invincible, leading one knows not where. Roughly, as it appears on the surface of social life at the present time.

Reconstruction of the scheme for constructing artistic reality

Let us proceed from the author. When creating the novel *The Enchantress of Florence*, Rushdie solved several tasks. First, he enlivened medieval history, populating it with his characters and their deeds. The fact is that for the ordinary person (not a scholar), past history is both incomprehensible and dead. Of course, by reading and studying history, a person understands what historians are saying, but as a rule, this knowledge is formal. I assume that Rushdie, even as a student, felt this formalism, and when he began to write his works, he decided to overcome it. How? Namely, as an artist, by recreating history through the actions of people he understood, turning them into heroes of the work and simultaneously participants in history. Why did he take modern people as his heroes? In my opinion, because he believed that, in essence, people of the past differ little in their actions, behavior, and psyche from modern people. Incidentally, this conviction is shared by many prominent contemporary scholars. This approach aligns with the view that Rushdie's project is to "liberate history from the shackles of positivism" by mixing myth and history to recreate new myths. The novel consciously adopts a historiographical meta-fictional mode, deliberately disrupting chronology and introducing supernatural occurrences to remind the reader that history is a relative construct.¹⁰

Second, Rushdie created an artistic narrative that would engage the public, making the reader experience, enjoy, and live through the events of the work. To this end, he constructed *The Enchantress of Florence*, on the one hand, as a detective story, and on the other, populated it with events that were attractive and interesting, as well as educational (knowledge of medieval history).

Third, in *The Enchantress of Florence*, as in his other works, Rushdie directly, but more often covertly (indirectly), shares his views on life and people, realizing, as psychologists would say, his desires and values. The attractiveness of the events in the work is ensured, among other things, precisely by the modernity of the author's events. Here, for example, are the characters' discussions of problems of power, feminist themes, psychological issues (the relationship between the I and We, the problem of artistic perception of the invisible, reflection on one's actions). Overall, the events were intended to incline the reader to reflect on modern life, for example, social chaos and meaninglessness. The connection between history and modernity is noted by many commentators of *The Enchantress of Florence*.

Solving the actual artistic task, Rushdie creates characters who live in two different realities—historical and contemporary. The heroes of his novel are two-faced: on the one hand, they honestly reproduce the deeds and speeches of historical figures (Rushdie took these speeches and deeds from historical books), but on the other, they speak and experience as modern people. Here are three examples. In

one, Padishah Akbar, irritated by the mustache and behavior of the defeated ruler of the city, chops off his head, which is certainly a simple historical fact, but immediately he begins to reflect and experience in a spirit characteristic of a modern personality. "Puppy, upstart, imagines he is smarter than everyone," Akbar thought irritably... and with the cry "Allah Akbar," which could mean "God is great" or "Akbar Almighty," he cut off the pitiful pimple's insolent, unyielding, and instantly absolutely worthless head. After the murder of the prince, as always in such cases, Akbar was visited by the familiar demon of loneliness... One of the main contradictions of his nature consisted precisely in the fact that he, being not only a philosophizing and weeping murderer, but also an egocentric accustomed to servility and flattery, nevertheless yearned for a completely different world, one where he could meet an equal, a kindred spirit, a brother in reason, a person with whom one could share thoughts, exchange knowledge, experiencing and giving the joy of communication; he dreamed of such a structure of the world in which one could defeat an opponent not by bloody reprisal, but in a more pleasant way, albeit one requiring the exertion of all mental faculties—that is, in the course of a dispute" [5, pp. 47-48].

It is highly doubtful that Akbar, who considered himself, if not God in heaven, then God for his subjects, could have had such humane thoughts. A medieval emperor and king could not in principle think in this way. What "brother in reason"? Reason was directed by God, and from Him came reason for the padishah or tsar, but not for ordinary people. For example, Ivan the Terrible, in his Epistles to Kurbsky and other persons, traces his genealogy "from Augustus Caesar and his brother Pruss to Rurik and the Kievan princes." The divine origin of Russian tsars, according to Ivan the Terrible, justifies "the unlimitedness of the prerogatives of tsarist power: the tsar must not be bound by anyone or anything in his actions; he is not responsible for his actions before his subjects, but only before God, therefore he stands above the law, and even if he acts unjustly—that is only a sin, not a crime" [3, p. 44]. Akbar also arrives at similar conclusions, despite all his humanism: "He did not wish to be considered a deity, and at the same time sincerely believed in his right to absolute power. But then it turned out that the strange thought about the good of disobedience that visited him was simply blasphemous. His power over the lives of others is based on the right of the strongest. Whose power, that one is right—and it is precisely this principle that should be fundamental for any realistically thinking sovereign; all other reasoning, including on the topic of virtue, is nothing more than a convenient cover" [5, pp. 328-329].

The second example. Machiavelli brings back to life a captive, a very beautiful girl who was hypnotized and turned into a kind of message—"The Palace of Memory" (she remembered nothing except the text she needed to convey, including to Machiavelli). Removing the hypnosis, Machiavelli expected that the girl would be able to love him, but the result was unexpected and terrible—having remembered her life, the girl threw herself out of the window and died. The story with the girl was clearly invented by Rushdie, but it could well have taken place in the Middle Ages; however, Machiavelli's experiences (or the author's comments, from whom this text is made, is unclear) after her death are very modern and completely uncharacteristic of those times: "You can somehow exist while your brain is asleep, while you do not realize what life has done to you. But when the ability to think returns to you, it is easy to go mad. Awakened memory can cause you irreparable harm. The memory of the many humiliations, violence committed against your body, the memory of the great many men who possessed you—this is no longer a palace ('the palace of memory' was the name given to the memorization technique described by Cicero.

— V.R.), it is simply a brothel of memories. And on top of that—the ruthlessly sober realization that all the people dear to you are dead and there is nowhere to expect salvation... Then you, like everyone else, should die. You must run, run swiftly, so as not to have time to feel anything, and overcome the glass obstacle between two worlds as if the glass became air, and the air became glass, and while you are flying, it showers you with fragments. How good it is to fall. How good it is to fall out of life" [5, p. 208].

The third example. It concerns content inspired by the numerous visual reflections of modern literature and television (images come out into the world or the viewer moves into the screen, into the reality of the image). In this case, the image of the amazingly beautiful Princess Qara Kōz ("Black Eyes") of the Mughal dynasty, created by the brilliant artist Dashwanth, comes to life and enters into communication with people, while the artist, on the contrary, goes into the world of his painting (incidentally, one of the first such reflections is Gogol's "The Portrait," where the image of the moneylender comes to life, counts gold coins, which the hero then picks up after waking up): "Dashwan immediately set to work, and soon he had a whole series of magnificent drawings... As Dashwan created new paintings depicting Qara Kōz in the bloom of beauty and youth, it became increasingly clear that his brush possessed truly magical power. The images were so full of life that Birbal (the great vizier and close friend of Emperor Akbar, a wise and witty man. — V.R.), when he saw them for the first time, said prophetically: 'I am afraid for Dashwan. He is so captivated by this long-dead woman that it will be difficult for him to tear himself away from her and return to the present...' Despite vigilant supervision, the artist managed to disappear without a trace... The mystery, as expected, was solved by Birbal. Eight days after Dashwan's disappearance, this most perceptive of Akbar's courtiers, hoping to find the key to the artist's disappearance, noticed a certain oddity that had remained unnoticed until then. It seemed that in the lower left corner, the drawing extended slightly beyond the format chosen by the artist and was continued under a wide ornamental frame. The painting was returned to the workshop, followed by Akbar himself, as well as Birbal and Abu'l-Fazl. Under the guidance of both Persian masters, the frame was carefully separated from the sheet, and when the hidden piece of painting appeared before the eyes of those present, a general exclamation of amazement rang out: there, hunched over like a little turtle, with a roll of drawings pressed to his chest, stood Dashwan—the great painter... Dashwan, who had fled into that world where the princess hidden from all lived" [5, pp. 132, 138, 140-141].

The next question is: how does Rushdie connect and unify the novel's narrative (the work's narrative) with history and the vicissitudes of the characters (historical events with the actions of fictional characters, both historical and non-historical)? The first technique is the identification of historical subjects with non-historical ones. For example, Akbar is both a historical subject and a fictional subject, reasoning like a modern person and dealing with the impostor Niccolò Vespucci. Ago Vespucci is both the real friend of Niccolò Machiavelli and the one who passionately fell in love with the beautiful Qara Kōz and Mirror (her maid, the spitting image of her mistress) and set off with them to the New World, becoming the husband of both. Qara Kōz is both a descendant, Rushdie claims, of the Great Mughals (sister of Babur, founder of the empire) and a princess who, after many misfortunes, found herself in Italy under the protection of Antonino Argalia, and then, together with Mirror, left for America. Jodha is both the ideal beloved created by Akbar's imagination and the third real wife, Miriam uz-Zamani, daughter of the Raja of Amber of the Kachhwaha clan (Figure 1).



Figure 1 Miriam uz-Zamani, she was also mentioned under several other names, including Jodha Bai.

It is interesting that such identification in no way affects historical events, since either events that do not affect history are chosen, or subjects whose existence cannot be proven. For example, as in the case of Qara Kōz or Jodha. Professor Irfan Habib, former chairman of the Indian Council of Historical Research, says: "There was no historical personage by the name of Jodha Bai." It is true that Akbar married the eldest daughter of Raja Bharmal of Amber, but her name is mentioned nowhere.¹¹ Still, questions arise; for example, Ago Vespucci, who left Florence for Qara Kōz and went to America, is formally very similar to Amerigo Vespucci, who, together with Columbus, discovered the New World (however, it is known that Amerigo returned to his homeland and died there, unlike Ago, who died in America).

The second technique is the deliberate connection of plot lines. Thus, the lineage of the Great Mughals passes into the line of events in Florence and then the life of Qara Kōz with Mirror and Ago Vespucci in America. The line of adventures and vicissitudes in the life of Niccolò Vespucci, son of the daughter of Mirror and Ago, is connected with a certain part of Akbar's life and reign. Not everything in Rushdie adds up in terms of time, but on the one hand, magic comes to the rescue, and on the other, the gap in time can be used to good effect, for example, to introduce new events (so Akbar does not believe Niccolò and sends him away): "'The man before us,' says Gulbadan Begum, Akbar's aunt, 'is thirty, at most thirty-one—no more. It follows from this that if the princess reached Italy, as this man tells us, and if, by his assurances, he is her own son, then she must have given birth to him at approximately sixty-two to sixty-four years of age. Well, if such a miracle did indeed take place, then he is indeed Your Majesty's uncle, the son of your grandfather's sister, and has every right to be called a prince. But at sixty-two, one does not give birth, so this version does not hold... <...>'

'Firstly,' said Hamida Banu, Akbar's mother, 'the disappeared princess, as is known, was a sorceress and knew the secret of eternal youth, so it is quite possible that she managed to preserve her youth, beauty, and even give birth in her seventh decade...' 'Suppose,' Gulbadan supported, 'this man is not lying and the mentioned princess with her warrior really did reach Italy many years ago. Then

it is possible that the mother of the man before us was not the royal beloved of this Argalia... 'But her daughter,' the emperor finished for her <...>

'My mother is Qara Kōz,' said Niccolò Vespucci, 'sister of your grandfather. She was a sorceress, she knew how to stop time.' 'Untrue,' Akbar said decisively, 'She did not know how to do that'" [5, pp. 125-127, 363]. The third technique, widely used by Rushdie—and not only for linking different lines and realities, but also for his other two purposes (entertaining readers and expressing his own thoughts)—is magic and fantasy. However, it is worth noting that, as a rule, the corresponding events are not pulled out of thin air by Rushdie or invented independently; they already exist in culture. Let us consider two examples: the image of Jodha, whom Akbar recreated with his imagination and brought to life, but only for himself, and the taming of the mad elephant that was supposed to trample Niccolò.

There is nothing unusual in creating an ideal beloved in one's imagination, but Akbar not only creates Jodha, but also communicates with her, talks to her, and even loves her as an ordinary woman—and this while he appears in the novel as a rational person (recall what he says to Niccolò: "Untrue, Qara Kōz did not know how to stop time!"). In modern psychiatry, communicating with one's projection and image, perceiving them as a living person, would be classified as schizophrenia. Akbar is a schizophrenic and simultaneously a wise ruler and husband—"cool," as our children would say: "From one wife, the imaginary and most beloved spouse took beauty, from another—faith, from a third—incalculable wealth. However, the emperor invented the character himself. In selflessness, in attention to the slightest desire of the master, in readiness to give herself to him at any time of day or night, she had no equal among the living. She was unreal and perfect—as a dream can be <...>

She was almost certain: if she went beyond the palace walls, the spell would lose its power and she would cease to live <...> Jodha knew that her illustrious husband had inherited the gift of sorcery from his ancestors <...> She too is a sorceress. She conjured herself. She needs to enchant only one person, and he is already here, nearby. He did not go to the other wives. He came for pleasure. <...> She waited... but the subtleties of the love act had lost all attractiveness for him; he sought to possess her as quickly as possible and put an end to it" [5, pp. 57, 58, 60, 62, 65].

The episode with the mad elephant was preceded by two others: in the first, Niccolò Vespucci enters the emperor's palace, calmly overcoming the numerous guards (his mistress Mohini-Skeleton had the gift of imparting to her clients such smells that opened all doors); in the second, Niccolò was accused of lying, of appropriating a sacred name, and sentenced to execution by being trampled by a mad elephant. But thanks to the smell, he remained intact and unharmed: "'Before you are allowed to see the emperor, you will have to appease many,' Mohini warned. 'Therefore, I will hide the aroma for His Majesty deeper, under the smells with which you will have to charm the guards and others. In the presence of the emperor, they will all evaporate, only the most important one will remain. <...>' The prisoner's hands were untied—with their help he could not save himself, but would merely accept death with greater dignity. The condemned man stretched out his hands upward, toward the elephant, and before the eyes of all those gathered, the elephant unexpectedly calmed down, allowed itself to be stroked, and then both nobles and commoners gasped in amazement at the same time: the elephant carefully wrapped its trunk around the prisoner's body, lifted him—and now the yellow-haired stranger was sitting on the elephant's back, like some prince" [5, pp. 75, 109].

Does not Mohini's ability to compose smells that control people's behavior recall the abilities of Jean-Baptiste Grenouille, the hero of Patrick Süskind's novel *Perfume*—exactly alike. Süskind's novel was published in 1985, and Rushdie's first in 2008. Why not include Süskind's novel in Rushdie's list of literature? But it is not there. In this case, I am still interested not in this circumstance, but in the fact that Rushdie relies on a narrative that already exists in culture. And most of his borrowings are of this kind, which is not bad, rather good; another matter is how to present such things publicly.

The story with smells is, of course, fantastic, partly fairy-tale-like, since the hero, to the reader's delight, remains intact and unharmed in a completely hopeless situation. And there are many such fantastic episodes in Rushdie's book, including the first appearance of Qara Kōz in the palace and the very last one, where the long-dead Qara Kōz returns to the emperor: (First appearance of Qara Kōz): "It was getting dark. Servants brought in candles, and the air smelled of camphor. On the rear solid wall, lamps with wicks soaked in cottonseed oil were lit, and in their light, the shadows of two women danced on the carved jali screens. At that moment, on the other half of the palace, the emperor's fantasy, his khayal, had finally and irrevocably taken on a new form... on the carved jali, it was no longer two, but three shadows dancing, and before their eyes (Akbar's mother and wife. — V.R.), ever more clearly, ever more distinctly, the figure of a woman began to emerge straight out of the air in the swirling twilight. Her lips smiled slightly. 'You are not Jodha!' the Queen Mother stammered.

'Correct,' said the vision, and her black eyes sparkled mockingly. Jodha Bai is gone. She is no longer needed by the emperor. From now on, I will always be at his side. <...>' (Return): "At night, the hidden Princess Qara Kōz appeared in his tent in all the splendor of her former beauty... she sat at his feet and tenderly touched his hand. The night was ending. The past had lost all meaning for him. Only the present remained—her eyes. In their mesmerizing light, all generations shifted, moved, and merged into one... 'You see,' she said, 'I am here. You allowed me to return. Now, O Guardian of the Universe, I belong to you alone.' 'Oh yes, my love,' thought Akbar. 'Oh yes, until you decide otherwise'" [5, pp. 344-345, 373-374].

Conclusion

Let us ask ourselves: why do many readers poorly understand «The enchantress of Florence»? In my opinion, there are two reasons here. One is connected with the very approach to understanding: these readers begin reading Rushdie's works believing that they are dealing with an ordinary novel, well, in the genre of historical literature with elements of fiction and fairy tale, or, at the very least, in the genre of postmodern literature. But still, they think, Rushdie describes a certain existing or fictional world, a world opposed to the author. But Rushdie, as I noted, writes a work in the genre of private realism, creating an artistic reality that largely expresses the contents and peculiarities of his consciousness. To understand Rushdie (or, say, Umberto Eco, Guzel Yakhina), one must, firstly, change the approach to understanding, and secondly, have a certain interest in the problems and discourses of such masters. Critical reception of the novel supports this. Some reviewers, while praising its ambition, have found it to be a "bewildering kaleidoscope of interests" that "never gel into anything approaching a coherent narrative,"¹ and others have commented on its "tiresome free-associative digressions".⁴ This suggests that the novel's structure, which I argue is a key element of its "private realism," is precisely what presents a barrier to readers expecting a more conventional historical or magical realist narrative.

The second reason lies in readers' unpreparedness to work with such complex material, which presupposes the reconstruction of an integral work and reality based on the images, plot lines, themes, and other expressive means offered by the author. Here, of course, the author's help is needed, and in my opinion, Rushdie does not sufficiently understand this. As I show, many of his characters are contradictory; their vicissitudes distort historical events; it is difficult to understand how individual plot lines are connected to each other. However, it is precisely this blurring of boundaries that scholars have identified as a central feature of the novel. The work is seen as a historiographical metafiction that knowingly disrupts chronology and mixes fact with fiction to highlight the constructed nature of history itself.¹² Rushdie's project, in this view, is not to present a coherent historical narrative but to create an alternative historical reality where myth and history are fused.¹⁰

There is one more circumstance: Rushdie depicts a world of social chaos, struggle, intrigue, injustice, and suffering. People are ruled by the desire for power, enrichment, pleasure, and sex. In such a world, a person oriented toward goodness, peace, and justice is unlikely to want to live; therefore, I think, *The Enchantress of Florence* is alien to many readers. I recall the wonderful novels of Meir Shalev, who also recreates a social world heading one knows not where. Nevertheless, this is not a world of chaos, and one sympathizes with his characters because they resemble us not only in terms of human weaknesses, but also in positive aspirations.^{13–15}

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Conflict of interest

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