

Multicultural Matters of Love in Contemporary Historical Fiction

*Ya-Chu Yang**

ABSTRACT

This paper examines two contemporary British historical fictions, Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe* (2002) and Salman Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008), as shedding light on and offering critiques to both Britain and the world's current multicultural state of development. Evaristo's verse novel revisits Roman London through the perspective of its black ruler and residents to uncover the historical evidence of a multiracial and multicultural British Isles not dominated by hierarchies of difference. Rushdie's novel, on the other hand, fantastically returns to the sixteenth century to portray the world famous Mughal Emperor, Akbar the Great, who is celebrated for his successful sovereignty achieved through diplomatic military policies as well as religious and cultural tolerance. Through Rushdie's historical writing, Akbar's great kingdom serves as an eastern counterpart to the vivacity of western Renaissance. By reviving these historical Emperors who lived and loved across cultural borders through literary imaginings of their lovers, Evaristo's and Rushdie's texts present critical and creative practices of multicultural progress as a mirror for today's postcolonial age of transnationalism and globalization.

KEYWORDS: multiculturalism, historical novel, hybridity

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Ya-Chu Yang, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Tamkang University,
Taiwan (karen73319@gmail.com).

Since the end of World War II, Britain has adopted multiculturalism's difference-oriented model to deal with the nation's influx of postwar immigrants. Guarding against racial discrimination served as the root for the British government's execution of cultural diversity policies. Amid such efforts, however, Enoch Powell's inflammatory "Rivers of Blood" speech popularized anti-immigration discrimination among the British public. Margaret Thatcher also continued to take a hard line on immigration population control during her long service as British prime minister. After Thatcher's era, Britain witnessed large influxes of immigrants into Britain, which was primarily the result of the policies of the Labor Party and the EU free movement laws. These large-scale arrivals of immigrants aroused debates regarding the promotion and practice of multiculturalism in Britain. Chief points of contention include clashes between universalism and particularism, sacrifices of commonality for individuality, as well as inequalities of attention paid to different groups. Public suspicion toward multiculturalism continued to accumulate with the September 11 terrorist attack in New York and the London race riots and bombing in 2001 and 2005. Published in the first decade of the twenty-first century, Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe* (2001) and Salman Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008) revisit premodern histories to shed light on and offer critiques of the contemporary developments in multiculturalism. In *The Emperor's Babe*, Evaristo deconstructs the white Britain myth by uncovering the black populations of the British Isles during the Roman era, thus ascribing racism to the subsequent British colonial enterprise. For its part, *The Enchantress of Florence* fantastically returns to the sixteenth century to portray the world-famous Mughal Emperor, Akbar the Great, who is celebrated for his successful sovereignty achieved through diplomatic military policies as well as religious and cultural tolerance. Rushdie projects Akbar's great kingdom as an eastern counterpart to the vivacity and diversity of the western Renaissance. Evaristo's and Rushdie's texts examine premodern localities of cultural diversity and hybridity through historical matters of love and fantasy. The past is held up as a mirror for present observations and reflections on multicultural struggles in the postcolonial age of transnationalism and globalization.

Rushdie and Evaristo have been known for their novelistic explorations into issues of ethnicity and multiculturalism via creative interplays between the personal and the historical. Rushdie scholars have mostly been attracted to the writer's practice of postmodern intertextuality, fantastic elements, postcolonial

expressions, multicultural performances and, lately, the transnational/cosmopolitan/international/global interests of his novels. His hybrid intermixing of fantasy, fiction, history, self, and nation presents a *mélange* where the world and the self are heterogeneously interlaced. In the context of modern Indian fiction, P. S. Ravi reads Rushdie's novels as what Raghavendra Rao categorizes as history creating, in comparison to the pre-1980s novels of history bearing and history suffering.¹

Mona Narain makes a similar argument in her analysis of *The Moors' Last Sigh*. She contends that “[b]y mythologizing and allegorizing histories, Rushdie posits ‘Europe’ and ‘India’ as imaginary figures and therefore subject to contestation and rewriting” (65). Rachael Trousdale proposes reading Rushdie's refashioning of history and the world through the lens of transnational migrants and exiles who construct identities through a participatory process rather than a passive one.²

Other critics such as Rebecca L. Walkowitz and Rishoma Zimring approach Rushdie's depiction of immigration from a cosmopolitan perspective.³ Cultural connectivity and hybrid intertextuality continue to prosper as the core of studies on Rushdie. On a similar note, Evaristo, who is of Nigerian and English parentage, is best known for delving into ethnic and multicultural themes of immigration through the intermix of poetry and prose, past and present, history and fiction, self and world. Lars Ole Sauerberg analyzes Evaristo's lyrical technique as showcasing verbal density by directing “attention to the verbal as the construction site for meaning rather than as its translucent filter” (459). Reading Evaristo's novels as an example of Linda Hutcheon's “historiographic metafiction” (qtd. in Upstone 280), Sarah Upstone regards the language of Evaristo's historical fiction as applying postmodern satire to invert slavery's racial dynamics.⁴ Evaristo's rewriting of history and re-inscription of black British identity have also been the focus of critics such as Katharine Burkitt, Judie Newman, and Şebnem Toplu. Many of her historical rewritings set out to re-envision border-crossing transnationality and

¹ Please refer to Ravi.

² Please see Trousdale.

³ Please refer to Walkowitz and Zimring.

⁴ For further details, please refer to Upstone.

cosmopolitanism through metropolitan female characters seeking self-definition.⁵

This essay continues to address the themes of hybridity and cultural connectivity central to Rushdie's and Evaristo's writings, but approaches these issues by focusing on the love relationships in their novels, asking in the end, whether amid the suspicions and difficulties of multiculturalism, love can serve as the matter to bridge differences. In the second edition to his book on Salman Rushdie, D. C. R. A. Goonetilleke includes a new chapter on *The Enchantress of Florence*, observing that

Rushdie's obsessions—free speech, migration, hybridity and globalization—remain in *The Enchantress of Florence*, but he is departing from serious interpretations of the present and liberating himself to entertain, like the old oral artists, creating fantastic arabesques of fancy and humour, dealing with love, beauty and aspiration. (184)

Discussing practices of love and border-crossing in the novel, Bishnupriya Ghosh argues that Qara Köz, who is also known as “The Enchantress of Florence” in the novel, “practices the arts of embodied mutuality—the ability to love across battlelines, the capacity to rule both Sikri and Florence by her sheer beauty . . . loving beyond generation, she has seduced her great-nephew, the Emperor Akbar” (28). She becomes a cosmopolitan legacy who enchants men of different times and places. Martin McQuillan suggests that “it is only possible to be enchanted in one of two ways: by stories or by love” (94). In stories as well as in real life, enchantment involves the surrendering of oneself to the influence of another which, for Emperor Akbar, nevertheless, remains only as temporary pleasures which fail to develop into permanent relationships. Disillusionment toward love also opens Evaristo's verse novel: “Who do you love? Who do you love, / when the man, you married goes off / for months on end” (3). The female protagonist envisions love to be “opposed to violence, betrayal, greed and lust,” but her aspirations oftentimes stand in contrast to her lived experiences in multicultural Londinium (Acquarone 152). To build my discussion on multicultural matters of love, the essay starts off with an overview

⁵ For related discussion, please refer to studies by Cuder-Domínguez, Gunning, Gendusa, Bhatnagar, and McConnell.

of the development and controversies of multiculturalism in Britain and then moves on to examine Evaristo's and Rushdie's complication and diversification of the history of multiculturalism and its concerns. By focusing on border-crossing love relationships in the novels, I argue that although attractions of difference bring strangers into contact, communication with and sacrificial love for the other are required to sustain border-crossing hybridizations in the long term.

I. Multiculturalism and Britain

On the development of contemporary multiculturalism, general advocacy after World War II resulted from a series of historical developments. In particular, this included the denunciation of racism after the Holocaust, the escalation of indigenous movements in white-settler countries like Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, the initiation of civil rights movements in the United States, as well as the spread of decolonization endeavors driven by white colonizers' postcolonial guilt syndromes. Different from Canada and Australia that sought to construct their nations on multicultural foundations, West European nations employed multiculturalist policies primarily to restrict the accommodation of postcolonial and guest-worker immigrants. Passive tolerance served as the latter's central attitude toward the influx of foreigners entering their countries. In comparison to other EU countries, Britain appeared keener to promote anti-racism and anti-discrimination policies to protect minority cultures. This is a result of Britain's closer relations to American ideologies as well as its desire to continue its imperial affinity with other parts of the world while transitioning from Empire to nation-state. Nevertheless, Enoch Powell's 1968 speech was among one of the anti-immigration declarations to publicly expose British society's growing suspicion toward the nonwhite Commonwealth immigrants and their descendants in Britain. His argument built on the postwar discontent that "[t]he *English* people, after saving the world for democracy, are drawn as victims to excessive and ongoing postcolonial reprisals" (Schofield 16). Feeling swamped by immigration, Thatcher carried out the Conservative Party's more restrictive approach to immigration.⁶ Earl Aaron Reitan remarks that the "pattern of restriction *cum*

⁶ In one of her TV statements, Thatcher infamously said that "People are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture" (qtd. in Chambers 136).

nondiscrimination was to characterize British immigration policy until nonwhite Commonwealth immigration was virtually shut down by Thatcher” (9-10). Therefore, although the Race Relation Acts in 1965 and 1976 helped advance racial equality, it was not until the end of the Conservative Party’s rule that the government regulated a lawful duty on all public institutions to advocate racial equality with the passing of the Human Rights Act (1999) and Race Relations (Amendment) Act (2000).⁷

In Britain, anti-racial discrimination efforts eventually intertwined with multiculturalist approaches. Fleras writes, “Definitions of racism shifted with the privileging of diversity as governance. Instead of defining racism as something that was done to deny equal rights, it now focused on the right to be different” (174). As various groups debated on and competed for self-definition, communities became culturally and ethnically fragmented and sometimes segregated. Despite developing from fighting racism to fostering diversity, Britain’s protection and promotion of cultural diversity contradict the nation’s continued tightening of immigration regulations since the Commonwealth Immigration Act in 1962. In effect, multicultural policies often executed as a means of control rather than defense. Nevertheless, Britain’s cultural diversity spokesman image paired with its effective immigration control policies served to represent the well-balancing of universal human rights with nationalism on the international scene. Into the 1990s, multiculturalism’s popularity reached new heights with Nathan Glazer famously announcing *We Are All Multiculturalists Now* with his book title.

Entering the twenty-first century, dynamics began to swerve to the other side as radical terrorist attacks devastated the capitals of America and Britain. This generated a new wave of criticism regarding multiculturalism’s drawbacks. Earlier critiques against multiculturalism involved suspicion toward the term as being fundamentally a paternalistic top-down solution to minority issues and a dangerous reification of cultural essentialism. On a global scale, Masao Miyoshi argued that “multiculturalism is a luxury largely irrelevant to those who live under the most wretched conditions” (95) Rey Chow also criticized post-WWII racism as being based on the “insurmountability of cultural differences” (12). In the British context, Clive Harris and Winston James harshly attacked multicultural politics for its racist results. They argued that “even when ‘multi-culturalism’ is preached in the name of anti-racism, cultural

⁷ For more information on Britain’s racial policies, see Ahmed; Meer and Modood; Fleras.

belonging becomes fetishized in some quarters to the point of creating a real cultural nature. Difference is not merely celebrated, it is absolutized” (2). When ethnicity and culture are attached to racial signifiers such as heritage and roots, definitions of difference often become essentialized and generalized, leading to issues of prejudiced exoticism and unequal pluralism.

The recent backlash against multiculturalism surrounds fears that Britain’s identity politics have intensified segregation and propelled hostility among its various ethnic groups. Many onlookers have labeled the England riots in 2001 and 2011, as well as the London bombing in 2005, as “race riots,” thus blaming multiculturalism as the nurturer of radical extremism and terrorist attacks. For twenty-first century residents of Britain, multiculturalism may still endure on a local level; however, in national debates, many claim that “Britain has entered an authoritarian ‘anti-multiculturalism’ period in which multiple identities, loyalties and allegiances are both being problematized and deployed in order to facilitate ‘our’ primary identification as British citizens who must accept British values above all else” (McGhee 145). In 2011, British Prime Minister David Cameron firmly denounced former policies of state multiculturalism and proposed “muscular liberalism” as the new turn for Britain.⁸ He proclaimed, “Instead of encouraging people to live apart, we need a clear sense of shared national identity, open to everyone.” His statement highlights the need for a more inclusive development toward belonging, integration, and cohesion in the process of Britain’s nation-building agenda.

Amid the wave of criticisms which holds multicultural politics responsible for Britain’s problems, there are still others who warn against such easy scapegoating of multiculturalism. George Crowder cautions against toleration prejudices and cultural relativist explanations. Instead, he stresses the dual combination of personal autonomy and critical reflective ability as the vital approach to multiculturalism.⁹ Focusing on the British scene, Joanna Fomina affirms Britain’s anti-discrimination stance but points out problems with basing cultural diversity primarily on race categories, ending her discussion with aspirations toward post-ethnic and cosmopolitan multiculturalism which “acknowledges that human beings are embedded in culture, but rejects the idea that our inherited ethnic cultures should define all our life options”

⁸ Cameron coined the term “muscular liberalism” in his speech in Munich, Germany, on February 5 2011 (qtd. in Miah 52).

⁹ See Crowder (2013).

(*Immigration* 286). Her analysis situates British multiculturalism as currently somewhere between “[l]iberal multiculturalism” and “[a]utonomist multiculturalism or ‘plural monoculturalisms,’” both of which are ascribed to group categorizations rather than individual definitions (“Multiculturalism” 2). Her criticism appears similar to Crowder’s attack on the lack of personal autonomy in many governmental multiculturalist agendas. Focusing on British Muslim communities, Nasar Meer and Tariq Modood argue for a dynamic political multiculturalism which refocuses on the interaction between different positions as a “re-balancing of multiculturalism rather than its erasure” (490). In contemporary Britain, prospects of “unity through diversity” continue to remain fraught with discontent and challenges.

II. Cross-ethnic Unions in *The Emperor’s Babe*

Written amid the controversies of multiculturalism, Evaristo’s *The Emperor’s Babe* and Rushdie’s *The Enchantress of Florence* revisit premodern eras to explore varied practices of multiculturalism. Their common effort combines developing concerns in British literature on multicultural discontents as well as historiographical narration. The two texts’ attempt to reimagine and rewrite history builds on postcolonial and postmodern discourses popularized during the 1980s. However, the authors’ commitment to historical research and reality as well as their exploration of form and matter in the novels also bears witness to twenty-first century fictions’ awareness of history as a material force. As Peter Boxall argues, “this struggle towards a historical realism that remains beyond the grasp of a narrative that is alive to its own limitations, a narrative that lives out the historical depletion of its own access to the real” (64). The content of Evaristo’s novel stems from her research in museums on black histories in Britain. Her language and style inherit verse traditions as well as Latin terms. Rushdie also includes a long list of books and reference materials in his publication, with an added note stating that this is merely a shortened list of the works he consulted. Narrative creates history, but material reality also binds and configures imaginings. Historical novels can never change the past but can only shed light on the present. In naming their books after self-created characters who cross temporal and spatial borders via fantasies of love and narrative, Evaristo and Rushdie explore the possibilities as well as limitations

of loving and imagining across borders under the material conditions of multicultural empires.

Evaristo's verse novel is inspired by the history of black presence inhabiting the British Isles during the Roman era of third century AD. In an interview, Evaristo discussed the common misconception of most British people, herself among many others, who were led to believe that black people came to England after 1948. After coming across historical research that proved otherwise in the late 1980s, she resolved to commit herself "to exploding the myth of Britain as monocultural and 'racially' pure until 1948. There are so many layers of British history to be peeled back" (Interview 290).¹⁰ *The Emperor's Babe* features Zuleika, who is the daughter of Sudanese immigrants in Roman London, and her telling of her life with her friends, her older white Roman businessman husband, and her brief affair with Libyan-born Roman Emperor Septimius Severus. Although Zuleika's black presence is among one of the few in the city, the novel accentuates Londinium as a multicultural city consisting of people from all over the Roman Empire. As Cuder-Dominguez nicely summarizes,

Home to the very English/Roman and the not English/Roman at all, in *The Emperor's Babe* Londinium is the seat of power and the city of the powerless. Evaristo has managed to bring to the foreground of this second novel the codes of gender, class, and sexual orientation underlying the myth of white Englishness, while at the same time offering an engaging and fresh insight into the life and experiences of a young black woman of long ago. (182)

In multicultural Londinium, Zuleika "is noticed because of her colour but she is not discriminated against because of it. The Romans did not practise anti-black racism" (Interview 286). Evaristo's novel illustrates Roman Londinium of AD 211 as a city comprised of predominantly white people but also inclusive of people from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. In this world, blackness is not racially discriminated against but is nevertheless viewed as different.

¹⁰ In her interview, Evaristo mentions being inspired by the works of Peter Fryer, Ivan Van Sertima, and J. A. Rogers (280-81).

At the start of a relationship, difference often incites attraction, which oftentimes wears out through the disillusionment of reality. Zuleika's marriage to Felix starts off from attractions of otherness. Felix desires Zuleika because she appears different from him and his current life, stressing his wish for a "nice, / simplex, quiet, fidelis girl, a girl / who will not betray me with affairs, / who will not wear me out with horrid fights" (16). He imagines her to be like the dark girls who had silently served him in his youth, those who remind him of nature and the exotic. His misguided preconception of Zuleika based on her darker complexion overlooks her London born and raised actuality. The narrative structure of the text accentuates Felix's biased naivety, for his speech comes after Zuleika has already confessed to the reader about her desire for mischievous wildness: "Me [Zuleika] and Alba / were the wild girls of Londinium, / sought to discover the secrets / of hidden hearts, still too young / to withhold more than we revealed, / to join the merry cast of actors" (9). Felix's misconception of Zuleika shows that although Zuleika is not discriminated against for her blackness, her skin color nevertheless confines her to certain cultural stereotypes.

Marriage unions require communication and mutual understanding; however, Felix makes no attempt to get to know his young bride, except for some sexual advances which appear to be more about domination than desire. Sexual union between the couple becomes merely a passionless obligation on the part of Zuleika, who experiences genital mutilation after their wedding night and requires "months of / recuperation each time his sewing / is undone" (33). Katherine Burkitt provides a postcolonial reading of Felix's brutality and Zuleika's infertility, arguing that:

This physical appropriation of Zuleika's body demonstrates the brutal and infertile nature of this oppressive practice *per se*, but also contextualizes it both within the British nation, and into contemporary terms, as again Evaristo does not allow any comfortable distance between Roman Londinium and contemporary London. (*Literary Form* 55)

By digging up multicultural Londinium, Evaristo challenges misguided assumptions of race and slavery that have confined modern conceptions of racism and cultural discrimination. Zuleika, who becomes a slave-owner of two

Scottish girls after her marriage to Felix, is a reminder that the Romans took slaves from both the south and the north. Multiculturalism was not tagged to racism in Roman London, for racial hierarchies are the modern product of the transatlantic slave trade and western colonization. Nevertheless, in the case of Zuleika and Felix, even though skin color is not materialistically stigmatized, their differences enlarge the gap between a couple who make no effort to appreciate and adjust to each other under real life circumstances. In cross-ethnic unions, the erasure of discrimination is not enough; one also needs to love and feel for the other in order for integration to materialize and the marriage to work. Zuleika's high-spirited black presence contrasts with her husband's pale and middle-aged absence, for not only is he often physically away, he also lacks charm and excitement for his teenage wife. In effect, Zuleika soon turns to African Roman Emperor Septimius Severus for a more exciting affair.

Zuleika and Severus's similar otherness is what attracts them to each other in the beginning. They enjoy consolation with each other due to their comparable situations as not belonging to conventional definitions of "Romanness," which Felix's sister, Antistia, states as the following: "A real Roman is born and bred, / I don't care what anyone says, / and that goes for the emperor too, jumped-up *Leebyan*" (53). Antistia excludes Zuleika and Severus from the Roman category based on their racial heritages. Yet for Zuleika, who was born and bred in Roman Londinium, being multicultural Roman is all she knows: "my father spoke pidgin-Latin, / we ate off our laps in the doorway, / splattered with mud. Yet I was Roman too. / *Civis Romana sum*. It was all I had" (54). Whereas Zuleika's marriage to Felix exposes her to the limited exclusiveness of Londinium Romanness as well as its unattractiveness, her passionate affair with Severus introduces her to appeals of Africanness and her darker roots. When Zuleika asks Severus why he chose her as his mistress, he replies: "You were like desert girl in Londinium. / So beautiful. I will never see desert again. . . . I knew you would make my world larger. / It was so small, inside and out. / I would discover more of myself through you" (220). Severus desires Zuleika for her African representations, a past part of him which he has gradually lost over the years. During this scene, he vividly illustrates Africa's boldness and beauty to the fascinated Zuleika. Although they are not from the same ethnic background, they find comfort in their similar inauthentic Romanness. Septimius Severus successfully invokes Zuleika's passions and

fulfills her admirations, and the status and significance of Romanness fade to the background of Zuleika's concerns.

The ambiguity of Septimius Severus's skin color and race is highly significant. In academia, archeologists and historians continue to debate over the Roman Emperor's identity. While many Afrocentrists claim Severus as a black African, condemning the "whitening conspiracy" of Roman imperial politics and western history, other scholars such as Frank Snowden Jr. argue against claims of color-conscious discrimination in ancient times.¹¹ Snowden Jr. writes:

In the entire body of evidence relating to blacks in the ancient Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and Christian worlds only a few concepts such as the classic somatic norm image has been cited as so-called antiblack sentiment. This misrepresentation and similar misreading of the ancient evidence, however, are examples of modern and not ancient prejudices The onus of intense color prejudice cannot be placed on the shoulders of the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, or Romans. (62)

Evaristo's verse novel also leaves Severus's appearance ambiguous. Severus is attracted to Zuleika because they both have African roots rather than because they are of the same ethnicity. This points to the diversity and complexity of black identities, which encompass cultures and ethnicities of various racial backgrounds originating from the vast geographical continent of Africa. Zuleika's passionate devotion to their relationship invokes Severus to intimately share his past and future with her—his hard struggles to become the first Roman Emperor from Africa, his dream to include all peoples on earth into his realm, and his yearning for the beauty of Africa. His Libyan roots will forever be a part of him, but his present and future ambitions exceed boundaries of race and color. Severus and Zuleika's affair may have lasted for only a summer, but their relationship's inspirational intensity affectively revives lost emotions and strengths in both characters.

Furthermore, the epilogue, titled "Vivat Zuleika," envisions empathy between poet and character as it actively invites readers to continue investigating the story's female protagonist by "slip[ping] into your skin, our

¹¹ For more information on the debate, please see Ben-Jochannan, Birley, Walker, Snowden, and Beard.

chest still, drains to charcoal. You have expired, Zuleika, / and I will know you, from the inside” (253). References to body and material call for the excavation of Zuleika and her poetry. Cecilia Rosa Acquarone describes:

In its mixture of high and low art, the past and the present, the serious and the comic, poetry and narrative, history and fiction, this novel is decentering and hybrid. The latter qualities are made obvious in the varied population of Londinium where different ethnicities and colours intermingle, in the mixture of Latin and English in the language of the characters as well as in the frequent use of anachronisms which include the use of contemporary youthful slang by the third century protagonists. In this way, the novel allows for multiplicity even when the central consciousness is exclusively Zuleika. (161)

By reimagining Britain’s multicultural past through the lens of ambiguously hybrid “non-Roman” characters, Bernardine’s novel presents the potential of a multicultural world not confined to rigid racial categorizations and prejudices but composed through struggles of personal existence and creativity.

III. Border-crossing Love Fantasies in *The Enchantress of Florence*

Rushdie’s novel, on the other hand, fantastically returns to the sixteenth century to portray the world-famous Mughal Emperor, Akbar the Great, who is celebrated for his successful sovereignty achieved through diplomatic military policies as well as religious and cultural tolerance. The story follows Akbar as he ventures through various love fantasy pursuits, which include his imagined Queen Jodha, Queen Elizabeth I of England, and his cosmopolitan traveler ancestor Qara Kōz. In histories of India, Emperor Akbar is celebrated for his promotion of religious and cultural tolerance and diversity. Originally an Islamic devotee, Akbar’s later interest, Sufism, prompted him to vigorously promote religious liberalism and dialectical conversations. In addition to official Mughal historical records, such as *Akbarnāma*, and autobiographical memoirs by successive Emperors, such as *Bāburnāma Jahāngirnāma*, many biographical and historiographical texts from the period sought to construct

Emperor Akbar's leading image as the representation of liberal diversities.¹² Four hundred years later, Victorian poet Lord Alfred Tennyson revived the historical Emperor of England's colony as the eastern spokesman of religious tolerance to critique England's long history of religious wars and massacres.¹³ Paul Stevens and Rahul Sapra read Tennyson's poem as an example of reverse transculturation, employing Mary Louise Pratt's theories on center-periphery cross-influences to break through Dipesh Chakrabarty's "politics of despair."¹⁴ Along the same line, Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence* presents Akbar as progressively modern-thinking and open to border-crossing enlightenments, reigning his heterogeneously diverse subjects through pre-modern, modern as well as East-West collaborative insights. Yet, Rushdie's re-imagining of Akbar's passionate but brief border-crossing love affairs further underscores complications of integrating differences.

In recreating Akbar's legend, Rushdie imagines the Mughal Emperor's historically most well-known lover, Jodha, as a creation of Akbar's own fantasy. By reimagining Jodha as Akbar's fantasy lover who enlightens him toward modernity, Rushdie's novel provides an eastern counterpart to western history by ascribing fantastic imagination as the incentive for modern developments. Near the beginning of the novel, Akbar starts to desire to speak in the singular "I" rather than the plural "we" employed by royal sovereignties. To do so, he creates Jodha by piecing together backgrounds of other concubines along with his own idealistic expectations of his other half. Jodha is soon brought to life in the courtly scene through circulating poems and paintings on her beauty and virtue, as Akbar expresses that "it was the real queens who were the phantoms and the nonexistent beloved who was real" (33). Akbar's ability to realize fantasy into reality shows the accepted co-existence of both realms in his Empire as well as his progressiveness in crossing over boundaries through imagination. In one of his interviews on the novel, Rushdie reveals:

¹² In his article Taymiya R. Zaman compares *Akbarnāma*'s official reports with Emperor biographies from the period, arguing that Akbar's historians strategically added and erased certain content in order to present the illiterate Akbar in a certain light. Cynthia Talbot's paper also cites various writings from the period which appear contrary to the official historical documentation. These researches highlight Akbar's symbolic significance in Eastern history as well as the diversified complicatedness of his historical image.

¹³ See Tennyson's "Akbar's Dream."

¹⁴ Chakrabarty's "politics of despair" refers to the impossibility of decentering Europe (45-46).

What was very liberating imaginatively is that one of the real things about the world at this time, both in the East and the West, was a passionate belief in magic. People believed in magic in the way that we believe in doctors or scientists. And they believed in it not as something separate from their daily life, but as very much a part of it. (“Salman Rushdie Spins a Yarn”)

For a sixteenth-century novel, fantasy is not a divergence from reality but a component of the historical materiality of the time. In re-examining Akbar’s era, Rushdie points to the relevance of fantastic imagination for the progression of multicultural unions.

For Akbar, Jodha serves as his mirror for self-discovery and identity construction. As a result, the moment Akbar attempts to make his groundbreaking step from the royal “we” to an individual “I” ironically triggers Jodha to similarly start contemplating her own identity. Their evolution toward the modern self estranges them from their previously united bond as both strive fervently to conquer the other in the bedroom. Their final sex scene echoes Adam and Eve’s banishment from the Garden of Eden, ending with Jodha’s remark that “She understood that he had changed. And now everything else had changed” (65). Akbar gives up experimenting with his “I” and returns to using the “we,” but not without the continued haunting of the dilemma between the previous term’s alienating enlightenment and the latter phrase’s unsatisfactory reclusiveness. Jodha’s abrupt fall from favor reveals Akbar’s love as self-love rather than love for another. His difficulty with her fantasy-modernity identity shows his hesitance at ramifications of border-crossing hybridizations which have developed beyond his understanding and control toward requiring mutual respect and two-way communication, thus straying from his likeness.

Not too long afterwards though, Akbar’s border-crossing imaginative disposition drives him to fall quickly and madly in love with Queen Elizabeth I over a falsely translated letter brought in by the feigned English messenger, Vespucci, who calls himself Mogor dell’Amore. For Akbar, craving the unknown stranger is what prompts him to fall in love. His fascination with the imagined Jodha reflects his wish to know his inner desires, and his ambitions for the Queen of England signify his aspirations for East-West cross-cultural communications and collaborations in the process of identity construction. He begins to imagine the English monarch as his mirroring counterpart, giving her

the title Queen Zelabat Giloriana in his own fantasies.¹⁵ Relishing in the delight of having found his other half, he eagerly sends many royal messengers to the English court bearing his love letters. However, as he continues to receive no response, Akbar and his court soon dismiss the virgin Queen's unresponsiveness as reflecting insincerity and sexual frigidity. As a result, the Emperor resolves to close himself off from "the folly of attempting to understand such an alien and unattractive personage, especially when so many more loving and desirable ladies were so much closer at hand" (92). Thus ends his brief infatuation with the English world and his western "mirror." Misguided by idealism, Akbar falls quickly in and out of love.

His following love obsession with Qara Köz, also known as "The Enchantress of Florence," symbolizes a hybrid intermix of various aspects which include past and present, fantasy and reality, as well as East and West. She is the sister of Akbar's grandfather and the leading lady of Vespucci's stories, a captivating woman who traveled around the globe with her enchanting charms. Nicole Weickgenannt Thiara reads the enchanting effect of Qara Köz's and her maid's, the Mirror's, barrier trespassing behavior as "not so much a product of hybridity as a product of their status as privileged outsiders" (426). She argues that Qara Köz's royal beauty and exotic foreignness give her the means to transgress boundaries and to "invent new roles and new spaces for herself and other women who copy her behavior" (426). Nevertheless, Qara Köz's exotic foreignness chiefly derives from her hybrid amalgamation of different cultures, which she employs to charm and captivate Florentines with her unfathomable mysterious strangeness. Qara Köz's transcultural and transnational mobility and flexibility represent her prime attractions for Emperor Akbar. Out of his love for Qara Köz, Akbar embraces the golden-haired foreign traveler Vespucci into his kingdom, proclaiming that "[t]he curse of the human race is not that we are so different from one another, but that we are so alike" (392). Yet when Vespucci's stories begin to diverge from Akbar's knowledge of the world, he begins to lose interest in the foreigner's tales. Despite being able to indulge in Vespucci's fantastic account of the mysterious western world without hindrance, he realizes that he cannot overlook western misconceptions of the East, such as the misplacement of the West Indies in India in Vespucci's narrative. The decline of Vespucci's and Qara Köz's

¹⁵ In historical records, Akbar usually referred to himself as "Mahumet Zelabdin Echebar" in his letters (Du Jarric 3).

status reveals the limitations of transcultural and transnational mobility and flexibility. Vespucci is soon banished from Akbar's court, whereas Qara Kōz's enchantments become branded as demonic witchcraft in her time.

The novel ends with the fantastic reappearance of Qara Kōz in Akbar's brocade tent to reveal the truth in Vespucci's narrative, as well as to tell Akbar that she has come home to stay. Her reappearance symbolizes the intersection of fantasy with reality, story with history, past with present, self with self/other. She says, "I have come home after all You have allowed me to return, and so here I am, at my journey's end. And now, Shelter of the World, I am yours" (442-43). After all her travels, her ultimate wish is to belong to a place she can call home. Yet, Akbar only silently replies, "*Until you're not My love, until you're not*" (443). His hesitance or suspicion derives from his lack of confidence in the durability and practicality of border-crossing love, which is a reaction to his past failures at attempting to love across boundaries.

His failures, however, are a result of his own self-centeredness, for he is always only interested in idealistically fantasizing about loving across borders rather than actually loving his counterparts' individual distinctiveness and embracing them as part of his own self. Ruling during the world's transition into the Enlightenment and the opening up of East-West interactions, the sixteenth-century Mughal Emperor in *The Enchantress of Florence* "was not content with being. He was striving to become" (45). Like Rashmi Dube Bhatnagar describes, "Salman Rushdie's novel constructs a global map of the Renaissance within which Florentine humanism, sensuality, political thought and love poetry has an eastern counterpart in the humanist, syncretic and proto-modern elements in Akbar's court in Sikri" (570). Indeed, Akbar's love fantasies demonstrate his discontent with current conditions, which he tries to surpass by attempting to cross barriers of knowledge, time and culture. His ability to realize fantasy into reality indicates the possibility of crossing borders via imagination; yet his decline or lack of interest in the realized fantasy shows his hesitance to cross borders in reality. Akbar begins to distance himself from Jodha when she begins to reflect on her own identity. He recoils back to the security of his people in the face of Queen Elizabeth's unresponsiveness. He also remains pessimistic about the durability of Qara Kōz's proclamation. By intermixing fact with fiction, Rushdie's version of Akbar and his lovers comments on the practical need for cross-cultural communication from both sides and the necessity of including more hybridized places in the carving out

of multicultural spaces. Different from Homi K. Bhabha's claim of "in-between spaces" as offering productive spaces for subversive actions carried out through means of sly civility (2), Rushdie's novel delves into the possibilities but more acutely into the restrictions of realizing border-crossing love.

IV. Listen, Learn, Love

Both Evaristo's and Rushdie's novels are named after mistresses who are recognized for their titles as part of another. Zuleika is *the Emperor's Babe* and Qara Köz is *the Enchantress of Florence*. They grace the covers of the novels, but the historical realities of the novels are grounded by Severus who leaves after the summer and the Florentines who ostracize Qara Köz, as well as Akbar who remains silent to her vows after her resurrection. Toward the end, the two female protagonists similarly call out to return home, which is not to go back to past lives but to move forward toward future prospects of union with others. In many of his talks and interviews, Rushdie argues that we must accept the fact that our current world is multicultural and will not de-multiculturalize.¹⁶ Yet, recognizing the material reality of multicultural existence is not enough, for the capacity to feel for another and to imagine the other as part of one's self is equally vital. Anne-Marie Fortier argues,

The prescription of sentiment—of feeling for the nation, for the community, for the neighbour, for the Muslim, for the suicide-bomber, for minorities—is also what race and ethnicity are about. That is, the very act of naming who and how to love, suspect, befriend, care for, embrace, welcome, and so on, performatively constructs racial, ethnic, cultural and national differences along with their gender, sexual, class, and generational 'identities.' Love, suspicion, fear tolerance, pride, become markers of what multicultural intimacy is about; they are constitutive of various public feelings about the obligations to and dangers of intimacy. (89)

¹⁶ See for example Rushdie's lecture "Secular Values, Human Rights, and Islamism" and his interview with Anis Shivani published as "'Look at the World as It Is': An Interview with Sir Salman Rushdie."

In the two novels, love is the bridge between differences. Yet, love requires sacrifice from both entities, a commitment not everyone is willing to make. As Qara Köz's husband in her previous life expresses:

Myself, myself, always and only myself. This is the way of the survivor. But she has tamed me, Machia. I know what she is, because she is still the way I was. She loves me until it no longer serves her to love me. She adores me, until the time not to adore me arrives I do not love her in that way. The love I have for her knows that the well-being of the beloved matters more than that of the lover, because love is selflessness. She does not know that, I think. I would die for her, but she would not die for me. (362)

Qara Köz only becomes aware of the strength of love after her magic starts to fade. Love is what sustains her in the face of Florence's prosecution and what resurrects her in Akbar's court. Feelings of love will not miraculously salvage cultural gaps, but critical examinations on crossing borders with love reveal the potential as well as constraints of living with difference both in the past and the present.

Evaristo's and Rushdie's novels go back in history to revisit different examples of multicultural practices. *The Emperors Babe* revisits Roman London through the perspective of its black ruler and residents to uncover the historical example of a multiracial and multicultural British Isles not dominated by separations and hierarchies of white supremacy. *The Enchantress of Florence* reimagines sixteenth century barrier trespassing fantasies to draw out the possibilities and dilemmas of border-crossing pursuits and developments. Both texts criticize the problematic rigidity of cultural and ethnic categorizations in multicultural societies and close with open endings anticipating revitalizing change in the coming future. Zuleika has died but her poems remain; Qara Köz had died but was resurrected in Akbar's tent. In life, these lovers invoked hidden sentiments in their Emperor's heart and mind, and, in death, they inspire readers to sympathize with their revival in their afterlives. Living in today's multiculturally globalized world requires not only the underlying deconstruction of modern racist constructions and categorizations

but also the further appreciation of strangeness, and, most importantly, the willingness to care for others as part of one's own.

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