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## SOCIAL AND POLITICAL AGENDAS OF AMERICAN SOCIETY IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM (SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *QUICHOTTE*)

The subject of the research is the artistic interpretation of social and political problems in Salman Rushdie's novel *Quichotte* (2019). This work is a postmodern reinterpretation of Cervantes's story about the ingenious gentleman of La Mancha, which tackles a number of pressing issues, faced by American society at the beginning of the twenty-first century, from opioid addiction and migration to the environmental crisis and cyber-spies. The purpose of the article is to identify and describe those social and political triggers that, on the one hand, define today's agenda of the American post-truth society, and on the other hand, appear to be kind of tags of the relevance and priority of the issues raised. Explication of the strategies of literary representation of such problems in the work of fiction reveals their relationship with the author's worldview. The application of the methods of hermeneutic, intertextual, cultural, semantic, and linguistic-stylistic analyses enables us to study the author's intentions in the literary space with an emphasis on the most topical concerns of contemporary issues. The literary forms representing the post-truth narratives in Rushdie's novel are designed to expose the most troublesome issues in the Age of Anything-Can-Happen. The article examines the interpretation of such problems as the influence of mass media products, racism, and gender inequality, as well as some issues of language, ageism, and psychological pressure on children.

The results of the study. The concept of post-truth, which penetrates fiction from public discourse to become a key means of explaining the author's intentions and creating narratives of hyperreality, in *Quichotte*, appears as the prism through which all events, phenomena, and meanings are interpreted. Having become the main form of artistic vision, hyperreality appears in postmodern fiction to transform the contemporary literary landscape. This post-truth environment helps Rushdie see and analyse in detail the most crucial problems of American, or, in general, world society. They are manifested at all levels and in the actions of the characters, and the situations that happen to them, as well as in the author's comments.

*Keywords:* escalation; postmodern hyperreality; post-truth; pressing issues; troubled society.

The change of times, a transition to the new millennium, is characterised not only by a change in historical panoramas but also by the transformation of worldviews, behavioural models as well as social and political agendas. At the beginning of the new millennium, the world faces many challenges, the most severe of which are the dot-com boom (2000–2001), the global financial crisis (2008–2013), and the coronavirus pandemic (since February 2020). They have affected everyone without exception, even in such developed countries as the USA and, indeed, have raised a number of social and political issues (Zoppi, 2017).

The beginning of the twenty-first century in the history of the United States was marked by the events of 9/11 that left an imprint on the further course of history. On September 11, 2001, coordinated suicide terrorist attacks were carried out to hit the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New

York City and the third into the Pentagon in Arlington County, Virginia. They started a new era of American history and American society that continues today (Peck, 2020; Hanson, & White, 2011). The rise of social and political issues is especially evident in periods of crisis, so turning to this angle of research seems quite natural.

Fiction reflects all the changes that take place in society, their reinterpretation, perception or non-perception (Fast, 2011). As Longo (2017) asserts, "a literary work may propose a fictional representation of reality. <...> It may also detect the relevance of themes and questions which are not yet on the social agenda" (p. 6). Among the bestsellers that impress with their range of covered topical concerns of contemporary issues is the novel *Quichotte* (2019) by Sir Salman Rushdie (1947–), an Indian-born British-American novelist, whose works primarily focus on the connections and disruptions between Eastern and Western

cultures. Masterfully plotted, a story within a story, *Quichotte* was shortlisted for the 2019 Booker Prize.

Inspired by Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, Rushdie entitles the chapters of his *Quichotte* following Cervantes' style but chooses the French title for his new novel instead of the English one. Following a metafictional mode, Rushdie writes the story of an addled Indian-American man, Ismail Smile, created by a mediocre writer of spy thrillers Sam Du Champ (mentioned in the novel as Brother). Du Champ reads Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, creates his Quichotte, and falls in impossible love with a TV star, Miss Salma R. Together with his imaginary son, Sancho, Quichotte launches on an adventurous journey across America to prove that he is worthy of his beloved. Meanwhile, Quichotte's author, Du Champ, suffering a midlife crisis, has urgent challenges of his own.

In the novel, Rushdie tackles a whole range of troublesome issues that American society continues to face in the twenty-first century, and which the writer believes to be the most significant: impossible and obsessive love; father-son relationships; Indian immigrants, racism towards them, crooks among them; cyber-spies; science fiction; the intertwining of fictional and 'real' realities, the death of the author; the end of the world; opioid addiction (Rushdie, 2019, p. 289)<sup>1</sup>. In the beginning of the new millennium, they have not only remained relevant in American society, but are interpreted in another way in the context of a post-truth society, when "...the surreal, and even the absurd, now potentially offer the most accurate descriptors of real life" (p. 222).

In *Quichotte*, Rushdie "exposes the post-truth condition where the moorings of reality have been lost" (Majumder & Khuraijam, 2020, p. 4) and reconsiders the concept of post-truth to explicate how all the things and events are interpreted through the prism of hyperreality, drawing our attention to the most topical concerns of contemporary issues. The writer emphasises the idea of *the Age of Anything-Can-Happen* that erases objectivity and captures minds by blurring a line between facts and fiction and the conflict between illusion and reality. Writing post-modern hyperreality as fictional reality is what Arva (2008) calls "writing the vanishing reality" (p. 72); this enables Rushdie to collide with truth and what seems to be the truth. Bezrukov & Bohovyk (2022) argue that the metaphysical gist of the novel "is created by a complex intertwining of the intertext, allusions, hints, culture-specific elements, vocabulary, etc" (p. 207). They produce "the effect of hyperreality and only a knowledgeable reader is able to get to the bottom and understands the author's profound considerations on the troublesome issues of our time" (p. 207).

Strangely enough, this post-truth environment helps Rushdie see and analyse in detail the most crucial problems of American, or, in general, world society. They are manifested at all levels and in the

actions of the characters, and the situations that happen to them, as well as in the author's comments. The *purpose* of the study is to identify the social and political issues currently defining the agenda of the American post-truth society, as well as to explicate the strategies of their literary representation in Rushdie's *Quichotte*.

The *methodology* is presented by the methods of hermeneutic, intertextual, cultural, semantic, and linguistic-stylistic analyses. This combination serves as the ground for exploring the author's intentions in the literary space.

**Mass media impact on modern society.** Mass media immediately respond to all changes in society, reflecting current states and influencing the development of tastes, the use of lexical items, and the shaping of opinions. Mass media products impact preferences about appearance as well as the desire to become famous through changes in appearance: "the fifteen minutes of fame accorded to young persons with large social media followings on account of their plastic-surgery acquisition of a third breast or their post-rib-removal figures that mimicked the impossible shape of the Mattel company's Barbie doll" (p. 3).

Certain cultural phenomena that are easily recognisable to the readers of the novel have become extremely popular precisely because of their broadcasting. Rushdie's *Quichotte* is dense with mass cultural allusions: Candy Crush Saga, Atlanta Cricket League, dharma bum, Freedom Day in the Confederacy, Ted's Montana Grill, Labor Day, etc., as well as the mention of dead and living celebrities: "Mummy R was Marilyn Monroe, very sexy and very fragile, and she stole the sportsman prince <...> whom Grace Kelly wanted to marry" (p. 36); "Granny R was Greta Garbo, a great actress who for unexplained reasons abruptly retreated from the world..." (p. 36); "I think, there are a lot of dead experts in self-medication. I think, Heath Ledger" (p. 113) and even the Royals: "...it was widely rumored that Prince Charles, a great admirer of the Islamic world, received guests at Highgrove dressed like an Arab sheik" (p. 60).

Films, cartoons, and TV shows help make their characters recognisable around the world, and their main features are used as identifiers to recognise the characteristics of real people. Such characteristic features play the role of allusions and help to understand the author's attitude to certain famous figures. The counterpart to the institution of the presidency in Rushdie's comparisons sounds as such: "Our president looks like a Christmas ham and talks like Chucky" (p. 132). The author compares the president to a fictional character and the main antagonist of the Child's Play slasher film franchise Charles Lee "Chucky" Ray. He is a dead serial killer whose spirit inhabits a doll and tries to transfer his soul from the doll to a human.

The author uses allusions not only to clarify the character traits of famous people but also to describe the actions of the characters: "A tornado might carry your house to a faraway land where, upon landing, it

<sup>1</sup> When referring to Salman Rushdie's *Quichotte* (2019), only a page number appears hereafter.

would squash a witch” (p. 7) — the allusion to the events in the fantastical *The Wizard of Oz*; “A woman might bear a baby who was found to be a revenant god” (p. 7) — the allusion to the biblical story; “There was a cricket sitting on the car roof beside him, unafraid, not making its cricket noise, speaking English with an Italian accent” (p. 101) — the allusion to the children’s novel *The Adventures of Pinocchio*.

The development of information technology in the post-truth age contributes to a different form of communication: “The messages arriving via her Twitter feed were mostly pseudonymous. <...> All of them were on or over the edge of illiteracy” (p. 50). Rushdie raises the severe problem of time if there is no difference: “America no longer taught its lovers how to spell. Nor did it teach joined-up writing. Cursive script was becoming obsolete, like typewriters and carbon paper” (p. 51).

The issue of assimilation becomes hot for those who try to immerse themselves in a foreign culture, trying to forget their own roots or feel different. Dr. R. K. Smile, the protagonist of the novel, who chose the pseudonym Quichotte in honour of Cervantes’s famous character, flying in his own plane over the South of the States, feeling at such moments “like a true son of the South, which of course he was not. He had tried to read *Gone with the Wind* and to learn the words of ‘Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah’ <...> but fiction and music weren’t his thing” (p. 79).

**Racial discrimination in the context of post-truth.** Racism has existed since Plato’s times and remains an urgent problem in today’s post-truth conditions. The companion of Rushdie’s Quichotte is Sancho, his imaginary son. As Quichotte’s thoughts, memories, and knowledge miraculously became his son’s, he plunges into his father’s past and witnesses a biased attitude toward strangers: “He’s looking at racist words scrawled on the wall of his little study room, wogs go home” (p. 87).

Travelling across America, the characters encounter manifestations of blatant racism. One of the most striking episodes is when a father and son become victims of a woman’s racist remarks. The writer does not describe the woman in detail but remarks sarcastically: “She was wearing some strange type of choker around her neck. It looked almost like a collar you’d put on your dog” (p. 128). The character did not receive protection from law enforcement officials, from the people who were supposed to provide it unconditionally. One of the security guards, arriving at the scene of the characters’ quarrel, says: “We can’t guarantee your safety much longer and I’m not so sure we’re even inclined to do so” (p. 127).

Faced with racial discrimination for the first time, Sancho thought that the “white lady’s pointing finger had put the mark of Cain on them both, and now wherever they went there would be suspicion and hostility” (p. 141). The author uses the anthroponym Cain, a Biblical figure in the Book of Genesis, who was the elder brother of Abel. He is considered the originator of evil, violence, or greed. Sancho notices

sidelong glances: “We’re the kind of ghosts people want to bust” (p. 142). Rushdie mocks: “Where’s Bill Murray when you need him, that’s what they’re thinking” (p. 142). The author transparently hints at the movie *Ghostbusters*, in which the American actor William James Murray starred.

A gentleman of impressive proportions came to Quichotte and Sancho and began insulting and threatening them because he thinks that they are not Americans: “You’re lucky I don’t shoot you myself. <...> Get out of my country and go back to your broke bigoted America-hating desert shitholes. We’re gonna nuke you all” (p. 143). In *Beautiful Town*, they witness another attack: “a drunk man started shouting at the Indian men a good deal less cordially, calling them ‘fucking Iranians’, and ‘terrorists’” (p. 144), and later “the man returned with a gun and shot the two Indian men and also a white man who tried to intervene” (p. 144).

The author emphasises that a race issue does not lose its relevance: “He married Miss Salma R’s mother in a glamorous three-day wedding at the Taj Palace Hotel in Bombay (a daring, avant-garde affair, because Hindu-Muslim marriages were rare, then as now, even among the elite)” (p. 38). Each writer uses their own experience to depict certain events. Rushdie is no exception, since while living in Great Britain for a long time, he notices some bias of the British towards foreigners that is mentioned in the novel: “now in this England with its wild nostalgia for an imaginary golden age when all attitudes were Anglo-Saxon and all English skins were white — we [migrants] are made to feel unwelcome” (p. 55). To be among the assembled Lords, Sister becomes witness to a quarrel about “the bloody immigrant problem” (p. 62), and is frustrated “listening to this petty, bitter spat, beneath which there bubbled the poisonous, xenophobic bitches’ brew of the new England, Sister caught her husband’s amused eye and had to resist a powerful, a positively Ukrainian urge to cry out, ‘Disappointing!’” (p. 62).

Following adults, children also become ruthless and biased in the era of post-truth: “There are three crimes you can commit at an English boarding school. If you’re foreign, that’s one. Being clever is two. And being bad at sports, that’s three strikes, you’re out” (p. 87). The reluctance to reach an understanding breeds hatred on both sides. Rushdie does not look at racism on one side because it is easy to be accused of racism if you try to urge someone to abide by the law. Sister, a character in the novel who lives above the restaurant and tries to influence the owners to follow the established rules for doing business, goes to court but “when the lawsuit began, the restaurant owners accused her of racism” (p. 235). She has been fighting racism all her life, but she is accused of having racist views on social networks as “social media had no memory” (p. 235). In today’s media landscape, facts often go unverified, and a gang of enraged persecutors tarnish a woman’s name, losing interest in her soon after: “Overnight

the troll army vanished, and the culture without memory, which all culture had become, instantly forgot how it had slandered an innocent woman, and moved on" (p. 237).

Life teaches us that people's actions and characteristics do not depend on race, just like their professionalism and talent. Everyone has the right to take a chance and the right to self-realisation. The African-American Miss Salma R, Quichotte's beloved woman, becomes an influential media personality whose chat show has made her "Oprah 2.0": "Within three years was the most influential woman in America, with the exception, of course, of Oprah, who quickly anointed Miss Salma R as her only possible inheritor, and by doing so kept her firmly in second place" (p. 47). In addition to hosting a daytime talk show, her duty is to go through the mail since "it fell to her to comfort America's anguish, to calm its rages, to celebrate its loves" (p. 49).

#### **Gender inequality as the post-truth challenge.**

Gender is an inexhaustible source for the study of attitudes, sexist prejudices, discrimination, and the delineation of social roles and norms. As is the case with any prejudice, sexist biases gradually weaken and become a thing of the past, but the latent bias remains. When shaping a psychological portrait of gender groups, established gender stereotypes cannot be discounted: they are often an obstacle on the path to achieving true equality between men and women in society (Evans, 2017).

The writer raises the problem of gender inequality when stereotyped thinking leads to women veiling their gender using pseudonyms: "Brother believed (without daring to compare his poor talent to their genius) that Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell, George Eliot, and even J. K. Rowling (who preferred the gender-neutrality of J. K. to Jo) would have understood" (p. 26). Since childhood, boys and girls have persistently been made to think about their differences, which provoke society to realise this inequality. It was this attitude of the parents towards Sister and her Brother that shaped the female's attitude towards her male relative: "The feeling of coming second to her brother, who received privileges not offered to her" (p. 56). Du Champ's sister, referred to by the narrator as Sister, lives in England where she is an MP, having been the first non-white woman elected to the Parliament, and "she would be only the second woman to be so chosen" (p. 61). The problems she faced aspiring to a position were compared to climbing the highest mountain: "It was if she had ascended Everest alone and without oxygen" (p. 61).

The problem of gender inequality has been raised for a long time but in the age of post-truth, it still remains relevant. This is especially true of societies with a patriarchal structure: "Sexual violence against South Asian women was present wherever and whenever women tried to establish independent lives and expand the zone of their personal freedoms" (p. 256). Instead, Rushdie considers the basic idea of self-identification leaving the choice up to women. It is

these ideas that Sister expresses: "I'm not fucking fighting to defend women's right to wear the veil, the hijab, the niqab, whatever. <...> All these young women these days who describe the veil as a signifier of their identity" (p. 285). The point is that the choice should not be imposed: "I tell them they are suffering from what that presently unfashionable philosopher Karl Marx would have called false consciousness. In most of the world, the veil is not a free choice. Women are forced into invisibility by men" (p. 285). Since modern society is "obsessed with identity" (Trueman, 2020, p. 366), this status, without exaggeration, deprives women of their identity.

Dr. R. K. Smile helped religious organisations but noted that he "was not a deeply religious man himself" (p. 50). Quichotte's cousin says this about faith: "But don't tangle me up in any of that, *yaar*," he added. "I'm a pharmacist. I make pills" (p. 50). Rushdie uses italics for the exotic language unit *yaar* but without reliance on established syntagmatic or paradigmatic relations. Thus, understanding *yaar* as an informal Indian English term for a friend or lover is impossible in this context. Instead, people tend to form their opinions under the influence of the communication environment. When Dr. R. K. Smile lost his wealth and his enterprises lay in ruins, people of his origin claimed: "He was too greedy. He wanted to conquer the world. He told us this also, standing right in front of us, he confessed everything. But we were too stupid to see" (p. 69). He was not supported but rather accused: "This was the level of the man's audacity: he showed himself to us openly, but blinded us with his charm. So he rose high high. But he has fallen now" (p. 71). Rushdie uses the contact repetition of *high* to indicate the man's financial affairs. The sentence fragment is used to enhance content and captures the readers' attention as if falling out of rhythm. The writer uses this literary device to express and highlight the idea embedded in the sentence.

**In between.** It is difficult to address all the global issues that the world community is facing through a work of fiction. In addition to these issues, the pages alternately address topics that concern people in different parts of the world.

**Ageism.** One of the ethical challenges of a post-truth world is the issue of ageism as stereotyping discrimination. Rushdie tangentially touches on the problem of ageism when adults try to hide their age with various tricks offered by cosmetology. The author's sibling Brother's Sister who is "a stalwart fighter on behalf of minorities and the urban poor, who has devoted a good proportion of her time to pro bono work" (p. 55), makes the decision "to stop coloring her hair was made quite recently, and she has had to get used to the white-haired stranger in the mirror" (p. 55).

**Psychological suffering of children.** The issue of children, who suffer psychologically and whose parents are divorced also finds a place in the novel. After Brother's divorce with his Wife and her marrying a Chinese-American man, "son was angry with both

Brother and Ex-Wife and retreated from them both into his secret world” (p. 214). The reluctance of parents to understand their children leads to the alienation of the latter, to closely related people becoming strangers to one another: “And he [Son] didn’t want to come home or see his parents or be in touch with them” (p. 214).

*Language matters.* Rushdie touches on language matters supposing that language and land are strongly connected. The loss of language causes the loss of the memory of a nation’s past. He combines language matters with racism and expresses a clear idea: “I understand now why the racists want everyone to speak only English,” Sancho told Quichotte. “They don’t want these other words to have rights over the land” (p. 152). Rushdie spells the words supposing that forgotten words lose their magic: “These are the words of lost power. New words were poured over them to take away their magic” (p. 153).

**Conclusion.** The era of relative stability in the United States ended at the beginning of the twenty-first century: the acts of international terrorism that hit the US on 11 September 2001 have changed not only the usual appearance of New York City but also the nation’s sense of the world. This is the next chapter of American history (as well as culture and literature), the first pages of which are being written right now. The social and political upheavals of the new millennium have directly contributed to the (re)actualisation of a number of painful issues that continue to trouble American society.

The literary representation of the social and political dimensions of American society contributes to the understanding of the patterns and trends of its development, which is associated with the comprehension of the difficulties that determine the functioning of society. Rushdie’s *Quichotte* is an inexhaustible source of masterfully reinterpreted problems of our time. The identification and description of those socio-political triggers that determine the current agenda of the American post-truth society draw attention to the

most pressing issues and make us think about them. The reinterpretation of these problems in the literary and aesthetic dimension turns out to be a certain mechanism for responding to challenges.

The concept of post-truth, which penetrates fiction from public discourse to become a key means of explaining the author’s intentions and creating narratives of hyperreality, in *Quichotte*, appears as the prism through which all events, phenomena, and meanings are interpreted. Having become the main form of artistic vision, hyperreality appears in post-modern fiction to transform the contemporary literary landscape. The literary forms representing the post-truth narratives in Rushdie’s *Quichotte* expose the most pressing issues in the *Age of Anything-Can-Happen*.

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## СОЦІАЛЬНО-ПОЛІТИЧНІ ВИМІРИ АМЕРИКАНСЬКОГО СУСПІЛЬСТВА В НОВОМУ ТИСЯЧОЛІТТІ (НА МАТЕРІАЛІ РОМАНУ САЛМАНА РУШДІ «QUICHOTTE»)

Предметом дослідження в статті є художня інтерпретація суспільно-політичних проблем у романі Салмана Рушді «Quichotte» (2019). Цей твір — постмодерна реінтерпретація сервантесівської історії про премудрого гідальго з Ламанчі, що порушує низку актуальних питань, із якими стикається американське суспільство на початку XXI століття: від застосування наркотиків і мігрантів до екологічної кризи й кібершпигунства.

Мета статті полягає в ідентифікації та дескрипції тих соціально-політичних тригерів, які, з одного боку, визначають сьогоднішній «порядок денний» американського суспільства постправди, а з іншого — є своєрідними маркерами актуальності й першочерговості порушуваних питань. Експлікація стратегій художньої репрезентації таких проблем у художньому тексті виявляє їх взаємозв’язок зі світоглядними позиціями автора. Поєднання

методів герменевтичного, інтертекстуального, культурологічного, семантичного і лінгвостилістичного аналізу уможлиблює дослідження авторських інтенцій у художньому просторі з акцентом на потрактуванні найболючіших питань сьогодення. Художні форми репрезентації наративів постправди в романі Рушді покликані викрити актуальні проблеми нашого «часу, коли може трапитися будь-що». У статті розглянуто інтерпретацію таких проблем, як вплив продукції мас-медіа, расизм, гендерна нерівність, а також деяких питань мови, ейджизму і психологічного тиску на дітей.

У результаті дослідження зроблено висновок, що концепція постправди, яка проникає в художню літературу з публічного дискурсу, щоб стати ключовим засобом пояснення авторських намірів і створення наративів гіперреальності, у Кіхота постає як призма, крізь яку інтерпретуються всі події, явища та значення. Ставши основною формою художнього бачення, гіперреальність з'являється в постмодерній художній літературі, щоб трансформувати сучасний літературний ландшафт. Постправдове середовище допомагає Рушді побачити й детально проаналізувати найгостріші проблеми американського чи, загалом, світового суспільства. Вони проявляються на всіх рівнях і в діях героїв, і в ситуаціях, що з ними відбуваються, і в авторських коментарях.

*Ключові слова:* загострення; постмодерна гіперреальність; постправда; актуальні питання; проблемне суспільство.

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