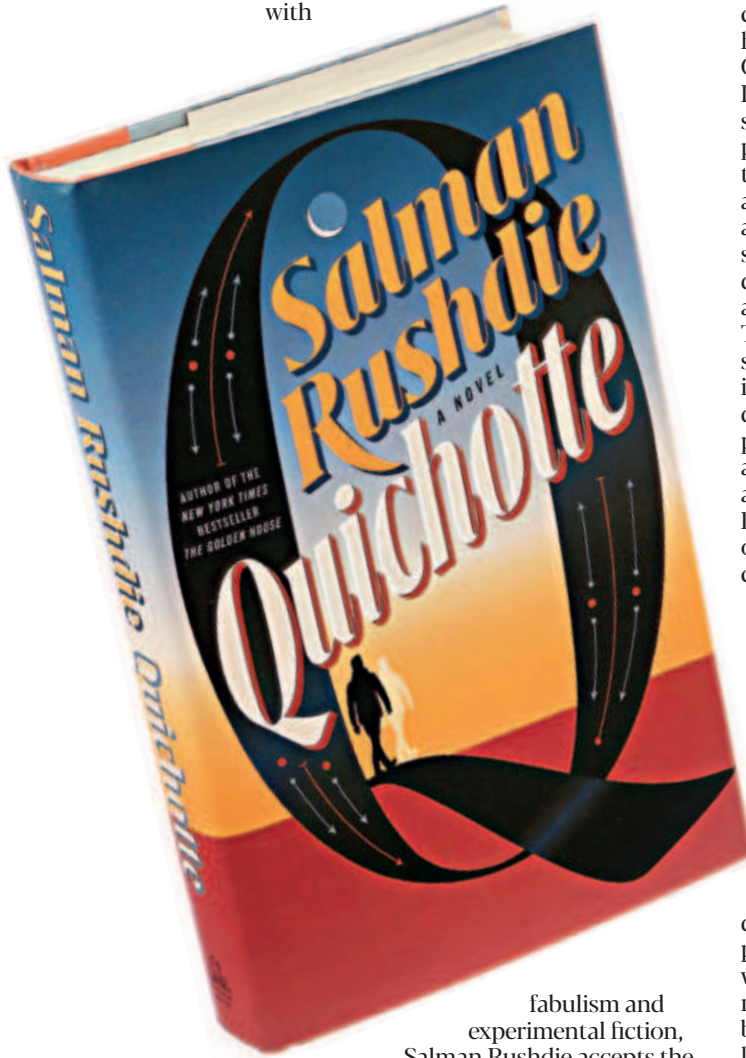


# Facts, Fabulism, and Fantasy: Salman Rushdie's *Quichotte*

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BY FARHAD B. IDRIS

Few authors would attempt a task as daunting as borrowing a seventeenth-century masterpiece *Don Quixote* from Spanish to English and setting it up on twenty-first-century United States. Given his dexterity with



fabulism and experimental fiction, Salman Rushdie accepts the

task with aplomb.

Like most Rushdie characters from Mumbai, the protagonist of Rushdie's *Quichotte* is an Indian immigrant in the US. His itinerant life in his newly adopted country has a reason: he works for a pharmaceutical business, which is a cover for pushing opioids. His ride, comparable to Cervantes's Don's rickety horse Rocinante (or Rozinante), is a Chevy Cruz of bygone years. His Sancho Panza—well, there is one in *Quichotte*, sort of—is his son who materializes in the passenger seat of the Cruz out of thin air to give his dad a reality check every now and then. For a fifteen-year old, he shows amazing wisdom. Rushdie's *Quichotte*'s self-begotten romance or his Dulcinea del Toboso, on the other hand, is Salma R, also of Indian origin and a hugely popular TV personality. Rich and unattainable, she is the woman *Quichotte* idolizes. This is where Rushdie makes a significant departure from Cervantes. Cervantes's psychotic knight adores and elevates an illiterate farm girl of La Mancha to a damsel of phenomenal beauty, lady Dulcinea; Rushdie's *Quichotte* has his eyes on the farthest removed in twenty-first-century United States.

Then, Rushdie's *Quichotte* is not an exact retelling of *Don Quixote*; his is based on the French opera set on Cervantes's work. While the French *Quichotte* authored by Jules Massinet is a loose recapping of its master work predecessor *Don Quixote*, Rushdie's toggles between both.

Cervantes's job in *Don Quixote* was a hard one: how to balance fantasy with fiction. His Don, who believes in wizards, knights, and only virtuous damsels (most of the time he meets only prostitutes), is consumed by fantasy while he inhabits a world that is always real. When the Don realizes that he has been fantasizing foolishly, he dies. No longer young, the Don's death is not all

that unexpected. The little possessions he had is already willed to his niece, his housekeeper, and his loyal squire Sancho. Rushdie comments on the Don's end, "The death of Don Quixote felt like the extinction in all of us of a special kind of beautiful foolishness, an innocent grandeur, a thing for which the world has no place, but which the world can call humanity" (281).

More poignant is the end of Massinet's *Quichotte*. He has been rejected by Dulcinea and dies on his way home, Sancho by his side. Sancho can't stop crying, but in a strange vision *Quichotte* sees Dulcinea beckoning him to the other world. Rushdie doesn't comment on this event in his *Quichotte*, but what he says about Cervantes's Don applies well to the ending of Massinet's work.

Rushdie's *Quichotte* finally meets his Salma R in an opioid transaction encounter; it turns out she too is an inveterate addict. *Quichotte* brings her to California from New York. His journeys both to and from New York is fraught with pain. On the way to New York, he, a seventy-year-old Indian with a permanent limp in his gait because of a stroke, is subjected to racist attacks. On a Labor Day at Lake Capote, he and his son are accosted by a "wide bodied young white lady in denim dungarees." She wants to know where *Quichotte* is hiding his turban and beard. When she wants to know what religion *Quichotte* and Sancho subscribe to, *Quichotte* gently replies, "It is my good fortune." This provokes someone from the gathering crowd to pipe, "he's a godless scum," but the irate lady claims *Quichotte* is most likely a member of ISIS. The ugly encounter ends peacefully when a security man asks *Quichotte* and Sancho to leave and they oblige.

Finally, *Quichotte* and Salma gain entry into CentCorp, a guarded place where a secret scientific project is near completion. Its goal is to send people to

another dimension and return them back alive though so far the science has failed to yield that result. CentCorp is the brainchild of Evel Cent who appeared in one of Salma R's TV shows and claimed he was able to bring back a dog from the other side of the portal. Now he admits there was no dog; he made it up. Undeterred, *Quichotte* invites Salma, "Come on" . . . "Let's go through." Presumably, they do.

What happens to them? Rushdie prefaces the event with two statements that offer an explanation: "WHAT VANISHES WHEN EVERYTHING [author's capitalization] vanishes: not only everything but the memory of everything" and "the book of how everything became nothing cannot be written, just as we cannot write the stories of our own deaths . . ." But in this retelling of the story of Cervantes's Don, the knight, does secure his love, his Dulcinea, though it is in a beyond that no one can imagine.

The point of view of Rushdie's *Quichotte* is that of an omniscient narrator, though this may not be the right way to describe someone who is unmistakably like the author and yes, supremely omniscient. However, it enables him to comment on issues such as the opioid crisis, racism, and many aspects of popular culture. There is another rub, though. *Quichotte* is in fact, an imagined character of Sam DuChamp, a failed author of espionage fiction, but Sam DuChamp is a pseudonym.

Fact and fantasy separate only by an infinitesimal hair's breadth in the work. But then strict adherence to realism is not Rushdie's purpose in *Quichotte*; one also realizes that the maze of dreams and inventions does not diminish the reader's interest in the gripping narrative. Indeed, *Quichotte* is a tale of imagination and dreams, testifying to Rushdie's deft craftsmanship.

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**"The death of Don Quixote felt like the extinction in all of us of a special kind of beautiful foolishness, an innocent grandeur, a thing for which the world has no place, but which the world can call humanity" (281).**

## For the Love of TEA

**"When I first entered this house as a daughter-in-law, I used to wake up with the beautiful, strong smell of tea. Your dadi had this huge aluminum kettle that she used to put on the stove with the appearance of the first light of dawn, and before anything else, tea was prepared for twenty people in the house."**

SANJEEDA HOSSAIN

My baby boy snatches my empty tea mug from me and starts licking it. He was given the last few drops of tea from the mug and now he wants more. He puts his hand inside the mug, gets the boiled tea dust into his fist, inserts them in his mouth and starts chewing furiously.

I like to have black tea in a big, steel mug. The smell drives him mad, and he dips his hands inside the lukewarm mug. I ask him to behave himself, and assure him that he will get his mild baby tea, but he needs to allow me some time to prepare it.

"Your son, I tell you, has become a tea addict at the age of two. Tea runs in his bloodline," my mother makes a passing comment as she walks by.

"When I first entered this house as a daughter-in-law, I used to wake up with the beautiful, strong smell of tea. Your dadi had this huge aluminum kettle that she used to put on the stove with the appearance of the first light of dawn, and before anything else, tea was prepared for twenty people in the house."

She sits beside me on the bed, and gets lost in her thoughts.

"I think I fell in love with that smell, not your father... in my house, apart from guests coming in, tea was rarely prepared."

"But everyone there drinks tea now," I said, surprised.

"Everyone got under the spell of the scent your father brought in. Whenever he visited his in-laws, he used to say, 'Just a sip of tea, I will have nothing else.'"

Yes, I remember. He made a gesture of holding an imaginary tea-cup in between his thumb and index finger, and by pretending to drag a sip from it, he used to demand a real cup of tea from anybody who was around him when he arrived at my nanabari.

No wonder my son also acquired the habit.

When his grandma wakes up in the morning, and he hears her moving around, he can barely keep his eyes shut. The aroma of tea fills the house as the two sit in front of their mugs, spoons and crackers. Together, they watch a morning musical show on TV, have a little tea and become serious about the music being played.

"It is also you, ma. You have accustomed him to start the day with tea."

"You learnt to drink tea from your grandparents as well," she smiles.

I remember *dadabhai* sitting on the balcony facing the mango tree. Tiny rays of sunshine used to appear through its leaves. His face used to glow under the rays. As soon as he came out from his bedroom in the morning, he had his cup of tea placed in front of him.

It was English tea poured in a silver-coloured mug and stirred by a silver spoon, served with two thin salted crackers on a saucer and a white handkerchief with my *dadi*'s floral embroidery on it, and a little jar full of sugar cubes. They were all in pristine form when put on his little round, wooden table.

One by one his grandchildren appeared to have a spoon of tea from his cup. Among them there was the one who was getting ready for school; one was crying aloud, not wanting to go to school; one just happily babbling and standing in front of him on wobbly legs, and one that just had learned to taste solid food.

My younger brother who was six months old, sat on my grandfather's lap, calmly gulping down the warm tea, enjoying his share of vitamin D provided by the sun.

All these children of the house made

a procession, standing in a neat, unbroken line to receive the holy water from the Grandfather. After receiving that refreshing draught, they did what seemed to be their daily mission – to scatter around the house.

I was the one planning to abort whatever mission was afoot. I sobbed and wailed, and bawled, and wept, holding the end of my mother's saree, demanding school to be brought home, and didn't stop until I was given an extra sugar cube on my palm.

As I reluctantly went off to get ready for school, I peeped through the room of my *boro chacha*, the eldest among my father's siblings, bending over his

a look on a page and could remember every word on it.

Her mother used to serve me fried egg, toast and tea every evening. Being aware of my love for tea, Sadia went to the market holding her mother's hand, and chose a special mug for me.

It was a mug that was red and yellow in color and had a matchstick woman drawn on it. The woman wore a mini skirt and tied her untamed, curly hair in a pony tail. And in blue, the mug had written on it: SEXY

"That woman has no resemblance to me dear, why have you bought it for me?" I asked her, amused.

"This is not you, Apu. This is just another woman. I loved the mug, and I love you. It is love brought for the loved one," she said with a straight face.

Someone else used to bring mugs of tea for me and called it, "love brought for the loved one." Her name was Isra, a friend of mine in Malaysia from Iraq. When I was studying at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur, I lived with her in a university hostel. Residential halls are called Kolej there; mine was Kolej 8.

We used to have our midnight tea sessions in Isra's room. There were six of us; everyone from a different country. Together, we had macha, the Japanese green tea, with cream and some unknown herbs. That drink had a disinhibiting effect on our minds, and brought out every thought we had locked up inside. We spoke to each other like madwomen. At times our babbling didn't even mean a thing, and sometimes, we laughed like we never in our lives ever had.

I feel a tug on my clothes, and find my son pulling me from behind. He points at his feeding bottle, and shouts out, "jinjah man!"

I finely chop a little piece of ginger and soak the ginger with lemon in his feeding bottle. I dip a green tea bag in it and mix in a few drops of honey; close the lid for a while, shake it hard and put it in his hands. I turn on The Ginger Bread Man on YouTube for him to watch, and I start to wonder if there is any connection between his lemon ginger tea and the story of The Ginger Bread Man.

As my son watches the cartoon, he giggles while having his baby tea, and shouts out "jinjah man!"

Every evening by seven o'clock, he has his tea in the same manner. I watch him and muse on his tea ritual as he opens the lid of the bottle and carefully brings out the sliced ginger and starts chewing. Happy and content.

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stacks of exam scripts. He used to have his ginger lemon tea by dipping *dhakai paneer* in it, and was sorely distracted by the children's clamour during his script checking.

This spectacle instilled in me a life-long desire to be a teacher. Apart from having cheese and tea together while marking piles of scripts, I don't really know how far I have ventured along the mission; nonetheless, the desire came to life as soon as I started giving tuition to children during my first year of college.

I was teaching English to Sadia, an adorable, little girl living upstairs with her parents.

And teaching her was a joy! She was very intelligent, sharp and had a photographic memory. She just had