

THE GROUND BENEATH HER FEET

Salman Rushdie

Analysis by Francesco De Sorbo

Fantasy Novel, Epic Novel, Biofiction

Salman Rushdie's novel *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999) depicts a series of earthquakes occurring across the globe. The narration of these events, which features both real and fictional tremors, is shaped through the author's 'earthquake imagery,' which intertwines mythological, scientific and political discourses to capture the complexity of contemporary disaster experience in a globalised world.

Year of Publication	1999
Publication Place	London / New York
Editor	Jonathan Cape / Henry Holt & Company
Entity	Jalisco Block

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Seismic zone Jalisco Block

REAL EVENT

Time	Unspecified
Location	Western Mexico (Jalisco) Mexico
Coordinates	20.879343, -103.835220
Seismic Fault	Plate boundary among the Cocos, Rivera and North American Plates
Typology	NW-SE-Trending Oblique-Slip Faults

"The JB is mainly influenced by the oblique subduction of the Rivera plate in the western part; likewise, it is delimited by two continental deformation zones. To the east is the Colima rift (CR), trending N-S [...], which is a tectonic structure with purely extensional deformation that has been considered by some as researchers as the eastern limit of the JB, whereas in the north is the Tepic-Zacoalco (TZR) rift, which runs NW-SE" (Zavala et al. 3).

NE-SW-Trending Oblique-Slip Faults

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Anthropization Level

Towns

"The state is divided into dozens of local governmental units called municipios (municipalities), each of which is headquartered in a prominent city, town, or village. More than four-fifths of the people live in urban areas" ("Jalisco")

Houses

"The state is divided into dozens of local governmental units called municipios (municipalities), each of which is headquartered in a prominent city, town, or village. More than four-fifths of the people live in urban areas" ("Jalisco")

Villages

"The state is divided into dozens of local governmental units called municipios (municipalities), each of which is headquartered in a prominent city, town, or village. More than four-fifths of the people live in urban areas" ("Jalisco")

Agriculture Areas

"The 35,019 ha site, between the foothills of the Tequila Volcano and the deep valley of the Rio Grande River, is part of an expansive landscape of blue agave, shaped by the culture of the plant used since the 16th century to produce tequila spirit and for at least 2,000 years to make fermented drinks and cloth" ("Agave Landscape")

Factories

"Within the landscape are working distilleries reflecting the growth in the international consumption of tequila in the 19th and 20th centuries" (Agave Landscape")

Earthquake 1989 Aparajitos quake

LITERARY EVENT

Time	Early Evening of February 14 1989
Location	Jalisco Mexico
Impacted Areas	The Town of Tequila and the surrounding areas
Emphasis Phase	Disaster (phenomenal and social dynamics), Pre-disaster (causes / context), Post-disaster (consequences)
Seismic Risk Ref.	Referenced
Seismic Fault	The Fault under the Town of tequila
Magnitude	"full nine on the Richter scale" (471)
Typology	Tectonic Earthquake Collapse Earthquake
Anthropization Level	Arenas Towns Country Houses Agriculture Areas Factories Houses Streets Facilities Dams
Ecological Impacts	Pollution Physical Landscape Changes Other Soil Changes Soil Degradation Tsunami

Social Impacts

Destruction Of Public Buildings Destruction Of Facilities Deaths Trauma

Destruction Of Dwellings Destruction Of Goods/Commodities

Resource Depletion Social Disruption Poverty Recovery

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	The Pilot
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	Acatlán
Nationality	Mexican
Reactions	Distrust In Authorities Calm Awareness Carelessness Recklessness

Name	Nissa Shetty (later Poe), A.k.a. 'vina Apsara'
Age	45
Gender	Female
Native Place	Chester, Virginia
Nationality	American
Reactions	Calm Distress Awareness Disregard

Name	Don Ángel Cruz
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Nationality	Mexican

Name	Maria
Gender	Female
Native Place	India
Nationality	Indian
Reactions	Fatalism Awareness Acceptance Wonder Curiosity
	Fascination Superstition Awe

Name	Ormus Cama
Age	50
Gender	Male
Native Place	Bombay
Nationality	Indian
Reactions	Fear Apprehension Distress Malaise Awareness Mitigation

Madness

Wonder

Anxiety

Name Umeed Merchant, A.k.a "rai"

Age 42

Gender Male

Native Place Bombay

Nationality Indin

Reactions Fatalism Awareness Rationality Acceptance Calm

Reactions

Name Umeed Merchant, A.k.a. 'rai'

Age 42

Gender Male

Native Place Bombay

Nationality Indian

Reactions Self-Absorption Astonishment Anxiety Neurosis Trauma
Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Despair Sadness

Name Nissa Shetty (later Poe), A.k.a. 'vina Apsara'

Age 45

Gender Female

Native Place Chester, Virginia

Nationality American

Reactions Fight For Survival Fatalism Malaise Resignation Despair
Prayer Escape

Name The Pilot

Gender Male

Native Place Acatlán

Nationality Mexican

Reactions Escape Anxiety

Name Ormus Cama

Age 50

Gender Male

Native Place Bombay

Nationality Indian

Reactions Self-Absorption Disorder Malaise Sadness Trauma

Scepticism

Doubt

Madness

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Affects/Reactions

Name	The population
Reactions	Fight For Survival Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Trauma Neurosis Despair
Name	Servants
Reactions	Escape
Name	Scientists
Reactions	Astonishment Wonder Curiosity Fascination Rationality Sharing Of Information

Group Attitudes

Name	Animals
Reactions	Distress Unease Malaise Madness

Seismic zone Intra-plate Faults near the City of Mumbai in Peninsular India

REAL EVENT

Time	Unspecified
Location	South Asia India
Coordinates	19.054005, -287.130604
Seismic Fault	Inter-Plate Faults in Peninsular India
Typology	NW-SE-Trending Oblique-Slip Faults

"here are also a few NW-SE faults cutting across the shoreline and extending into the land mass" (Kanth and Iyengar 1487); "A total of twenty-three major faults, which influence seismic hazard at Mumbai, can be identified" (Kanth and Iyengar 1487)

Anthropization Level	Megalopolis
	"The loss due to earthquakes can be higher in developing nations, as compared with developed nations, due to uncontrolled population growth, poor infrastructure, and a lack of mitigation and management policies. India is one of the most densely populated countries in the world; is diverse in terms of geographical, cultural, and economic factors; and is prone to multi-hazard scenario" (Agrawal et al. 1)

Public Buildings

"studies indicate that while the hazard is not very high, a large number of buildings are highly vulnerable and modern buildings do not always conform to the standards. These studies have found that such an earthquake will result in several tens of thousand casualties" (Sinha et al. 3)

Sea Coast

"the west coast fault zone running nearly N-S in the Koyna region" (Kanth and Iyengar 1487); the reality is that 'growth' in many coastal cities around the world now depends on ensuring that a blind eye is turned towards risk" (Ghosh ch. 11)

Earthquake 1971 Mumbai Earthquake

LITERARY EVENT

Time	The 14th of January 1971
Location	Maharashtra India
Impacted Areas	The City of Mumbai
Emphasis Phase	Pre-disaster (causes / context), Disaster (phenomenal and social dynamics), Post-disaster (consequences)
Seismic Risk Ref.	Referenced
Seismic Fault	The Indian Plate
Typology	Tectonic Earthquake
Anthropization Level	Houses Public Buildings Villas Huts Slums Tent Cities Facilities Streets Dams Offices Sea Coast
Ecological Impacts	Other Other
Social Impacts	Destruction Of Dwellings Destruction Of Public Buildings Destruction Of Facilities Deaths

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	Persis Kalamanja
Age	30
Gender	Female
Native Place	Mumbai
Nationality	Indian
Reactions	Anxiety Apprehension Discomfort Distress Fatalism

Reactions

Name	Umeed Merchant, A.k.a. 'rai'
Age	24

Gender	Male
Native Place	Mumbai
Nationality	Indian
Reactions	Order Self-Absorption Astonishment Scepticism Doubt

Name	Op-ed Columnist
Nationality	Indian
Reactions	Wonder Neurosis Anxiety

Name	Mr. Henri Hulot
Gender	Male
Native Place	France
Nationality	French

Name	Dolly Kalamanja
Gender	Female
Nationality	Indian
Reactions	Escape Intervention Solidarity Fear Paralysis

Name	Persis Kalamanja
Age	30
Gender	Female
Native Place	Mumbai
Nationality	Indian
Reactions	Sadness Despair

Name	Nissa Shetty (later Poe), A.k.a. 'vina Apsara'
Age	27
Gender	Female
Native Place	Chester, Virginia
Nationality	American
Reactions	Intervention Solidarity Sadness Anxiety Fear

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Affects/Reactions

Name	The population
Reactions	Cooperation Anxiety Trauma Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Group Attitudes

Name	The population
Reactions	Apprehension Unease Awareness
Name	Journalists
Reactions	Awareness Fatalism Distrust In Authorities
Name	Politicians
Reactions	Disregard Carelessness

LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Keywords	“Underworld” (Rushdie 6) “Hell” (6) “Earthquake” (10) “Orfeo E Euridice” (12) “Abyss” (17), “Terra Infirma” (244) “Instability” (487) “Doom” (421) “Photography” (13) “Music And Love” (438)
Metaphors	“the unforeseeable” (Rushdie 13) “hated metamorphosis” (13) “one of the great shaping forces of life” (16) “the earth’s pounding lullaby” (326) “scenes out of Bosch” (473)
Similes	“like a naughty child” (Rushdie 11) “cracks scurried like lizard [...] with their long creepy fingers” (13) “the ground simply opens and eats her, like a mouth” (472)
Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes	Hell Gods Hades Miracles Hyperdisaster Ideal Community Superstition The End Of The World Corrupted Civilisation Evil Violation Of Laws Of Nature War Colonisers Supernatural

THE REPRESENTATION OF EARTHQUAKES AND ‘GEOLOGICAL IMAGERY’ IN SALMAN RUSHDIE’S *THE GROUND BENEATH HER FEET*

1. INTRODUCTION

Salman Rushdie’s *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999) has been widely praised for its original blend of canonical postcolonial themes, such as displacement, identity and migration, with elements drawn from classical mythology, pop culture, and rock music. Conceived as a form of “biofiction,” the novel

chronicles the lives of two central protagonists, focusing on the love between the internationally acclaimed musical duo Ormus Cama and Vina Apsara. The narrative is told by a third main character, Indian photographer Umeed "Rai" Merchant, who follows Vina during her travels and becomes one of her lovers. The narrative opens on February 14th, 1989 (the day that changed Rushdie's life permanently due to the proclamation of the *fatwa*), with Vina's disappearance after a devastating earthquake in Mexico. In the aftermath of losing his great love, Rai sets out to reconstruct her life story alongside his own and that of his rival, Ormus, tracing their journey from childhood in Bombay through the duo's meteoric rise in the international music scene across the UK and the United States.

Despite frequent and unfavourable comparisons to the author's earlier works, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* exhibits several hallmarks of Rushdie's distinctive style. The novel displays remarkable intertextual richness, weaving together elements of both 'highbrow' culture and popular forms, while incorporating digressions, narrative intrusions, and commentary offered by both Rai as narrator and the multitude of characters he allows to speak. Like many other texts in the Indian-English literary tradition, the novel also stages the recurring encounter between 'East' and 'West'. Furthermore, it subtly rewrites twentieth-century history. If Elvis's twin, Jesse Parker, becomes America's "King of Rock", and J.F.K. is never assassinated in Dallas, the world of *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* is one in which Indian performers dominate global music stages. This alternate reality is made possible through the prophetic whispers of Ormus's deceased twin, Gayomart, who reveals future hits to his surviving brother.

The novel's tone oscillates between ironic detachment and serious philosophical reflection, exploring the nature of music and its intricate relationship with both love and death. This literary enterprise unfolds through Rushdie's rewriting of the myths of Orpheus and Eurydice, as well as that of Kama and Rati, with Ormus and Vina assuming these archetypal roles, respectively. Within this mythological framework, the representation of the devastating earthquake near Colima functions as the symbolic counterpart to the hostile earth of the Underworld, which swallows Vina/Eurydice.

However, Rushdie's depiction of geological entities and events extends beyond to mythical symbolism. Building on the concept of disasters as "ordering mechanisms" (Knowles and Loeb 11), we can state that *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*'s narratological structures and the novel's thematic exploration of love, loss, music, and transformation are strongly influenced by the theme of earthquake. The following section briefly clarifies Scott G. Knowles and Zachary Loeb's theoretical standpoints; section 3 examines the representation of the 1971 Mumbai earthquake; finally, section 4 discusses the 1989 Aparajitos earthquake.

2. EARTHQUAKE AS METHOD

From the perspective outlined in *Critical Disaster Studies* (2021), historians Knowles and Loeb challenge the tenets of the traditional conception of disasters. In their view, disasters constitute analytical 'conceits' *per se* and are, therefore, socially and politically constructed. In this light, disasters do not simply reveal the world as aberrant interruptions in the normal flow of social life, but rather reorder it, exposing hidden social relationships. This perspective fundamentally challenges the conventional wisdom that positions disasters as external shocks to otherwise stable systems. Instead, Knowles and Loeb argue that these events operate as integral components of social organization itself. In other words, the overall thesis is "that disasters operate as realms of sensemaking, conflict, memory, cultural practice, and imagination that define and bind societies over long stretches of time" (12).

This paradigm has profound implications for contemporary disaster analysis and represents an innovative epistemological shift. Where earlier approaches treated disasters as epiphenomena, and, consequently, as windows into other social processes like urban planning or political power, the approach proposed by *Critical Disaster Studies* recognises disasters as objects of study possessing their own complexity and causative power. Regarding literary analysis, this theoretical framework potentially offers a new perspective on how catastrophic events function within narrative structures. Rather than treating disasters in literature solely as plot devices or symbolic representations, this approach suggests examining how catastrophes operate as ordering mechanisms within textual

worlds, revealing characters' inner lives and relationships, exposing cultural tensions, generating new narrative possibilities, and bridging different temporal and spatial scales.

3. THE 1971 EARTHQUAKE IN MUMBAI

Mumbai's proximity to several active faults and its inadequate infrastructure make it vulnerable to seismic hazards. Therefore, the city represents an ideal setting for Rushdie's 1971 fictional earthquake. Rushdie strategically situates his depiction of the catastrophe both within a moment of political upheaval in India's history and at a crucial turning point in the plot, highlighting how seismic events fundamentally reshape both individual consciousness and collective identity.

3.1. *Seismic risks and hazards in the city of Mumbai*

Seismic hazards pose a major threat to the megalopolis of Mumbai due to its geographical location and the vulnerability of its socio-urban landscape. Mumbai is situated on a peninsula along the west coast of Maharashtra and is home to over 22 million inhabitants.

From a geological perspective, the city lies on the Indian Plate. Although intra-plate seismicity is less common at plate margins, Mumbai is affected by the influence of a total of "twenty-three faults" (Kanth and Iyengar 1487), which can cause severe damage even from minor tremors. The actual impact depends on several contingent factors, including the city's resilience, public awareness, and emergency response. As seismologists note, "while the hazard is not very high, a large number of buildings are highly vulnerable, and modern buildings do not always conform to standards" (Sinha et al. 3). As a result, the potential for casualties is enormous.

Such high risk is common in countries of the Global South, where vulnerability is shaped by socioeconomic conditions and historical factors. Not only do Countries like India have weak welfare systems and lack adequate infrastructure, but they also have also been shaped by imperialistic and neo-colonialist policies that have contributed to poor urban planning and limited attention to risk mitigation. In India, the situation is further complicated by the country's geographical and environmental diversity, which makes it "prone to [a] multi-hazard scenario" (Agrawal et al. 1). For instance, Mumbai is threatened not only by potential earthquakes but also by tsunamis and cyclones originating from the Arabian Sea. As writer Amitav Ghosh warns in his essay on climate change, *The Great Derangement* (2016), "the reality is that "growth" in many coastal cities around the world now depends on ensuring that a blind eye is turned towards risk" (ch. 11), as construction lobbies and development plans often put economic profits ahead of citizens' safety.

3.2. *The 1971 catastrophe as a narrative catalyst*

The fictional earthquake that strikes the city of Mumbai is the first geological event experienced by the characters of *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*. This event occurs at a pivotal moment in the narrative, marking Vina's return to India and her first intimate encounter with Rai. In the novel's fictional history, the major earthquake is preceded by minor tremors that alarm the population amid an atmosphere of public tension. The novel intentionally aligns the Mumbai earthquake with several significant national events, reimagined within the text's alternative historical reality. The first is the political ascent of Indira Gandhi, dubbed 'Mrs. Mover-and-Shaker' (Rushdie 203), whom journalists ironically associate with both the political and geological turmoil of the period.

Other key references are tied to the year in which the earthquake occurs. The quake manifests itself on the 'day of the kite festival' (Rushdie 216), typically held between January 14th and 15th, in 1971, a year that also marks the start of the Indo-Pakistani War and, in the novel's alternate reality, the renaming of Bombay to Mumbai. The earthquake is thus directly associated with broader shifts reshaping both individual lives and national identity.

Despite a general awareness of seismic hazards, Rai shows witty sarcasm towards the first signs of an impending disaster. In contrast, the ominous signals are taken seriously by the character of Persis Kalamanja, a beautiful young woman who – rejected by Ormus in favour of Vina – decides to remain chaste. In the chapter devoted to the quake, Persis is portrayed as a seer, sensing 'the ground beginning to shift' (215). To some extent, Persis's characterisation echoes medieval beliefs in heroines

gaining supernatural powers through preserved virginity, such as the Germanic Brynhild. Indeed, her personal story of loss and renunciation has helped her develop "some sort of sixth sense, some preternatural sensitivity to the treacheries of life" (217). At the same time, her sensory powers are also framed through references to the classical figure of "Cassandra" (215), emphasised by her anxiety and others' refusal to trust her perceptions.

Although Persis foresees that "Bombay was about to fall, like Troy" (215), her prophetic abilities are not confined to mythological frameworks. Rai, for instance, observes that "her mystical side, which lies beneath all our surfaces like a fault, began to manifest itself" (215). This comparison between her inner life and geological instability links her powers to the earth itself. By drawing this parallel between Persis's mystical aura and seismic fault lines, Rushdie frames her divinatory abilities using geological imagery, a recurring and distinctive feature throughout the novel.

Unlike Persis, who is overwhelmed by a sense of "doom" (215), Rai struggles to grasp the reality of the earthquake, even after it occurs. Indeed, he perceives the event a disorienting experience. As "the city [begins] to shake" (217), cracks open the façades and rooftops where families and children are celebrating the kite festival, killing "[a]n unspecified number of construction workers and kite fighters" (217), Rai struggles to process the events. His thoughts reflect his sense of displacement and uncertainty: "My first thought, when I felt the tremor, was that this was an impossibility, a piece of make-believe, a mistake, because we did not have earthquakes in Bombay" (217). His emotional state, initially marked by a mix of incredulity and denial, is reflected in his lexical choices in describing the earthquake in terms of 'wrongness' and 'impossibility'. Overall, the text emphasises this kind of cognitive dissonance produced by the earthquake. These conflicting and paradoxical aspects are reinforced by the picture taken by French photographer Mr. Henri Hulot, who "turned his camera perversely towards the sky" (218), shooting "the famous image "Earthquake 1971" in which the tearing mid-air explosion of a single kite tells us everything about the unsee mayhem below. The air becomes the metaphor for the earth" (219). In this light, both Rai and Hulot's reactions can be interpreted as acts of refusal to confront the event's aftermath. Eventually, Rai is forced to admit that although "it was not a bad earthquake, low on scale and of short duration" (217), there was a "widespread damage, because the city was unprepared" (217). The earthquake triggered a 'multi-hazard scenario', including "fires" (217) and floods, after drains under the roads and "[t]he sea wall Hornby Vellard broke" (217), flooding the city's beach and the upper-class districts, such as the racetrack and Club's golf course. Likewise, Mumbai's poorer quarters were also devastated, with a dozen or so residents "crushed beneath falling masonry" (217).

The impact of the earthquake on the local population was profound. After the disaster, survivors in Mumbai are left traumatized and increasingly anxious about the future. For them, "the earth had become an adversary, sly, malign" (218), a condition that led the population to turn a blind eye to "the worst excesses of the Emergency" (218). This collective trauma is exacerbated by the public press, as columnist in *The Times of India* "went so far as to wonder if the country might be literally breaking apart" (219). Implicitly, Rushdie constructs a double discourse in which the image of the earth breaking apart refers both to the geological danger and, more subtly, to the fear of authoritarian political shifts. This idea is reinforced through the suggestion that India might become "the new Atlantis" (219), Francis Bacon's imagined and early modern dystopian society.

Rai reflects that "the earthquake that gave us the shock that shook our confidence in who we were and how we had chosen to live" (218) had profound repercussions on the characters' inner lives. Persis, for instance, who is found by her mother "sobbing amid broken glass" (219) in her villa, realises that she still loves Ormus despite all the pain he has caused her. For Persis, then, the event of 1971 was an 'emotional earthquake' that "had shaken up feelings which she had tried to bury long before, and now they were pouring out of her, like water from a burst tank" (219). Conversely, Vina comes back to India after hearing the news about the tremors and realises to still have feelings for Ormus. She goes to Ormus's house, reduced to "a train wreck" (224), but finds Rai, instead, who realises he still loves her. Vina explains that the catastrophe made her realise "that she was still tied to Ormus [...] and the fear that he might be dead or injured had overridden all the uncertainties [...]. The earthquake hurled her on to a plane and brought her back to Bombay" (224).

In this light, characters are fundamentally transformed by the earthquake like tectonic plates. The tremor redefines their life trajectories as some characters drift apart while others are drawn into closer

proximity. Accordingly, this geological metaphor extends beyond a narrative device, illuminating the psychological and relational reconfigurations triggered by seismic upheaval. In other words, the earthquake imposes a new order on their life, reshaping the dynamics of their relationships. After the quake, Persis confronts the painful realisation that Ormus has definitively abandoned her and recognises that her friendship with Rai is no longer sustainable, as his resemblance to Ormus is too painful to bear. Vina returns to India in search of Ormus but instead encounters Rai. Ultimately, this meeting proves to be catalyst for Rai's development, as he resolves to wait for Vina even after their inevitable separation and continues to hope for a future together.

4. THE 1989 EARTHQUAKE OR "WHEN THE EARTH LEARNS TO ROCK 'N' ROLL"

The novel's most catastrophic seismic event takes place in the Mexican state of Jalisco, near the town of Tequila, where Vina meets her tragic fate on February 14, 1989. Unlike the Mumbai earthquake, which primarily catalyses personal transformation, the Mexican tremor serves as the narrative's climactic catastrophe. To fully grasp Rushdie's portrayal, it is crucial to examine the actual seismic conditions of the region underpinning his fictional disaster. Thus, the geological instability of Western Mexico provides the realistic foundation for the novel's structuring calamity, demonstrating how Rushdie foregrounds his post-modern narrative in actual conditions of geological hazards.

4.1. The Jalisco Block and the seismicity of western Mexico

The novel's second earthquake takes place near Tequila, a city in the Mexican state of Jalisco. Jalisco is divided into dozens of local governmental units called municipios (municipalities), each headquartered in a prominent city, town, or village. Over four-fifths of its population reside in urban areas ("Jalisco"). Tequila is best known for producing the renowned alcoholic beverage distilled from the blue agave plant since the 16th century, with numerous factories scattered throughout the region ("Agave Landscape").

Despite the scenic beauty of the Mexican landscape, the city of Tequila and the state of Jalisco lie within a highly seismic zone. This area is defined by the Jalisco Block, a tectonic structure that forms part of the North American Plat. The block is also affected by the subduction of the Cocos and Rivera Plates, a geodynamic process in which one tectonic plate converges with and slides beneath another, eventually sinking into the mantle (Bartolome et al. 3575). The region is bounded by two continental deformation zones: to the east lies the Colima Rift (CR), trending north-south and characterized by purely extensional deformation, considered by some researchers as the eastern boundary of the Jalisco Block; to the north lies the Tepic-Zacoalco Rift (TZR), which runs northwest-southeast (Zavala et al. 3). For these reasons, geologists consider this region to exhibit the "maximum level of expected seismicity" (Zobin and Plascencia 119), with potential "earthquakes of a magnitude greater than $M_w > 9.0$ " (Zavala et al. 3)

4.2. Anatomy of a post-modern disaster

The 1989 Aparajitos is described with extreme detail, not only by relying on figurative language which conveys its severity and its violence, but also thanks to the employment of technical languages. Near the novel's conclusion, a CNN talk show explains how earthquake strength is measured using "the logarithm of moment – known as the magnitude" (470) and states that the 1989 quake registered "a full nine on the Richter scale" (471). In this way, Rushdie's constructs his personal 'geological imagery' through the combination and overlapping of multiple discourses, ranging from scientific studies, politics, mythologemes and literary tropes, as well as by blending mimetic realism with fantastical and magical elements.

For these reasons, Rushdie's depiction of the earthquake takes on distinctly postmodern characteristics. Firstly, the 1989 tremor's account deliberately abandons linear sequencing, disrupting narrative continuity across both spatial and temporal dimensions. Rai recounts his story as a way of confronting the trauma of losing Vina in contemporary Mexico. Anchored in the present moment, the narration moves backward in time, retracing the decades from the late 1940s and shifting geographically across the globe. Simultaneously, within these temporal reversals, readers learn that the spectre of this catastrophe has long haunted the characters' earlier lives. After an accident while living in England, Ormus began experiencing supernatural encounters with an Indian woman named

Maria. Maria, a seer, prophesies the approaching "great cracks" (326) between the novel's dimensions and the reader's reality, threatening to destroy the characters' world. Despite Ormus's warnings, his friends dismiss them as superstition, remaining sceptical even as Maria's global earthquake predictions begin to manifest.

Another key postmodern element in the novel is the relativisation of truths and the fragmentation of our grasp on reality. *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* interrogates both the ontological and epistemological nature of the earthquakes it portrays. While Rai views the event as a conventional tectonic phenomenon, Ormus and Maria see it as the beginning of a cosmic collision between his reality and ours, literally described as "the world coming apart" (451). These competing interpretations of the earthquake's nature and cause are further complicated by interventions from the media, government, and activists. In the final chapter, "Dies Irae," conspiracy theories circulating among the narrative's population suggest that the military-industrial complex has developed subterranean technologies to control earthquakes, framing them as "new hegemonic geopolitics, the tool by which the superpower quake-makers intend to shake and break the emergent economies of the South" (554). On one hand, Rushdie juxtaposes pointed political criticism of Western interventions in the Middle East during the late 1980s with his seismic discourse, creating trenchant political allegory. On the other hand, his critique of how natural disasters are exploited by hegemonic power structures raises questions about the novel's earthquakes, which may be anthropogenic in origin.

4.2.1. Echoes from future hazards

Initially, Maria is presented as a woman desperately struggling to make love to Ormus, while he lies in a deep state of coma. After Vina awakens him with a kiss, Ormus detaches from the spirit of his deceased twin and gains the ability to communicate with Maria telepathically. This moment marks the start of Ormus's deep existential anxieties, as he engages in extensive conversations with Maria about the looming catastrophe.

According to Ormus, Maria has the "ghoulish [...] hobby" (326) of constantly discussing earthquakes. Her extracorporeal nature allows her to witness past and present earthquakes (Orléansville, Agadir, Messina, Kingston) and, like Persis, to predict future ones. However, unlike Persis, Maria's premonitions are characterised as different mystical powers, which, as her name suggests, are marked by a heavy reliance on apocalyptic and religious imagery. This is evident in the lexical choices that shape her 'geological consciousness'. She believes the rising number of earthquakes signals that "*the fabric of the earth has put itself in questions*" (326, emphasis in original), leading to the "*endgames of the self-contradictory earth*" (327, emphasis in original). This series of events has a moral cause, central to Maria's view of earthquakes: "*Underlying all earthquakes is the idea of Fault, she says. The earth has many faults, of course. Literally millions have been mapped et cetera. But human Faults cause earthquakes too. What is coming is a judgement*" (326, emphasis in original). Thus, the collision of the two worlds represents a moment of moral judgment, as the earth is a "*Terra Infirma*" (244, emphasis in original) not only due to tectonic movements but also because the planet is metaphorically diseased.

The blurring of religious dichotomies, (such as 'good' and 'evil', 'right' and 'wrong', 'grace' and 'sin'), is also evident in Maria's interpretation of geological history. She imagines a time when the lithosphere "*was originally intact but has been gradually deformed by the movements in the planet's slowly convecting interior [...] the earth's original sin, its First Fault*" (327, emphasis in original). This brief passage also entails one of Rushdie's subtle yet pointed critique of religious thinking as bigotry. Maria critiques earthquakes not for the "*high tragedies*" (326, emphasis in original) they cause, such as loss of life or destruction, but because they represent transformation, particularly that of the earth itself. According to her, this original "state of balance, of grace" (327) has been irretrievably lost, and all that remains is to await judgment: earthquakes will come to "*punish itself and its population for wrongness*" (327, emphasis in original). Yet it remains unclear what exactly the population, and more puzzlingly, the earth itself should be punished for. Maria's longing for the "*utopian golden age in which there were no quakes*" (327) stems from her disdain for "*conflicting versions*" (327). Similarly, the "*quality of irreconcilability*" (327) she attributes to geological faults reflects traits of the migrant and postmodern condition. Therefore, Maria conceptualises earthquakes as negative events not for their mortality or hazard, but because they are transformative events that can bring about an unexpected new order, both socially and geologically.

Maria's metaphysical exaggeration of seismic risk has tragic consequences for the already-troubled Ormus Cama. She instills in him a deep fear about "*the fragility of the fabric of our space and time*" (421, emphasis in original). Ormus becomes increasingly anxious, obsessively watching for signs of the foretold "great calamity" (471) and "the beginning of an unimaginable end" (471). However, his growing neurosis proves to be an ineffective form of mitigation. Rather than raising awareness among his friends, his behaviour alienates them. This is particularly true of Vina, who becomes exasperated by "Ormus's deepening obsessions" (438) and eventually finds emotional solace in Rai. Ormus descends into absurd planning, such as trying to convince the mayor to allocate a park for cows to graze in. He claims this would allow early warning of impending quakes: "we'll get an early warning." He adds that everyone should play music non-stop and organize daily love festivals in major cities, because "all we have to fall back on is harmony, all we have to protect us is the power of music and love" (438).

Nonetheless, Maria's geological beliefs also exert a positive influence, particularly on Ormus's creative process. When she speaks to him about plate tectonics and fault systems, she frequently employs auditory metaphors that draw a parallel between seismic activity and musical expression. For instance, she describes tremors as "*the earth beginning to sing, and rocking people's houses as if they were swinging cradles*" (326, emphasis in original), or refers to them as "*the earth's pounding lullaby*" (326, emphasis in original). These sound images create a striking contrast between the destructive force of earthquakes and the gentleness implied by terms such as 'sing', 'rocking', and 'lullaby'. This dissonance mirrors the thematic tension found in Ormus's music, which fuses chaos with harmony. When he and his band, VTO, release their double album *Doctor Love and the Whole Catastrophe*, Ormus concludes that:

music could be either about almost nothing, one tiny strand of sound plucked like a silver hair from the head of the Muse, or about everything there was, all of it, tutti tutti, life, marriage, otherworlds, earthquakes, uncertainties, warnings, rebukes, journeys, dreams, love, the whole ball of wax, the full nine yards, the whole catastrophe. The new album was a rich mosaic of all these: love songs and jeremiads, heart-stopping odes and visions of doom. (421)

This passage reveals how Ormus has internalized Maria's apocalyptic vision and transformed it into his artistic philosophy. The juxtaposition between music as something minimal ('one tiny strand of sound') and maximal ('the whole catastrophe') mirrors not only the tension between the earth's potential for both harmony and destruction but also the possible magnitude of an earthquake. Through his description of the album as encompassing both 'love songs and jeremiads, heart-stopping odes and visions of doom', Ormus demonstrates how his art has become a vehicle for processing the existential anxieties about geological and metaphysical catastrophe. In such a way, his attempt stresses his need to reconcile the contradictory forces that were revealed to him, as music become a channel to express his growing distress and find solace in artistic creation.

4.2.2. *The Lady Vanishes*

The anxious and ecstatic states of Ormus and Maria contrast the underestimation shown by characters who are in Tequila on St. Valentine's Day, such as Vina, Rai, and the capitalist Don Cruz. Vina tours the Central American countryside by helicopter, visiting Don Ángel Cruz's hacienda, with Rai following her in the hopes to convince her to come back together. Geological risk is not totally unknown in the area, since even Vina's "pilot had been informed of mild earth tremors in the region" (9) and noted that "the ground shakes" (9). Despite such warnings and the observed odd behaviour of "oracular birds" (10), Vina does not see reason to halt her tour, as she states that she survived a car accident during an earthquake in Oakland, 1984. Having survived a previous disaster, Vina demonstrates boldness but lacks genuine awareness of dangers, as indicated by her irritated tone when her "disaster-vet voice" (10) addresses Rai: "Don't you earthquake me [...] Don't try and Richter me [...] I been scaled before" (10).

A different attitude is exhibited by Don Cruz, who is frightened by the eventuality of more serious shaking. What worries Don Cruz, the entrepreneur and tequila exporter, is the "fragility of his fortune, liquid cradled in glass [...] Why should God give us such a gift only to take it away again?" (10). Eventually, his fear is mitigated by Vina's "Voice [...], dismissing the feared earthquake like a naughty child, sending it to stand in the corner, forbidding it to create any trouble for the excellent Don Ángel"

(11). While Vina's voice initially seems powerful enough to tame nature, Rai's attitude towards the possibility of controlling or predicting earthquakes is much more disenchanted and pragmatic. In his opinion, prophecies like those of Ormus are pointless: "Like all Cassandras, he was short on remedies. In the end such prophecy is useless. You just have to live your life, make your choices, move forward until you can't" (451). Yet this confidence is short-lived, as the earthquake ultimately strikes.

The 1989 tremor is recounted from Rai's perspective, and it begins after Vina finishes singing the closing lines of the Chorus "Trionfi Amore" from *Orfeo e Euridice* (1762) by Christoph Willibald Gluck. In contrast to the Italian excerpts from the Chorus—"... E quel sospetto / Che il cor tormenta / Al fin diventa / Felicità" (12)—the 'suspicion which afflicts' the characters' hearts does not 'become happiness', but rather ends in "catastrophe" (3). Rai is stunned that the quake begins precisely as Vina finishes singing, noting how "the earth began to shake just as she finished, applauding her performance" (12). To describe the earth's movements, Rushdie once again weaves together multiple registers to capture events that defy ordinary language, establishing a symbolical connection between music and seismic activity. For instance, the chaos inside Cruz's country house evokes the imagery found in Disney's *Fantasia* (1940), as the house furniture "commenced to jump and dance [...] animated by the little sorcerer's apprentice, that over-weaning mouse" (13). Moreover, the reference to magic applies both to the earth's power and to Vina's, as another metaphor suggests that the objects were moved "by the sheer power of her song to join in the closing *chaconne*" (13).

If the magical references to the power of song and Disney entertainment characterise the events perceived from a domestic setting, outside the house, the tone shifts to something darker and more ominous. This change in tone is first marked by the silence of the event, in contrast with the previous moment dominated by musical imagery. As Rai struggles "to remember the exact sequence of events" (13), he finds that his "memory has become a silent movie. There must have been noise [...] Pandemonium, city of devils and their torments, could scarcely have been noisier than that Mexican Town" (13). Indeed, the earthquake has ravaged the whole area, where "trees were flung into the air" (13), "sewage burst upwards from the streets" (13) "houses exploded" (13) and "cracks scurried like lizard along the walls of its building prying apart the walls of Don Angel's hacienda with their long creepy fingers" (13). Amid this chaos, Rai ascribes the muteness of his experience to "the silence of great horror. The silence, to more exact, of photography" (13), which mirrors:

the eternal silence of faces and bodies and animals and even nature itself, caught—yes—by my camera, but caught also in the grip of the fear of the unforeseeable and the anguish of loss, in the clutches of this hated "metamorphosis, the appalling silence of a way of life at the moment of its annihilation, its transformation into a golden past that could never wholly be rebuilt, because once you have been in an earthquake you know, even if you survive without a scratch, that like a stroke in the heart, it remains in the earth's breast, horribly potential, always promising to return, to hit you again, with an even more devastating force. (13)

Unlike music, visual arts establish a radically different relationship with catastrophe, through their silence. Rai's photographic perspective reveals how the camera freezes the 'appalling silence of a way of life at the moment of its annihilation', creating a stark contrast to the musical metaphors of earthquakes. Where Maria and Ormus hear the earth 'singing' and perceive seismic activity through auditory imagery, photography confronts the reader with the mute testimony of destruction. The 'eternal silence of faces and bodies and animals and even nature itself' suggests that the camera's power lies not so much in its ability to give voice to catastrophe, but in its capacity to preserve the speechless moment of transformation. This silence becomes more profound than any musical expression because it captures what cannot be articulated, the precise instant when a familiar world becomes irretrievably past. The photograph's stillness mirrors the paralysis of those caught in the earthquake's grip, while simultaneously offering the only form of testimony available to experiences that exceed language. In this way, Rai's visual documentation serves as a counterpoint to the novel's musical themes, and it is often employed for describing the social and ecological impact of the tremor. For instance, the town's destruction is compared to a "picture postcard torn up by an angry child and then reassembled by its mother" (17) or "scenes out of Bosch" (473).

In this sense, photographs serve as tangible bridges connecting viewers to the victims' lost lives. On the "whip[ped], snaking and cracking" (16) streets, Rai shoots pictures that capture "the deathly laughter of the unhoused, the bankrupted, the unemployed, the orphaned, the dead" (16).

Metaphorically, the disaster also becomes a voyeur, fixing its victims with "her mesmeric eye" (16) as they "begin to scoop and paw at the rubble of their days, trying to pluck the memory of the quotidian —a toy, a book, a garment, even a photograph—from the garbage heaps of the irretrievable, of their overwhelming loss" (16).

Like Mr. Hulot, Rai also shoots his masterpiece after an earthquake. This is the photo known as *The Lady Vanishes*, capturing the last moment when Vina was seen alive, after she leaves Rai to return to the villa and continue her tour:

In my last photograph of Vina the ground beneath her feet is cracked like crazy paving and there's liquid everywhere. She's standing on a slab of street that's tilting to the right; she's bending left to compensate. Her arms are spread wide, her hair's flying, the expression on her face is halfway between anger and fear. Behind her the world is out of focus. There is a sense of eruptions all around her lurching body: great releases of water, terror, fire, tequila, dust. This last Vina is calamity incarnate, a woman *in extremis*, who is also by chance one of the most famous women in the world. (467)

The rich detail of her captured posture, along with the singular focus on her body, contrasts sharply with the uncertainty surrounding her disappearance. While the destructions is 'out of focus' behind her figure that out-scale the disasters, nobody knows how events unfolded. The pilot, interviewed by international media on the spot, reported that he did not pay attention to her while they returned to the villa as he was preoccupied with his family. The servants, too, had fled the building after the first tremors. In this unseen moment of a diva's life, Rai envisions that "the ground simply opens and eats her, like a mouth" (472) in a "muddy embrace" (472), as "the earth closes over her body, bites, chews, swallows" (472). Her death is further compared to that of the Mexican landscape, consumed by broken-vat floods and tsunami tidal waves "eleven meters high" (472)., Her death becomes permanently integrated into the earth's geological record, a mythic sacrifice, wherein the diva merges with the transformative and destructive forces that have permeated the novel from its beginning.

4.2.3 After the quake or "After Vina"

After the great 1989, earthquake the novel's world changes, but it is unclear whether this change results from Vina's death or the catastrophe that ravaged Tequila. Seismologists marvel at the "monster quake" (470) that has given shape to "a gigantic new fault" (471). Even Maria comments that her predictions were wrong, and it is her reality (i.e. the reader's world) which is crumbling and not Ormus's. Vina's death, as she is swallowed by the earth, functions like an aftershock in the lives of people around the world who mourn her death. Indeed, Rai notes how, a year after the event, something like:

an earthquake is building within people, [...] Vina's adoring constituency has acquired a taste for collective action and radical change. Instability, the modern condition, no longer frightens them; it now feels like possibility. This is Vina's true legacy, not the acres of mawkish commentary or the bad-taste dolls (486-87).

'Instability' may be the keyword to understand Rushdie's novel. As Falconer (2017) has argued, in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, "human beings live precariously poised over calamity [...] When this underground force surfaces, our subjectivities are exploded or dissolved, cracked up or dragged down by existential Scyllae and Charybdis, or by earthquakes that combine centrifugal and centripetal energies" (17). The result of this process is that characters, much like the reader, are forced to come to terms with the disorientations that define human existence and are exposed by earthquakes. In this process, both Rai and Ormus exhibit similar behaviours in mourning their great love, as they decide to dedicate themselves to their art. In the end, Rai experiments with double-exposure and marries the singer Mira-Celano, a singer hired by Ormus to impersonate Vina in a comeback tour. Ormus is shot dead by an unknown woman uncannily resembling Vina, but not before releasing a song dedicated to his great love, entitled *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*. Its lyrics, set to music by U2, reappraises the several mythological references to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice spread throughout the narration. Ormus imagines Vina sinking into Virgil's "Underworld" (Rushdie 6), the ground that "stole" (475, emphasis in original) his love away, promising to "rescue her" (475, emphasis in original) and bring

her "back above, where there is only love, and the ground's beneath your feet" (475, emphasis in original).

5. CONCLUSIONS

Rushdie's representation of earthquakes in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* transcends the conventional literary use of natural disasters as mere plot devices or symbolic backdrops. Through his sophisticated deployment of 'geological imagery,' the author demonstrates how seismic events function as fundamental ordering mechanisms that restructure both narrative architecture and character consciousness. The novel's earthquakes operate simultaneously across multiple registers (mythological, scientific, political, and aesthetic) as both a centrifugal and centripetal forces, revealing the complexity of contemporary disaster experience in a globalised, postmodern world. From the transformative 1971 Mumbai tremor that reconfigures the protagonists' emotional geography, to the apocalyptic 1989 Mexican earthquake that swallows Vina—both literally and figuratively—into geological history, these seismic disruptions expose the precarious foundations upon which contemporary existence rests. Rushdie's geological metaphors thus shed light on a painful aspect of the human condition: instability does not represent an aberration, but rather constitutes the 'common ground' of all human experience.

In this regard, the novel's opening chapter provides a philosophical compass that orients the entire narrative trajectory. Through Rai's words, Rushdie articulates the aesthetic framework that governs his exploration:

Five mysteries hold the keys to the unseen: the act of love, and the birth of a baby, and the contemplation of great art, and being in the presence of death or disaster, and hearing the human voice lifted in songs. These are the occasions when the bolts of the universe fly open and we are given a glimpse of what is hidden: an eff of the ineffable. Glory bursts upon us in such hours: the dark glory of earthquakes, the slippery wonder of new life, the radiance of Vina's singing. (20)

In this light, the novel's narrative is configured as a daring exploration of the ineffable, approaching the unspeakable through both literary and philosophical inquiry. This investigation arises from the existential recognition that what lies 'beneath our feet' involves an ongoing possibility of transformation and loss.

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