

Of Stories and Men: Discursive Self-fashioning and the Confessional Narrative of Love and Self-hatred in Louis de Bernières' *A Partisan's Daughter*

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ABSTRACT

Louis de Bernières is known especially for his international bestseller Captain Corelli's Mandolin (1994) and the historical saga Birds Without Wings (2004). His most recent novel, A Partisan's Daughter (2008), represents a strikingly different kind of writing, much more subtle and intimate and therefore less ambitious in terms of its plot construction and thematic structure. Through the use of diverse narrative and stylistic techniques, particularly that of the male mock-testimonial, de Bernières manages to explore many of the thematic concerns of his previous works as well as several new ones.

KEYWORDS

Narration, male testimonial, mid-life crisis, identity self-fashioning, storytelling, personal and official history

Louis de Bernières is one of the most distinctive of contemporary British novelists. One of the many jobs he did before becoming a writer was teaching English in Colombia. His experience with this country and its culture and with South American literature in general, especially the magic realism of Gabriel García Márquez, significantly influenced his first three novels, sometimes known due to their settings and narrative style as his Latin American trilogy, *The War of Don Emmanuel's Nether Parts* (1990), *Señor Vivo and the Coca Lord* (1991) and *The Troublesome Offspring of Cardinal Guzman* (1992). In 1993 he was selected by *Granta* magazine as one of the "20 Best of Young British Novelists." De Bernières' breakthrough came a year later with his fourth book, the worldwide bestseller, *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* (1994), a novel centred on a love affair between the eponymous soldier and the daughter of a local doctor on the Greek island of Cephalonia during the Italian and German occupation of the Second World War. The novel was awarded the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book (de Bernières being the first British author to win the award), and has been translated into more than thirty languages. Nick Bentley ranks de Bernières, who "produced novels that engage with the complexities of our relationship with history," as one of the most significant novelists of the decade.¹ De Bernières' other internationally acclaimed novel, *Birds Without Wings* (2004), tells a tragic love story of two young people in a small fictional village in Turkey during the first two decades of the twentieth century. This work simultaneously provides a historical chronicle of the era, documenting religious intolerance during the period of the First World War along with the rise of Turkish nationalism through the person of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. The novel was shortlisted for the 2004 Whitbread Novel Award and the 2005 Commonwealth Writers Prize (Eurasia Region, Best Book).

De Bernières' most recent novel, *A Partisan's Daughter* (2008), in many respects represents breaks with the author's previous works: it is not set outside England but in London during the late 1970s, and also does not deal with a turbulent and eventful period

1 Nick Bentley, ed., *British Fiction of the 1990s* (London: Routledge, 2005), 2.

in the lives of its numerous fictitious as well as historical characters. It does not attempt in-depth historiographic exploration; it has neither a diverse cast of characters nor a complicated plot. Although it is not as ambitious as *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* and *Birds Without Wings*, *A Partisan's Daughter* does offer a complex narrative, both stylistically and thematically. It tells in essence a tragic chamber love story of two lonely and desperate people who accidentally encounter each other. Each of the pair seems to differ in all respects, such as nationality, cultural background, age and life experience. *A Partisan's Daughter* develops many of the themes explored in de Bernières' previous novels: the many varieties of love – here “a love affair thwarted by a misunderstanding”² – expression of emotional states through music, criticism of authoritarian political regimes, and the interconnection between official history and various personal stories. The latter functions by “taking peripheral episodes of European history and viewing them on a human scale, moulding political events to the shape of ordinary lives,”³ exploring definitions of good and bad, heroism and cowardice. This article attempts to show how de Bernières, through the use of confessional testimony and a lyrical interweaving of essential ontological and epistemological themes, builds up a narrative that transcends the scope of the novel's seemingly simple plotline and language.

An amazon and a bore

The particular dynamism and complexity of *A Partisan's Daughter* is achieved through the two parallel first person narratives of the story's main protagonists. The male perspective oscillates between honest confession and regretful retrospective recollection – Chris is an embittered middle-aged, middle-class man trapped in a loveless marriage who one day out of curiosity mixed with the need for human contact, tries to randomly pick up a prostitute in the street. The young woman, Roza, turns out to be an illegal Yugoslavian immigrant who is only pretending to be a streetwalker to kill time and avoid the boredom and loneliness of her shabby flat. As the more active of the two characters she immediately spots the chance to bring some amusement into the monotony of her life. She recognises Chris as harmless, jumps into his car, asks him to give her a ride home, and eventually invites him to come over whenever he can. Despite his initial embarrassment, Chris soon becomes fascinated by the mysterious girl who is his daughter's age, and starts seeing her as often as he can in order to listen to the stories of her life. Although the main narrative perspective is that of Chris, it is complemented by and confronted with Roza's, and the almost regular turn-taking of their narrations not only allows the author to maintain suspense by deferring the story's much expected revelations, but also to animate and dramatise the protagonists' intricate relationship. This is felt most intensely right in the middle of the book in Chapter 16, which consists of alternative contributions by Roza and Chris on the same subjects, written in the form of a play script. Here a substantial difference is that they do not respond to each other but provide generally diverging interpretations of what has taken place between them.

What the two narrations have in common is simple, straightforward language and style, practically devoid of any figurativeness and apparent ambiguities. Yet, as de Bernières repeatedly strives to demonstrate, this does not forestall misunderstanding between the speakers. Roza's psychological sixth sense tells her that his feelings of

isolation and futility make Chris a suitable audience for her life stories. She identifies him as “someone a bit like [her], who would have been better suited to more exciting times, and was whiling away an ordinary life in resignation.”⁴ However, their entirely different personalities and life experience mean that, even though they use a similar language, they are unable to bridge the gap between what they say and what they really wish to convey, and thus are doomed to misinterpret the other person's true intentions and motives. In terms of narrative dynamism, however, they complement each other perfectly – Chris's down-to-earth, pragmatic, sceptical, and self-pitying tone is in striking contrast to Roza's emotive, spirited, and hopeful “attitudes of an amazon”⁵ to life. The effect of this juxtaposition of contradictory characters only emphasises their position within the story's narrative framework. While Roza, despite all hardships and obstacles, lives her life to the fullest so as to retain her personality and identity: “It's true that I'm opinionated. I believe in good and evil, and I know which is which, and I know that sometimes you do evil to do good,”⁶ Chris seems to act according to social norms and conventions, as Roza notes after having just told him one of her deliberately shocking stories: “Chris often didn't comment about what I said, because he was worried about making the right impression.”⁷

Chris's resignation towards life due to his unhappy marriage has turned him into a kind of detached commentator on his own existence. He worries about how others see him: “I didn't like knowing that the youngsters thought I was boring, mostly because I suspected that it was true.”⁸ “People like things in theory,”⁹ Roza observes, and in fact she makes an affecting diagnosis, claiming that Chris's life is so theoretical and abstract that it cannot be lived but only endured. Thus it is understandable that Roza's exciting stories become his to be enjoyed vicariously. In this structurally uncomplicated novel de Bernières deliberately presents the points of view of two people who are lonely and who desperately long to speak and be listened to, which inevitably makes them unreliable in terms of what they present as a true account of the events in their narrations. This strategy adds a new dimension to the text by making it less transparent. “The thing is, if you want to seem to be interesting, you shouldn't be predictable,”¹⁰ Roza notes when explaining why she has been telling Chris made-up stories, and this is exactly what de Bernières achieves with his complementary but unreliable narrators.

The emptiness behind/in you

Chris's narration is largely derived from what has been termed confessional narrative, or rather its specific variant of “male testimonial,” a very popular form of fiction in British literature during the 1990s which can be found, for instance, in works such as Will Self's *Cock and Bull* (1992), Nick Hornby's *Fever Pitch* (1992), Blake Morrison's *And When Did You Last See Your Father?* (1993), Fergal Keane's *Letter to Daniel: Despatches from the Heart* (1996), Hanif Kureishi's *Intimacy* (1998) and Tony Parson's *Man and Boy* (1999).

4 Louis de Bernières, *A Partisan's Daughter* (London: Vintage Books, 2009), 15.

5 de Bernières, *A Partisan's Daughter*, 38.

6 de Bernières, *A Partisan's Daughter*, 47.

7 de Bernières, *A Partisan's Daughter*, 100.

8 de Bernières, *A Partisan's Daughter*, 26.

9 de Bernières, *A Partisan's Daughter*, 153.

10 de Bernières, *A Partisan's Daughter*, 30.

2 Toby Clements, “Louis de Bernières: Incest amid fratricides,” *The Telegraph* (15 March, 2008).

3 Stephanie Merritt, “When a dullard meets a temptress,” *The Guardian* (24 February, 2008).

It is a narrative form constructed as a confessional monologue, laying bare and exploring various “private forms of masculinity” and “assertions of autonomy in the face of competing commitments to others.”¹¹ The form thus attempts to achieve an intimate relationship with the reader, one that through its self-justifying tone continually entreats sympathy and understanding. This deliberately manipulative strategy represents the central conceit of the genre: making the reader feel sympathy for a person whose opinions and attitudes, especially those hostile and offensive towards women, are often discordant with society’s expectations and demands. Male testimonial is therefore seen by many as a manifestation of a contemporary “‘crisis of masculinity’ in a post-feminist era.”¹² Chris represents a typical man who feels lost in the new world of asserted femininity, nostalgically longing for the “good old” forms of traditional patriarchal masculinity, and thus in his dreams he turns Roza into an archetypal virgin-whore male fantasy figure: “Emasculated and exasperated by pushy, demanding Western women, the Roza prototype has its appeal, the perfect Stepford fantasy of the female unspoilt by the expectations of feminism.”¹³ Yet, *A Partisan’s Daughter* represents a playful modification of the narrowly defined genre – though it does employ confessional male narrative it simultaneously subverts it and points to its inconsistency and pretence through the often unflattering confrontations between Roza’s sensitive insights and precise disclosures of Chris’s true intentions.

In many respects, the narration from the male point of view in *A Partisan’s Daughter* bears a similarity to the self-reflexively mocking perspective of Kureishi’s *Intimacy*. Both Chris and Jay are going through what is commonly termed the male mid-life crisis. Emotionally and sexually frustrated in their long-term relationships, in both cases the narrators’ female partners are identified as the main cause of their despair and need for an alternative – preferably younger – sexual partner. Both men show misogyny in their depictions of their spouses almost as cruel monsters – heartless, unfeeling and indifferent to their needs and desires. In neither novel do the women have a chance to defend themselves in any way. Because of her plumpness, reserved attitude to sex and general apathy, Chris has nicknamed his wife the “Great White Loaf,” and he feels neglected and misunderstood in her company: “[T]he trouble is that sooner or later, at best, your wife turns into your sister. At worst she becomes your enemy, and sets herself up as the principal obstacle to your happiness.”¹⁴ He, much like Jay in *Intimacy*, also has the tendency to generalise on account of one particular negative experience, thus claiming victim status for his whole gender: “I don’t think that most women understand the nature of a man’s sexual drive.”¹⁵ Such a one-sided account, no matter how persuasive it might appear, can hardly be taken without reserve by an unbiased reader. There is, however, one more aspect the two books have in common: the authors at times treat their male protagonists with merciless irony by making them say things that are self-contradictory, immature or narrow-minded, and, in doing so, they lay bare their mouthpieces’ insecurities and anxieties in a way that substantially determines their characters.

In his early forties, Chris is going through a typical male mid-life crisis. He finds himself in a kind of existential limbo, suffocated in a loveless marriage, looking for his role in and sense of life: “[t]he thing about me and being forty is that I feel I’ve

got to offer something extra, because no one would be interested in me otherwise.”¹⁶ Chris feels too old-fashioned for the young: “I was about forty years old back then and I had no idea at all what the youngsters were listening to, or even talking about. It used to make me feel I was being left out and that I was already past it.”¹⁷ But he is yet not old enough to abandon an active pursuit of affection, pleasure and excitement: “I used to dream about having sex with Roza and sometimes I still do. Old men don’t become virtuous just because age pins them up against a wall and snarls contempt into their ears. Time [...] never stops you yearning.”¹⁸ Chris is mired in regret for having missed diverse, mostly sensual, life opportunities: “I just wish I’d been more of a rake when I was young. [...] I’ve wasted my life being sensible when I should have been cavorting and gallivanting. I haven’t had enough bliss.”¹⁹ Despite all his complaining and wishing for change, Chris never takes any active steps to improve his situation and just resignedly awaits further “blows of fate,” growing thus increasingly embittered and cynical, as when he is musing on what eventually happens to youthful dreams: “Well, the first thing is that you put your dreams on hold. And the second thing is that you then unintentionally give up your dreams entirely, and you while away your life until death comes to collect you, and then you get that last opportunity to look back and see nothing but emptiness behind you.”²⁰ Such a paradoxical and frustrated outlook inevitably results in illogical and self-contradictory statements, ideas and acts.

As is typical for the male testimonial narrative, de Bernières makes his narrator markedly, and sometimes even brutally, honest and straightforward in his monologues, which provides a necessary degree of authenticity and possibly also evokes some sympathy and understanding from the reader. However, this forced intimacy is soon felt as rather unpleasant as the seemingly sincere tone and diction of the narrator’s statements do not correspond with their content. Throughout his entire narration Chris repeatedly confesses that his primary motivation for seeing Roza is sexual. He finds Roza’s story of how she took money for sex immoral, yet excitingly seductive. Chris is willing to do anything to see her, including committing various acts of obsessive voyeurism of which he even feels somewhat proud. Although the main narrative perspective of the novel belongs to Chris, through the contradictory and pitiful nature of his statements he is portrayed as a far from sympathetic character. This can be seen in Chris’s contemplation on “ignorance”: at first he claims that “the general trouble with ignorance is always that the ignorant person has no idea that that’s what they are. You can be ignorant and stupid and go through your whole life without ever encountering any evidence against the hypothesis that you’re a genius.”²¹ The implication is that Chris is not like this, but a few lines later he admits how difficult it is for him to take prostitutes as human beings. The reader can easily deduce that it was Chris’s own ignorance and lack of empathy that harmed and eventually destroyed his relationship with Roza. Social and emotional competences can hardly be looked up in books like data about the former Yugoslavia, Freudian theories or Baudelaire’s poetry.

In fact, Chris is presented as an incorrigible solipsist, an unfortunate if not contemptible self-centred weakling whose speeches merely attempt to justify his mean

11 Ruvani Ranasinha, *Hanif Kureishi* (Devon: Northcote House, 2002), 102-3.

12 Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 171.

13 Sarah Vine, “*A Partisan’s Daughter* by Louis de Bernières,” *The Times* 7 March, 2008.

14 de Bernières, *A Partisan’s Daughter*, 2.

15 de Bernières, *A Partisan’s Daughter*, 3.

16 de Bernières, *A Partisan’s Daughter*, 100.

17 de Bernières, *A Partisan’s Daughter*, 20-21.

18 de Bernières, *A Partisan’s Daughter*, 19.

19 de Bernières, *A Partisan’s Daughter*, 146-7.

20 de Bernières, *A Partisan’s Daughter*, 246.

21 de Bernières, *A Partisan’s Daughter*, 60.

motives and better his overall image. On the one hand, he is shocked or even repelled by Roza's disturbing stories, yet, on the other hand, he always opportunistically finds something beneficial or promising about them, in other words, he always interprets them through the egotistic prism of his own needs and anxieties. For instance, despite Chris' disapproval of Roza's incestuous act with her father: "I also thought that it might have made her attracted to older men, and that might be to my advantage."²² When she tells him how a cat tried to suckle her breast he feels embarrassed but also ridiculously jealous: "I felt a mild sense of injustice because I had never been invited near her nipple."²³ When contemplating having befriended an ex-prostitute he foolishly feels proud of himself for being courageous: "It was like being friends with a cobra or a cougar. I admired myself for my daring."²⁴ When she tells him about her experience as a streetwalker he imagines how many men she must have been with. This, he finds both repellent and arousing, however "I thought it increased the chances that she'd sleep with me."²⁵ It is exactly this tension between the main narrator's sincerity and his contemptibility that evokes in the reader a growing sense of the story's tragic inevitability.

I like being what I like

A Partisan's Daughter recounts the accidental encounter of two complete strangers who for different reasons strive to impress each other. They vigorously present themselves as they wish to be seen rather than as who they really are, composing thus a (semi-)fictitious image of themselves. One of the novel's crucial themes is the process of discursive self-invention, the self-fashioning of identity through the telling of stories. Both Chris and Roza invent or re-construct their selves in order to fit into the social paradigm of their unconventional relationship. De Bernières aptly demonstrates the inherently ambivalent nature of these processes operating in a social reality, oscillating perpetually between the excitement of playful creativity and the pressure of insecurity and insufficiency, as well as frustration because of the impossibility of ever grasping the other person's otherness.

Joanne Finkelstein comments on how continuous self-fashioning is an inevitable strategy that fundamentally determines the mechanisms of all socialising processes. In the countless instances of social interaction with people we barely realise the various roles and identities we assume to best suit a particular situation and to make ourselves more appealing for others. Consequently, a prevailing majority of these identities are temporal and transient, formed on the spot through imaginative play-acting, the fictitiousness of which becomes itself a defining part of the strategy.

The possibility of continual self-invention introduces an element of self-conscious playfulness into all sociability. At that moment when we begin to interact with another, a series of calculated decisions are made. These calculations take place in another dimension of the social moment, a separate back area where we estimate the degrees of fictionality that the immediate situation can sustain.²⁶

22 de Bernières, *A Partisan's Daughter*, 56.

23 de Bernières, *A Partisan's Daughter*, 70.

24 de Bernières, *A Partisan's Daughter*, 78.

25 de Bernières, *A Partisan's Daughter*, 188.

26 Joanne Finkelstein, *The Art of Self-Invention* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2007), 13.

The essential principle of this social interaction rests in a mirroring effect, as others respond to our assumed identities and provide us with feedback which shows us how successful and efficient they are. "Some of the pleasures of the moment rest with seeing ourselves mirrored in the actions of others and by being flattered by them. There is a sense of authority and pleasure to be extracted from such moments and it is easy to conclude from these instances that personal identity is a conceit rather than deceit."²⁷ The essential unpredictability of this process makes it a slightly risky but potentially frustrating game, which, naturally, is not to everyone's taste. We fashion ourselves in many different ways, through what we wear, our behaviour and manners, our body-language and our identification with various cultural products. The most frequently employed processes in our invention of identity are, however, discursive ones – the stories we choose to tell about ourselves – and it is the limits of this verbal self-fashioning that de Bernières explores in his novel.

Roza is most prone to various forms of self-fashioning, a kind of "Balkan Scheherazade"²⁸ telling her stories as if in order to stay alive. De Bernières constructs her identity exclusively through what she chooses to say or not say. Her first appearance in the novel involves play-acting, first as a prostitute and then as a shy and embarrassed girl who nevertheless is daring enough to jump into a complete stranger's car and ask him to give her a lift home. As an illegal immigrant, far from her home country, her family and friends, Roza fences off her feelings of loneliness and isolation by communicating tales of her life to whoever is willing to listen. We learn that before Chris she has already practiced this on her neighbour: "I told him my stories so many times and from so many angles that I lost track of everything I'd said."²⁹ These narratives represent a chance for her to become who she wishes to be, and she gradually perfects them to such a degree that they inevitably substitute for her real life experiences. It is particularly through her stories that the novel becomes highly self-conscious. De Bernières comments indirectly on the very nature of imaginative writing, "that fiction can be like a certain kind of bad love affair, writer manipulating reader like girl manipulating boy, with delayed revelations and deferred gratification, the big tease."³⁰ As Christian House points out, "[i]t swiftly becomes apparent that Roza has a touch of the fabulist about her and that de Bernières is as interested in examining our need to tell tales, and the consequences of doing so, as he is in the nature of desire."³¹ In Roza's stories, the truth is no longer relevant and gives way to an exciting creation of identity. "You know, I like it, being the daughter of a partisan,"³² she tells Chris at the beginning of her storytelling, but it is already difficult to believe her, and particularly later as we learn that she goes to the local library to look up facts about the former Yugoslavia.

Although her storytelling is a manifestation of Roza's desperate longing for sympathetic company, she very much enjoys her new identity as a charismatic and convincing narrator who manipulates her audience through her imaginative tales and playful narrative strategies. As Chris notes, "[s]he was like the Ancient Mariner in that poem, who used to buttonhole people and not let them go until the tale was over, except

27 Finkelstein, *The Art of Self-Invention*, 68.

28 Joanna Briscoe, "Coffee with Roza," *The Guardian* (1 March, 2008).

29 de Bernières, *A Partisan's Daughter*, 17.

30 Hugo Barnacle, "A Partisan's Daughter by Louis de Bernières," *The Sunday Times* (9 March, 2008).

31 Christian House, "A Partisan's Daughter, by Louis de Bernières," *The Independent* (16 March, 2008).

32 de Bernières, *A Partisan's Daughter*, 39.

that in this case I never wanted to get away."³³ Roza soon discovers that Chris as a listener is gratified, thus she starts playing games by telling him all the sensational and shocking stories about her past – how she seduced her father, her lesbian experience, how she learnt to kill animals, how she worked in a hostess club, and how she was abducted and raped – thus teasing and tormenting him as well as testing how far she can go in her fantasies. That veracity is not the main criterion for her stories can be seen for instance in her description of how she supposedly bought a knife after her traumatic experience of abduction and rape. When asked by Chris whether she has ever used it, she considers both options: "I hesitated. I was very tempted to say yes. I mean, what fun it would be if I told Chris I was a murderer,"³⁴ eventually deciding to say that she did not, even though, as Chris/the reader learns later, in the version of the story she has told her neighbour she did use it to kill her abductor. Probably the closest Chris/the reader gets to Roza's real self is when she describes her friend Tasha, the kind of a person she would like to be herself: "Tasha was enchanting. She had a head full of dreams and fantasies that permitted her to be carried away by conquering heroes or to die of consumption in a nunnery. At one minute she was a princess, and then she was a Gypsy from Herzegovina, and then she was an Amazonian warrior, a millionairess, an actress."³⁵ Roza is a person deeply dissatisfied with her existence, someone who desires change, new opportunities and exciting adventures. She wishes her life would be at least half as interesting as her stories. "I wondered why people didn't get bored with me. I thought, 'One day I've got to stop talking and start living,'"³⁶ she says, admitting thus that what lies behind her stories is far more crucial for an understanding of her personality than their actual content.

Both protagonists become victims of self-fashioning, as they are intrigued by the fictional construct of the other. "Blinded by his fantasy of her exoticism, clueless as a schoolboy, Chris fails to notice her commonality, fails to consider that he might represent a fantasy to her."³⁷ Similarly, Roza fails to recognise the true motivation behind Chris's eagerness to listen to her stories. She believes that Chris is the kind of listener and person she has long been looking for – interested, patient, sympathetic – but, unfortunately for her, he is not a strong and balanced enough personality to provide her with what she really needs most. Although Chris strives to present himself as a victim of unfortunate life circumstances for whom Roza's stories represent a unique opportunity for escape, the reader can deduce from the occasional statements he makes about his past that it was far from terrible and that his permanent dissatisfaction is just another projection of his self-delusion, such as when he complains about his uneventful childhood: "I sometimes think that I know Roza's stories better than I know my own. My background was modest and sane, and there was plenty of love simmering away serenely under all the polite English restraint. [...] I've always been normal, sad to say. It didn't leave me with many stories. It was so normal that I didn't know whether to thank God or curse Him,"³⁸ or his education: "My teachers were all paedophiles, sadists and megalomaniacs [...] I had a wonderful education, though."³⁹ It is thus difficult to feel sorry for Chris, as he seems

solely responsible for the development of his life. His stories are boring, self-centred and self-pitying, a perfect parallel to his personality, and so he prefers listening to Roza's tales. Even though he often dislikes being teased by her, feeling "like the idiot in a spy book,"⁴⁰ he never asks her to stop. He is pleased that at least someone is taking notice of him: "I don't want you to stop, so I don't look shocked, even if I am. These days I feel like an old man. Nobody's interested in someone like me."⁴¹ Roza's key misconception thus concerns Chris's true motivation for listening to her. "[E]veryone's escaping from themselves. Everybody's on the run, and then one day you've stopped running, and that's when you're dead, and nobody ever gets to be where they wanted,"⁴² as Roza explains her view of life to Chris. She is unable to realise that he has long been dead in terms of what she hopes from him – no matter how enticingly original and fascinating is the identity she constructs, his obsessive self-regret will always destroy it.

The abstract and the involved

There is another characteristic feature of de Bernières' writing in *A Partisan's Daughter* that makes it more than a mere confessional narrative – the perpetual intertwining of private/personal and public/official histories. Although, unlike in his more ambitious novels like *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* and *Birds Without Wings*, great historical events do not play a crucial role in the story of *A Partisan's Daughter*, they are always made present, either directly or indirectly. The characters are shown to be caught in a tension between their most internal desires and larger historical circumstances. *A Partisan's Daughter* is built around a parallel duality between the two narrators and de Bernières also keeps to this parallel strategy in his exploration of this theme. The lives of both Roza and Chris are shown to be bound to the history of their countries and to world affairs, though in distinct ways and for different purposes.

The story unfolds during about half a year, from late December 1978 until late June or early July 1979. Through Chris's perspective the reader can follow a number of crucial political, social and cultural events that were occurring during this period both in Britain and abroad, from the Winter of Discontent to the Wimbledon tennis tournament. However, these events are not recounted merely to indicate when exactly the story is taking place, but largely to provide excuses for or explanations of Chris' feelings and moods. As is generally the case with his attempts to justify himself, these accounts are often inconsistent, misleading or utterly ridiculous. For example, when trying to explain what made him stop to pick up a prostitute he argues that during the Winter of Discontent "we all needed some prospect of consolation, even if you weren't married to a Great White Loaf."⁴³ Feeling insecure because he is just about to knock on Roza's door for the first time, he remembers hearing the news of the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia on his car radio. He also blames Ayatollah Khomeini's rejection of democracy in Iran and strikes for wage increases in Britain as reasons for his depressed mood, while in reality he is troubled by fits of jealousy over Roza's first boyfriend Alex. A woman murdered by the Yorkshire Ripper, though not a prostitute, reminds him of Roza in the hostess club and makes him think about what would have happened to her if she had stayed

33 de Bernières, *A Partisan's Daughter*, 22.

34 de Bernières, *A Partisan's Daughter*, 241.

35 de Bernières, *A Partisan's Daughter*, 114.

36 de Bernières, *A Partisan's Daughter*, 212.

37 Liesl Schillinger, "A Dishonest Woman," *The New York Times* (2 November, 2008).

38 de Bernières, *A Partisan's Daughter*, 56.

39 de Bernières, *A Partisan's Daughter*, 102.

40 de Bernières, *A Partisan's Daughter*, 101.

41 de Bernières, *A Partisan's Daughter*, 100.

42 de Bernières, *A Partisan's Daughter*, 191.

43 de Bernières, *A Partisan's Daughter*, 5.

there. When announcing Muhammad Ali's retirement to Roza and calling it "the end of an era,"⁴⁴ he is merely trying to drive away awkward feelings before she starts telling him about her experience in the hostess club. Even though Chris seems more interested in current world affairs, his interest turns out to be rather superficial, always forming a mere background for his personal history, always appropriated in order to add some meaning to his own life.

Roza is the exact opposite, ignoring much of outside reality and deliberately living in the world of her private history. As Chris notes, "[s]he didn't follow the news much. She was interested in politics in a rather abstract way."⁴⁵ Yet, unlike Chris, Roza does not pretend to be interested in all world affairs but only in those which can directly affect her life, and these she perceives and experiences with great emotional intensity, for example the last days of Tito, her beloved hero, or the death of John Wayne, whose films she used to watch to kill time in the hostess club. Having listened to her stories, the reader realises that once again Chris's judgement is mistaken, since it is he who is actually interested in the outside world in an abstract way, merely receiving news in a mediated form, stripped of much of its emotional content and thus made easier to process and consume. The spirited and sensitive Roza is not capable of such detachment; for her official history matters only as long as she can be emotionally involved in it, as long as it can be drawn directly to her own life experience. When she tells Chris that as a young girl, she found a dead tramp wearing a placard saying "Survivor of Jasenovac. Hero of the Resistance," she does not remember being horrified by the corpse but upset that such a heroic person was left to die like a beast: "[y]ou could be a hero and survive in hell, and get awarded the Partisan Star, and then still die like a rat, and it's just another day, and nothing's changed. Roza said that the episode gave her horrible feelings about the futility of life's struggles."⁴⁶ The two characters' approaches to official history reflect their different personalities, although in both cases these are interconnected with their personal histories. Roza's involved focus on her being in the world differs significantly from Chris's detached and indifferent position as observer and commentator on his own life. The fact that he responds to Roza's account of the dead tramp with a banal, made up story of how he himself found a dead person "under an archway in King's Cross,"⁴⁷ narrated moreover in a flat, news-presenting manner, only highlights the contrast.

There are different kinds of love

In *A Partisan's Daughter* de Bernières manages, in the briefest of spaces within and with only a few narrative devices, to build up an exceptionally strong story about basic human needs, desires and failures. By alternating monological narrations the novel achieves its effect through the perpetual confrontation of two worlds which, despite their physical proximity, are doomed to remain insurmountably distant in spiritual terms. Although some affection is achieved between Chris and Roza, it is of a very specific and fragile kind based on identities they have fashioned for each other in order to disguise and escape who they really are. The reader is thus presented with a human tragicomedy of misunderstandings and misconceptions between two ultimately unfortunate and lonely

people who, though for different reasons and by different means, place their hopes in each other for one more chance to start a new life. The fact that de Bernières makes his main male protagonist fully responsible for the story's unhappy ending and also fully aware of his responsibility gives the novel's resolution a mood completely unlike that of the traditional male confessional narrative.

Some critics and reviewers have compared *A Partisan's Daughter* with Ian McEwan's novella *On Chesil Beach* (2007),⁴⁸ as both are written as a retrospective lament over a missed opportunity, showing that one single moment can alter the course of one's entire life. This comparison, however, is not entirely apt, as McEwan's third-person, editorial omniscient narration achieves a completely different effect than de Bernières' combination of two first person narratives. Moreover, in *On Chesil Beach* the reader never really learns the female protagonist's side of the story. *A Partisan's Daughter* rather owes much to the male mid-life crisis mock-testimonial narrative of self-pity and self-justification such as can be found in Kureishi's *Intimacy*. This, in combination with the vivid and unconventional perspective of the young female refugee counterpart, enables the author to explore a rich variety of interconnected themes: alongside the subtle intimacy between the two marginalised characters there is the theme of storytelling, and consequently the theme of writing fiction and the relationship between invention and reality. By juxtaposing Chris's traditional English upbringing with Roza's background in a post-war Yugoslavia convulsed by political and ethnic conflicts, the novel also touches on the theme of cultural difference. As well as considering the culture clash between different European historical and cultural realities, the always intricate relationship between individual and official histories is also central. Last but not least, de Bernières playfully deals with the theme of the post-feminist nostalgia felt by unfortunate males who suddenly find themselves "cheated out of their chromosomal rights"⁴⁹ of exclusiveness and dominance.

Roza's tragedy rests in the fact that she hopes for love from someone incapable of any deep affection for anyone other than himself. Unlike her, the reader soon learns through his confessions that Chris has a deformed understanding of what being in love means, confusing it with various forms of fascination, obsession or lust: "How do you disentangle love from lust? At least lust is comprehensible. Perhaps love is the torment that dammed-up lust unleashes against you."⁵⁰ "If there's anyone who knows how to distinguish sexual obsession from love, they're a lot wiser than I am."⁵¹ And so, while Roza dreams about Chris as a perfect gentleman who will lift her out of her life and make her happy, "a little dream about a simple act of love,"⁵² he lay sweating in bed having wild sexual fantasies about the things he would like to do with her; while she believes that he is falling for her he is contemplating all the possible reasons why she could sleep with him. "There are different kinds of love,"⁵³ Roza says knowingly, yet, unfortunately for her, none of them fits into Chris's notion of what love is supposed to be. Her stories, no matter how fantastic and redeeming, prove to be futile towards performing a miracle, inciting love in someone who hates himself.

48 For instance Joanna Briscoe and Stephanie Merritt.

49 Sarah Vine, "A Partisan's Daughter by Louis de Bernières," *The Times* 7 March, 2008.

50 de Bernières, *A Partisan's Daughter*, 78.

51 de Bernières, *A Partisan's Daughter*, 148.

52 de Bernières, *A Partisan's Daughter*, 110.

53 de Bernières, *A Partisan's Daughter*, 170.

44 de Bernières, *A Partisan's Daughter*, 210.

45 de Bernières, *A Partisan's Daughter*, 172.

46 de Bernières, *A Partisan's Daughter*, 94.

47 de Bernières, *A Partisan's Daughter*, 94.

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