

Salman Rushdie set out to be an artist, not a symbol, but he quickly became both. The publication of *The Satanic Verses* in 1988 became an international incident—turning the novel into fuel for book burnings, riots, and political posturing, and transforming its author into an effigy hung in public squares, a target, an underground man, a blasphemer against Islam to some, and a martyr to the principle of freedom of expression to others. Even before this, however, his startlingly original second novel *Midnight's Children*, which appeared in 1981 and was awarded the Booker Prize, had led to his being widely discussed for nearly a decade as the harbinger of a new wave of writers from the margins.

One of Rushdie's first and most vocal defenders during *The Satanic Verses* controversy was Susan Sontag. In several of the speeches collected in *At the Same Time*, she makes observations about the nature and purposes of literature that help to explain why Rushdie's works immediately attracted so much attention. "Each work of literature that matters, that deserves the name of literature," she said in an acceptance speech for the Jerusalem Prize, "incarnates an idea of singularity, of the singular voice. But literature, which is an accumulation, incarnates an ideal of plurality, of multiplicity, of promiscuity" (149). Writers' imperative, Sontag added, is to "free us up, shake us up. Open avenues of compassion and new interests" (154). The role of literature, she argued, is "to extend our sympathies; to educate the heart and mind; to create inwardness; to secure and deepen the awareness (with all its consequences) that other people, people different from us, really do exist" (177). The combination of Rushdie's singular voice with a style and vision that grew out of and reflected the plurality and multiplicity of his experience is exactly what captured readers of his first novels and has continued to define all he has written since. From the beginning, he has shaken us up, while seeking to expand the sympathies and educate the hearts and minds of his readers in both the East and the West.

Throughout the 1980s, he also wrote essays, eloquently and often, in which he used his growing celebrity to do this by talking about his work as prompted and shaped by the migration and cultural hybridity that he views as the archetypal experiences of the twentieth century. “It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt,” he says in the title essay of his nonfiction collection *Imaginary Homelands* (*IH*). He goes on to add that perhaps “we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost . . . we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind” (10). Several of Rushdie’s novels—*Midnight’s Children*, *Shame*, *The Satanic Verses*, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, *Shalimar the Clown*—conjure other such imaginary homelands, from India and Pakistan to London, Bombay, Manhattan, and Kashmir. “It is the natural condition of exile,” he writes in his debut novel, *Grimus*, “putting down roots in memories” (107). His novels, like those of James Joyce, Günter Grass, or Milan Kundera, are all rooted in memories of cultures and places concrete and imagined, cherished and abandoned, mythologized and mourned, and capture the essence of reality as seen through the eyes of characters who, like their author, face the challenge of straddling two (or more) worlds.

“How does newness come into the world? How is it born?” Rushdie asks in *The Satanic Verses*. “Of what fusions, translations, conjoining is it made?” (8). He addresses these same questions in his essays. The word “translation,” he notes, comes from the Latin for “bearing across,” and “having been borne across the world, we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something gets lost in the translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained.” The migrant, he writes, “is not simply transformed by his act; he also transforms his new world. Migrants may become mutants, but it is out of such hybridization that newness can emerge” (*IH* 17, 210).

Rushdie's aspirations as an artist were inspired by a wide range of writers and works. One of the most important inspirations as he attempted to understand and convey the experience of migration in his fiction was Günter Grass, and he makes several observations in his essay on Grass that help to explain his own work's concerns, perspectives, and techniques. He writes,

A full migrant suffers, traditionally, a triple disruption: he loses his place, he enters an alien language, and he finds himself surrounded by beings whose social behaviour and codes are very unlike, and sometimes even offensive to, his own. And this is what makes migrants such important figures: because roots, language and social norms have been three of the most important parts of the definition of what it is to be a human being. The migrant, denied all three, is obliged to find new ways of describing himself, new ways of being human. (*IH* 277–78)

He then elaborates, explaining what migrants learn from such disruption of reality:

Reality is an artefact, that it does not exist until it is made, and that, like any other artefact, it can be made well or badly, and that it can also, of course, be unmade. What Grass learned on his journey across the frontiers of history was Doubt. Now he distrusts all those who claim to possess absolute forms of knowledge; he suspects all total explanations, all systems of thought which purport to be complete. Amongst the world's great writers, he is quintessentially the artist of uncertainty, whose symbol might easily have been the question mark if it were not the Snail. (280)

Like Grass's, all of Rushdie's work has been written in opposition to those whose claims to righteousness and absolute truth are used to justify their oppression, intolerance, and silencing of anyone who disagrees with them, an opposition that is most often expressed through his emphasis on the importance of hybridity to a culture. While

Midnight's Children is not about migration—it builds its fiction on, under, and around the actual (and, at times, fractured and imagined) history of India—its perspective and style are profoundly shaped by the fact that Rushdie wrote it as an émigré, from a distance, and migration has explicitly been a subject and provided the context for all of his novels since. Beginning with *Grimus*, in fact, he has sought to speak for all migrants, those who, like him, “have been torn from their place, their language, and their social norms, and forced to reshape and root themselves in a strange and estranging new world” (Rodgers 2225). The multiple names and uncertain parentage Rushdie frequently gives his major characters reinforce the fluidity of identity, while the novels’ recurring theme of a traumatic fall speaks to the migrant’s dislocation and alienation. Personal memory, subjective and malleable, acts as the cornerstone of storytelling in his fiction, such that the products are inevitably “flawed, unreliable, skewed by the obsessions and blind spots of their tellers” (Rodgers 2225). Thus, even though the narratives may feature actual persons, places, or occurrences, they exceed the bounds of realism.

Rushdie once told an interviewer that when he decided to call his collection of short stories *East, West* he felt that the comma was the most important part of the title because “it seems to me that I am that comma—or at least I live in that comma” (“Homeless” 163). Set down between East and West, now looking one way and now the other, always linked to both but never wholly a part of either, a small figure in the middle of larger forces, again and again he has written such “East, West” tales. Grass has his snail; the symbol Rushdie chooses for himself is that comma. To express the multiplicity of his experience living “in that comma” and remain faithful to his worldview, Rushdie had to invent his own language and literary form. As a result, his books are a fascinating, exuberant, and extravagant melding of genres, religions, histories, languages, and cultures, bringing together disparate concepts from realism and fantasy, humanism and fundamentalism, major world mythologies and theologies, Eastern and Western media, developed

and developing nations, the legacies of empire and struggles of newly acquired independence. India's thoughts in *Shalimar the Clown* echo many of his own: "Everywhere was now a part of everywhere else. Russia, America, London, Kashmir. Our lives, our stories, flowed into one another's, were no longer our own, individual, discrete. This unsettled people. There were collisions and explosions" (47).

To relate the multicultural experience authentically, Rushdie relies on what he terms "stereoscopic vision," a perspective that enables the simultaneous examination of two societies from within and outside. Another émigré, the Polish American Nobel Prize-winner Czesław Miłosz, makes a similar point in his *Native Realm* when he speaks of a new organ: "the telescopic eye, that perceives simultaneously not only different points on the globe but also different moments in time . . . New images canceled out none of the old and, strictly speaking, I do not see them in chronological order as if on a strip of film, but in parallel, colliding with one another, overlapping" (2-3). Memory is "our force," Miłosz later explained in his *Nobel Lecture*, and the poet's role must be to see and to describe: "'To see' means not only to have before one's eyes. It may also mean to preserve in memory. 'To see and to describe' may also mean to reconstruct in imagination" (21-22).

Rushdie's stereoscopic or telescopic vision, his own effort to reconstruct in imagination, is buttressed by his "aesthetic of excess," his signature technique of heaping "episode on episode, character on character, plot on plot, pun on pun, comic name on comic name, digression on digression." It is also marked by erudition without pretension, allowing him to blend the narrative energy of *The Arabian Nights*, the playfulness of *Tristram Shandy*, and the political and psychological ambition of *The Tin Drum* into the formal space needed to treat the myriad subjects demanding to be written (Rodgers 2225).

In her introduction to the Everyman's Library edition of *Midnight's Children*, fellow novelist Anita Desai offers the best description I have read of just what this formal space reads and sounds like. Rushdie "turned his back on the Victorian/Indian tradition," she observes,

“delightedly and insouciantly jumbling genres and employing post-modern techniques such as discontinuous narrative, cinematic images and metaphors, mirror games and linguistic blasphemies” (ix). This was linked by critics to the school of magic realism in Europe and Latin America; however, Desai remarks, “he had journeyed so far west that he had returned, curiously enough, to the older Indian traditions of story-telling . . . and proved the oral tradition not only alive but capable of versatility and invention” (ix). The “subversions” of his startlingly polyglot, hodgepodge language, she writes,

belong more to the spoken mode, and in particular to gossip—highly subjective, the ever-present narrator commenting, judging, persuading, digressing and repeating—so that the narrative proceeds in a disjointed fashion, an episode or anecdote presented at a time, and with constant changes introduced of pace and tone, now comic, now ribald, now moralistic, now informative. . . . Yet the language itself belongs to the contemporary world—of comics and cartoons, newspapers and tabloids, of advertisements and posters, with capitals, exclamations, imprecations and the use of onomatopoeia. Babble, or Bombay-speak—that uncouth “chutney” made up of English, Hindi, Urdu, Konkani, Marathi, Gujarati and various dialects thereof—allows Rushdie to revel in interlingual puns. . . . (xviii–xix)

This blending of language Desai calls “a cacophony” that “defies nationality and the carving up of the world’s geography into separate and sealed areas.” She then goes on to parse his disruption of grammar and punctuation:

Some passages are dense with punctuation marks—hyphens, dashes, ellipses, colons, semicolons and parentheses—so that they resemble teeming ant-hills (or crowded Bombay streets), and in other passages punctuation is altogether jettisoned, words and sentences running together with multiple force . . . as if the author can barely contain the creative energy

and its momentum. . . . While some of his sentences are as formal and correct as any grammarian could wish, in others he chooses to apply the rules of Indian grammar. . . . (xix)

Desai concludes that this “eclectic style belongs to a world that does not know purity of race or tongue” (xix).

These linguistic pyrotechnics are used in the service of his cross-cultural vision. Rushdie grew up in Bombay, which he has described as a place “in which the West was totally mixed up with the East.” His family spoke Hindustani, “a colloquial mixture of Hindi and Urdu [that] isn’t written,” and “some mixture of Hindustani and English is what [they] spoke at home” (“The Art of Fiction” 110, 119). At Cambridge, he both studied Western literature and majored in Islamic history. Unsurprisingly, then, he has acknowledged a host of artistic touchstones from the literature of both East and West. In addition to those already mentioned, they include the Ramayana, Farid ud-Din Attâr’s *The Conference of Birds*, Jorge Luis Borges, Giovanni Boccaccio, Jonathan Swift, François Rabelais, Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol, Italo Calvino, Charles Dickens, Joseph Conrad, Franz Kafka, James Joyce, Eugène Ionesco, G. V. Desani, Gabriel García Márquez, Saul Bellow, Milan Kundera, Vladimir Nabokov, Philip Roth, and Ted Hughes. His connections to any of them are fascinating to consider, as several of the essays in this volume demonstrate. Here, however, I want to look briefly at an example of the cross-cultural multivalence of one of his most famous images—Saleem Sinai’s nose in *Midnight’s Children*—which is representative of the literary method and layered perspective that characterize each of his works.

Above all, Saleem’s nose serves as a comic device, linking him to the likes of Pinocchio, Gogol, Sterne, and Cyrano de Bergerac, as well as Ganesh, the elephant-headed Hindu god of literature. Such associations offer subtle implications about Saleem’s character, namely, that he lies, may be insane, digresses frequently, and is unlucky in love. Like Ganesh, who, according to myth, belongs to both the gods Shiva

and Parvati, Saleem's parentage is equally uncertain. Furthering the Ganesh connection is Rushdie's choice of naming other major characters Shiva and Parvati. This physical feature therefore simultaneously provides comic relief, alludes to the literary and religious traditions being combined in the narrative, and works as plot element. Such multifunctional, multidimensional elements are common throughout Rushdie's work. A reader need not recognize all of these reverberations, however, nor be familiar with both Eastern and Western traditions, to enjoy such images or feel at least some of their effects. This makes Rushdie's novels both multilayered and accessible, enjoyable to an audience that may not be aware of all of his intentions and references as well as to those readers who are.

Nonetheless, his writing is ambitious and can be demanding. In his essay on Günter Grass, Rushdie acknowledges another important influence that the elder writer had on his work and, in the process, helps to explain the impulses behind *Midnight's Children* and all of the books that have followed it. "A book is a kind of passport," he says, which gives readers who want to write "permission to become the sort of writers they have it in themselves to be" (IH 276). *The Tin Drum* was such a passport for him when he first read it in the summer of 1967:

This is what Grass's great novel said to me in its drumbeats: Go for broke. Always try to do too much. Dispense with safety nets. Take a deep breath before you begin talking. Aim for the stars. Keep grinning. Be bloody-minded. Argue with the world. And never forget that writing is as close as we get to keeping a hold on the thousand and one things—childhood, certainties, cities, doubts, dreams, instants, phrases, parents, loves—that go on slipping, like sand, through our fingers. I have tried to learn the lessons of the midget drummer. And one more, which I got from that other, immense work, *Dog Years*: When you've done it once, start all over again and do it better. (IH 277)

Rushdie learned all of these lessons well, and used them to become the writer he had it in himself to be in *Midnight's Children*.

When he set out to “do it better” in *The Satanic Verses*—to go for broke, be bloody-minded, argue with the world—a large part of the world argued back with a violence and hatred he could not have imagined beforehand. He certainly did not expect his novel to be welcomed in places like Pakistan and Iran. After all, he had put many of the words he would hear as the controversy grew into the voice of the people of his imaginary Pakistan in *Shame*. “*Outsider! Trespasser! You have no right to this subject!*” he imagined them saying. “*Poacher! Pirate! We reject your authority. We know you, with your foreign language wrapped around you like a flag: speaking about us in your forked tongue, what do you tell but lies*” (23; italics in orig.). Nonetheless, it is one thing to expect vehement criticism, quite another to envision a *fatwā* (legal ruling), death threats, and a price on his head. He also seems not to have imagined that many Muslim migrants in Britain were not like him. Many of them had no intention of leaving their language, customs, culture, and religion behind simply because they had crossed the water; they did not think the Prophet was a fit subject for imaginative reinvention; and they had no desire to embrace the newness Rushdie valorized.

His shell-shocked comments as the furor grew make it clear that he thought he was speaking *for* these migrants, defending them against Thatcherite Britain as well as the oppressions of fundamentalist demagogues, and sympathetically exploring their existential condition. By contrast, they saw him as mocking and blaspheming *against* them and all they considered sacred. They were not interested in explanations of his authorial intentions. In fact, most of the people who rioted, threatened him and his publishers and translators, and burned his book in Britain and around the world had not *read* it. To read the book was considered a desecration, so it and its author were condemned by entire populations on the basis of politically and religiously based descriptions of it.

The novel and its author deserved and still deserve better. The story begins with its two heroes, both Indian actors, falling to earth on New Year's Day after terrorists blow up the plane in which they were traveling to London. When they miraculously land on the British coast alive, Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha are reborn, transfigured. As the story shifts from East to West and back and from the present day of Margaret Thatcher to the seventh century of Muhammad, the irreligious Gibreel experiences a crisis of faith and sanity, while the anglophile Chamcha experiences a crisis of cultural self-identity. In Gibreel's psychotic visions, he alternately plays the part of the archangel giving the Recitation to Muhammad (here given the pejorative name Mahound) and Salman, Mahound's scribe. Chamcha, meanwhile, loses all that is familiar and comforting—home, loved ones, sense of self—yet ultimately gains protection from those he reviled, taps into his rage against the racism he endures, reconciles with his father, and embraces a new sense of self. A variety of subplots interweave throughout the whole, maintaining a whirlwind pace for over five hundred pages. As critic Robert Irwin said, *The Satanic Verses* is “several of the best novels that [Rushdie] has written” (1067).

Depictions of the prophet Muhammad are forbidden in Islam, and Muslims consider the Recitation (Qur'an) to be holy. Tradition holds that, in the early days of Islam, Muhammad was briefly persuaded by the devil to acknowledge three goddesses as intercessors to or daughters of Allah, the one male god of Islam, to ameliorate relations with the local people. In this account, Muhammad was later set right by the archangel Gabriel, who informed him that Satan had tricked him. The incident, known as the Satanic Verses episode, was accepted in Muslim scholarship for a time but has become contentious over time. Thus, when Rushdie decided to feature the episode in his novel, he knew the faithful would not take kindly to it. Not only does Rushdie's version show the Prophet as fallible, but it calls him by a medieval Christian epithet and adds a character (named after the author no less) who intentionally distorts the Recitation, thereby calling the very legitimacy

of the Qur'an into question. Adding insult to injury, the women of a fictional brothel in the novel adopt the names of Muhammad's wives as a business strategy. For all his disclaiming after the fact about fictional representation, Gibreel's psychosis, his own lack of faith, Rushdie's defenses were not taken seriously because surely he must have known what an insult these scenes would be to faithful Muslims. Moreover, the novel's subplot about a tyrannical imam, a thinly veiled reference to the ayatollah's rule in Iran, undoubtedly contributed to Khomeini's ire.

Despite the offense it has caused, *The Satanic Verses* ought to be examined according to its original intent: to explore "the deepest religious and personal conflicts within its author and many others," to "capture the sense of rootlessness and alienation that comes with displacement and migration," and to "encompass the extremes of contemporary experience in a form that would allow the freest possible range to its author's talent and imagination" (Rodgers 2227). It is also, ironically, a "dispute between different ideas of the text," as Rushdie told an interviewer, "between the sacred and profane ideas of what a book is. The book whose legitimization comes simply as an act of the imagination—and these other books that are supposed to be handed down from another place. . . . [an] argument about the status of the work of the imagination as opposed to so-called revealed texts" ("Salman Rushdie" 115). This argument described in a work of fiction created very real collisions and explosions in the world far beyond it.

When he was once again able to find enough concentration to write fiction, Rushdie created a fable, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, which is both an extraordinary children's story and a pointed allegory of his own situation that treats the suppression of the imagination and its consequences. Six years after the fatwā, he published his first full-length post-*Satanic Verses* novel, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, which critics have found to be one of his strongest and most important books. Like *Midnight's Children*, a multigenerational saga engages the politics of contemporary India. Three of the novels that followed—*The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, *The Enchantress of Florence*, and *Luka and the Fire*

of Life—garnered mixed reviews and have so far not elicited much critical commentary. One of the later novels, *Fury*—which is based in New York City, where Rushdie resettled at the beginning of the millennium—received the worst reviews of his career; another, *Shalimar the Clown*, was widely praised. This volume offers fuller commentary on them all.

“Description is a political act,” Rushdie asserts in one of his essays, and from the start, his work has been controversial because it has been both idiosyncratic and deeply engaged with the realities of the world he comes from and of the world to which he migrated (*IH* 13). He has engaged both parts of his experience in thought-provoking essays gathered in two valuable collections, but he has focused his efforts as an artist on representing that experience imaginatively in his fiction. In a single sentence (“Once upon a time—*it was and it was not so*, as the old stories used to say, *it happened and it never did*—maybe, then, or maybe not”), Rushdie succinctly illustrates the parallel between the Eastern storytelling tradition and Western magic realism, two major sources of inspiration for his own genre-defying stories (*Satanic Verses* 35). Seeking to convey the turbulence of his times through his art, Rushdie became its hostage. More than twenty years after his life turned upside down, however, he has been neither silenced nor cowed.

In a commencement address at Williams College in 1984, Joseph Brodsky, yet another Nobel Prize-winning émigré to America who knew firsthand the price of speaking truth to power, declared that “the surest defense against Evil is extreme individualism, originality of thinking, whimsicality, even—if you will—eccentricity” (Brodsky 385). Like Brodsky, Sontag, and Miłosz, Salman Rushdie clearly believes that there is evil in our world and that the artist can help us to recognize and defend ourselves against it. Like them, he has seen his work as nothing less than a confrontation with and conversation about our times. Not everything he has written has had the far-reaching significance of *Midnight’s Children* or *The Satanic Verses*, but the voice and vision of all of his novels have surely been individual, original,

entertaining, at times whimsical, and even eccentric. They have also been important contributions to the art and language of the novel, to cross-cultural understanding, to the emergence of postcolonial writing, and to the essential effort to understand the fundamental—and fundamentalist—conflicts that pervade contemporary culture in both the East and the West.

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