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Edited by Abdulrazak Gurnah

Excerpt

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I

ABDULRAZAK GURNAH

Introduction

‘The past is home albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time.’¹ Salman Rushdie wrote that in 1982, in the early period of his new fame as the author of *Midnight’s Children*, which had won the Booker Prize in 1981. The elegiac tone is striking. Many years before the *fatwa* threatened to make Rushdie’s exile from India a permanent one, and at a time when he was ‘enjoying the unique pleasure of having written . . . a book that people liked’,² he laments the loss of the city his novel celebrates. Clearly the present life, London and fame, have not displaced the memory of India and Bombay as a constitution of ‘home’. Rushdie here describes a sense of being absent from his most intense reality that will be familiar to his migrant readers. The ‘lost city in the mists of lost time’ is Bombay in the 1950s, which is the period when Rushdie grew up, and which is the period of childhood in *Midnight’s Children*. It is to this time and this city that Rushdie locates the best of India’s possibilities, a time when Nehru’s vision of a tolerant and plural India seemed achievable, and in a city which in some ways appeared to have made its own way towards that vision.

Salman Rushdie was born in Bombay in 1947, the year of India’s partition and independence. He was born in June, some weeks before the date of India’s independence (15 August), but the family joke was that the young Salman’s appearance was the true cause of the departure of the British. This linking of the birth of a child and the birth of a nation provided ‘the germ of a novel, *Midnight’s Children*’.³ In the meantime, he had plenty of other things to do before he got to write that novel. He attended Cathedral School in Bombay, an English Mission School, just like his narrator Saleem would do in the novel (‘In my nearlyninth year I had begun to attend the Cathedral and John Connon Boys’ High School’⁴). He was at the school until 1961, when he was sent to Rugby School, a famous boarding school in England. The period from 1947 until 1961, when Rushdie was thirteen, is the only continuous time of any length that Rushdie lived in Bombay, and is the period that figures most profoundly in the ‘somewhat Proustian’⁵ dimension

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of *Midnight's Children*, the part of it that is to do with retrieving the memory of a lost time. Rushdie was at Rugby from 1961 to 1965, a period rapidly passed over in the description of Saladin Chamcha's arrival in England in *The Satanic Verses*: 'Five years later he was back home again after leaving school, waiting until the English university term began.'⁶ This sentence describing Saladin's return to Bombay is preceded by his first arrival in London, with the disappointment he felt after so much anticipation, and by the excruciating kipper-eating scene on his first outing at breakfast in Rugby. This scene succinctly acts as a metaphor for Saladin's simultaneous alienation from England and his perverse determination to be English, a precarious balancing act which is comically explored in the novel and which provides one of the narrative strands in the novel's migrant theme. But Rushdie himself did not return to Bombay after Rugby, because in the meantime his family had migrated to Karachi in Pakistan, and now Bombay was forever the lost city of childhood.

Rushdie studied History at King's College, Cambridge, graduating in 1968. While at Cambridge he studied Islamic history, and it was during this period that he first came across the story of the satanic verses which was later to be the source of the novel.⁷ He also acted in the Cambridge Footlights review, something he was later to do professionally for a brief while, soon after his return from Pakistan. After graduation, Rushdie went to Karachi where his family now lived but only stayed for a few months, disenchanted by the crude and heavy censorship in the work he did with Pakistani TV during this period, and perhaps, as he makes Saleem Sinai say, because it was not Bombay. In any case, he was in London before the end of the year, working as an actor with Oval House productions and doing work in television, advertising and publishing. It was during this period that he started writing. For the next ten years, until the publication of *Midnight's Children*, he worked as a copywriter for an advertising agency, and he sums up his writing career until this point as follows: 'Before *Midnight's Children*, I had had one novel rejected, abandoned two others, and published one, *Grimus*, which, to put it mildly, bombed.'⁸

Most of Rushdie's readers and critics have also taken this view of his first novel and have mostly ignored it. Ib Johansen, in Chapter 6 in this volume, is one of the few who has written about the novel, and he shows here the sources and developments of its ideas. *Grimus* is also interesting, Catherine Cundy shows, for the way it points to Rushdie's later concerns:

Viewed from the standpoint of *The Satanic Verses*, *Grimus* allows us to see areas of debate which are subsequently handled with greater depth and maturity in Rushdie's later work – ideas of personal and national identity, the

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legacy of colonialism, the problems of exile and even the first signs of a tendency to demonise female sexuality.⁹

At the core of *Grimus* is a quest for knowledge or faith, or in another sense, the individual's need for meaning. These are central ideas in *The Satanic Verses* and, to some extent, in *Midnight's Children*. In *Grimus*, the narrative is dominated by its intertexts, Dante's *The Divine Comedy* and Farid Ud-Din Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*, from which it derives its title.¹⁰ Perhaps it is the reliance on the ideas of its sources which makes *Grimus* seem stiff-jointed and abstract in style compared to the later Rushdie texts whose historical and cultural locations are explicit.

Compared to what was to follow, *Grimus* was a failure. Rushdie started work on *Midnight's Children* in the same year as *Grimus*'s publication, although it is very likely that some of the material from one of the earlier, abandoned novels found its way into it. *Midnight's Children* was published by Jonathan Cape in 1981 to huge acclaim in the United Kingdom, in North America, in India and elsewhere. It won the Booker Prize that year, the first time the prize was televised, turning it into the huge public event it has since become. It made Rushdie famous, and in the years that followed, ensured his frequent presence in the book pages of national newspapers: as novelist, reviewer and commentator on current events. Rushdie scholars and critics return to the novel repeatedly (as is evident in this collection of essays), and few quibbled when it was chosen in 1993 as the best novel to have won the Booker Prize in the Prize's first twenty-five years. Much has been written about the novel: its narrative inventiveness, its huge ambition, its intertexts, which more recently have been shown to be filmic as well as textual. Vijay Mishra in Chapter 2 of this *Companion* shows the significance of Indian popular cinema in reading Rushdie, and especially *Midnight's Children*.

In 1983 Rushdie published *Shame*, about which the novel's narrator, at times unmistakably the novelist himself, has this to say: 'I tell myself this will be a novel of leavetaking, my last words on the East from which, many years ago, I began to come loose.'¹¹ It turned out to be a mistaken prediction, of course, but it expresses a compelling and recurring desire in Rushdie's writing, to write 'the East' out of him and found new origins, yet finding himself not quite able to do so. The sentence just cited above is followed by: 'I do not always believe myself when I say this.' Aijaz Ahmad in his *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* took Rushdie thoroughly to task on his self-representation as an exile with the degree of agency that would enable him to deliver 'last words' on 'Pakistan'.¹² Ahmad's argument is complex and detailed, and perhaps its real emphasis lies in the representation of women in the novel, and of Sufiya Zenobia in particular. However,

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Ahmad's discussion is valuable on the issue of 'self-representation' as it attempts to situate Rushdie's novel (and at times it seems Rushdie himself) in a modernist–postmodernist debate.

As we have noted above, Rushdie lived only very briefly in Pakistan,¹³ and everything he had had to say about that country by 1983, in both *Midnight's Children* and in *Shame*, expressed his repulsion. If the former novel describes India's lost possibilities, its tolerant and plural ambitions squandered for expediency, the latter describes Pakistan as never having had such possibilities because it was constructed out of intolerance and narrow-mindedness. The failure of the state of Pakistan has a domestic allegory in the squabble between two powerful families, only thinly disguised to represent that of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (Iskander Harrappa) and of Zia ul-Haq (Raza Hyder).¹⁴ But the force of Rushdie's critique of Pakistan as an oppressive and authoritarian society is focused on the treatment of women.

Sufiya Zenobia is born a girl when Raza Hyder wanted a boy. At her birth, he rages at the medical staff as if somehow his anger will force them to change the baby's gender. Sufiya Zenobia blushes for shame. From the moment of her birth, Sufiya Zenobia is made inadequate, shamed by her gender. As the novel progresses she comes to represent an unavoidable capacity for feeling shame while the world that dictates to her, the world of men, cannot restrain itself from shamelessness. Rushdie's argument suggests a gendered sense of 'honour', a public sense in which men fraudulently disguise cynicism by investing honour in the conduct of women, in the process dictating to them, while conducting themselves with cruelty and self-indulgence. Women, who are required to submit to what has been invested in them and are made inadequate by this submission, feel shame. Sufiya Zenobia cannot prevent herself blushing for shame, and is a literal representation of this gendered condition, which is attenuated further by making her retarded by illness to a permanent mental age of a six-year-old. So her blushes, in other words, are not from a heightened moral sense but the metaphorical conditioning of her gender.

Rushdie's women in *Shame* are not mere cyphers, though they are given a problematic agency.¹⁵ The novel's 'peripheral hero' has three mothers: three sisters who had spent their lives in a huge blank-walled house shut off from the outside world. The house is a metaphor, no doubt, for the detention of women in the medieval form of Islam which Rushdie ascribes to the idea of Pakistan. The house is called Nishapur, the birthplace of the eleventh-century Persian poet Omar Khayyam, and has rambling rooms with forgotten books which, perhaps, represent arrested learning. The three sisters rebel against their incarceration by going to a dance in the British

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‘lines’ and returning with a joint pregnancy, whose outcome is Omar Khayyam Shakil, whose self-indulgence knows no shame. Rani Harrapa, Iskander Harrapa’s wife, knits a shawl in which she records her husband’s murders. Good News Hyder, Raza Hyder’s other daughter, kills herself because she cannot prevent her husband fathering more babies on her. If all these are problematic and, to some extent, tragic forms of agency, it is Sufiya Zenobia who is given its most grotesque form.

In Rushdie’s argument, humiliation and shame will inevitably lead to violence, which is as much about the oppression of women in Pakistan (and Islam) as about the whole society. It is Sufiya who demonstrates this argument. The first occasion is when she tears off the heads of 218 turkeys, ‘then reached down into their bodies to draw their guts up through their necks’ (*Shame*, p. 138). Later, in the novel’s closing stages, she fulfils what this early outburst of prodigious violence promises. She tempts four nameless men to have sex with her, inverting the right of Muslim men to take four wives, then she pulls their heads off:

Shame walks the streets of night. In the slums four youths are transfixed by those appalling eyes, whose deadly yellow fire blows like a wind through the lattice-work of the veil. They follow her to the rubbish-dump of doom, rats to her piper, automata dancing in the all-consuming light from the black-veiled eyes. Down she lies [...] Four husbands come and go. Four of them in and out, and then her hands reach for the first boy’s neck. The others stand still and wait their turn.

(*Shame*, p. 219)

Her humiliation at the hands of men who should have loved her, her father Raza Hyder and her husband Omar Khayyam Shakil, have turned her into a Beast. Rushdie celebrates Sufiya’s violence as liberation, or makes Omar Khayyam Shakil ponder along these lines, but the real force behind this figuration of women is not so much to suggest a route to fulfilment, but to issue a warning to the rulers of Pakistan. Out of the encounter of shame and shamelessness will come violence. Not surprisingly, *Shame* was banned in Pakistan, although it was short-listed for the Booker Prize.

Rushdie’s next novel, *The Satanic Verses* (1988), was also banned in Pakistan, as it was in India and in many other countries, including several Muslim countries. In Bradford in the United Kingdom, the novel was publicly burned by protesters and in Karachi, Pakistan, the police fired into a mass protest and killed ten people. The climax of these protests against the novel was the death ‘sentence’, the *fatwa*, declared by the Ayatollah Khomeini on Rushdie, his publishers and translators, with a bounty of £1.5 million offered to whoever would do the deed. It was a remarkable and shocking intervention by a head of state in response to a novel. If this found

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an echo in many countries whose opinion-leaders were also repelled by what they saw as the mockery of the Prophet, it also brought out writers, intellectuals and many others in support of Rushdie and his right to write freely. In any case, the invitation to murder drove Rushdie into hiding for several years and broke his life and career in two. A great deal has been written about the *fatwa* and its consequences on Rushdie's writing. This volume has two chapters on the subject, by Ruvani Ranasinha on the background to and consequences of the *fatwa* (Chapter 4), and by Joel Kuortti, who reads *The Satanic Verses* in the light of the *fatwa* (Chapter 9). There is little need here to add to what those two readings undertake. In addition, Rushdie published several defences of his novel and of his practice as a novelist, and these are alluded to in the chapters of this volume. All these essays were published in *Imaginary Homelands* (1991, 1992), including an essay in which Rushdie 'embraced' Islam as a way of getting out of the impasse. Rushdie withdrew this essay from later editions because he thought he had been ill-advised to publish what looked like an apology.¹⁶

During this period of great post-*fatwa* intensity, when Rushdie was involved in a campaign to make his case to officials and the public, when he was fêted as an emblem of the writer's freedom, he published the short novel *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990). The novel is described as a children's book, yet it is one of Rushdie's most complete books, which gracefully manages his customary energetic comedy despite its dark subject, the imposition of silence on a story-teller. In 1994, he also published a collection of stories *East, West*; both these publications are discussed by Deepika Bahri in Chapter 10 in this volume. The following year, seven years after the publication of *The Satanic Verses* and the trauma that followed it, Rushdie published *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995), in many ways the disillusioned sequel to *Midnight's Children*. Towards the end of the earlier novel, its narrator Saleem Sinai contemplates the possibility of 'new myths' being born after the failure, or the destruction, of Nehru's vision of a secular and tolerant India. That possibility is symbolically lodged in Aadam Sinai, the 'son' of Saleem and Parvati-the-Witch, although his real father was Saleem's potent rival, Shiva. Aadam is the 'son' of the children of midnight, but without Saleem's sense of significance. His silence while the Emergency lasted and his Ganesh-like features hint at a moral position and a modest persona, a more practical attitude to what lies ahead for India and for Bombay, which in its pluralism signifies India's best possibilities. In *The Moor's Last Sigh* this possibility is utterly lost. In the novel, Bombay's parallel allegorical site of tolerance and pluralism is Muslim Spain. Its title alludes to the place on the hill from which the last Muslim ruler of Granada turned to look on his beautiful city for the last time, after his and his

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people's expulsion by the fundamentalist Christian reconquista. Like Granada in its era, Bombay is now in the hands of fundamentalists and Aadam Sinai has fulfilled a wholly different future from that anticipated for him in *Midnight's Children*. He has found no new myths but has become a gangster in the service of organised crime. In this volume, Minoli Salgado discusses Rushdie's method in this later reading of India and shows the complex techniques the novel employs.

In 2000, Rushdie moved to New York and published the novel *Fury* which is set in New York. This novel and the earlier *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999) signify a change of location for Rushdie's fiction, and in Chapter 12 in this volume, Anshuman Mondal discusses the significance of this change. After the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center in New York, which happened just before the publication of *Fury*, Rushdie took a pronounced pro-United States government position in support of 'the War on Terror', and this is evident in the essays and columns he has collected in *Step Across this Line* (2002). He has retreated from this support to some extent,¹⁷ but his self-positioning on this issue opens up in an interesting way the subject with which this Introduction began, the location of 'home'.

In 2005, Rushdie published *Shalimar the Clown*, a novel in which the Indian sub-continent, with Kashmir as a central political event, features prominently, returning his writing to the location primarily associated with him. Clearly there are many more twists and turns to come from this writer, and it is too soon yet to be definitive about recent developments in his work.

This *Companion to Salman Rushdie* is organised in two parts. Part I contains four chapters on important themes of context necessary to reading Rushdie's work: Vijay Mishra on the influence of Indian popular cinema, Peter Morey on the English tradition in Rushdie's writing, Ruvani Ranasinha on the consequences of the *fatwa* and Amina Yaqin on the significance of gender and family. Part II studies the texts and offers readings of all the fictional texts available in volume form, except for *Shalimar the Clown*.¹⁸ There are references to Rushdie's non-fictional writing throughout the book, and for the interested reader there is an extensive bibliography of further reading.¹⁹

NOTES

- 1 Salman Rushdie, 'Imaginary Homelands', *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Granta, 1991, 1992), p. 9.
- 2 Rushdie, 'Introduction', *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 1.
- 3 Rushdie, 'The Riddle of Midnight', *Imaginary Homelands* (1991), p. 26.
- 4 Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1981), p. 153.

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- 5 Rushdie, “‘Errata’: or, Unreliable Narration in *Midnight’s Children*”, *Imaginary Homelands* (1991), p. 23.
- 6 Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (London: Viking, 1988), p. 44.
- 7 See Chapter 9 in this volume, Joel Kuortti, ‘*The Satanic Verses*: “To be born again, first you have to die”’, for a discussion of the sources of the story of the verses.
- 8 Rushdie, ‘Introduction’, *Imaginary Homelands* (1991), p. 1. *Grimus* was the winner of the Victor Gollancz Science Fiction Prize, and the prize was its publication. The novel’s editor at Gollancz was Liz Calder, who later moved to Jonathan Cape, and whom Rushdie followed there with *Midnight’s Children* and later *Shame*. Liz Calder went on to found the independent publisher Bloomsbury.
- 9 Catherine Cundy, *Salman Rushdie* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 12.
- 10 The birds’ quest in Attar’s poem is for their ruler Simurg, a sufi conceit for God, and Grimus is, of course, an anagram of this name.
- 11 Rushdie, *Shame* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1983), p. 28.
- 12 Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992), pp. 123–58.
- 13 The narrator of *Shame* says: ‘Although I have known Pakistan for a long time, I have never lived there for longer than six months at a stretch’ (p. 69).
- 14 The high drama played out by these two figures is too well known to be repeated here. For some discussion of the feud see Chapter 5 in this volume, Amina Yaqin, ‘Family and gender in Rushdie’s writing’ (pp. 61–74).
- 15 For a detailed discussion of Rushdie’s women in *Shame*, see Ahmad, *In Theory* (1992), pp. 139–52.
- 16 Rushdie, ‘Why I have Embraced Islam’, *Imaginary Homelands* (1991), pp. 430–2.
- 17 For example, on 8 November 2005, he participated in the protests against the detention centre at Guantanamo Bay, where ‘terror’ suspects are held and tortured, and in April 2005, he criticised President Bush for his failure to engage with ‘the international community’ in pursuit of ‘the War on Terror’.
- 18 Rushdie has also written a story ‘The Firebird’s Nest’, which appeared in *The New Yorker*, 23 and 30 June 1997, pp. 122–7. The story is also published in a special limited edition (Las Vegas, Nev.: Rainmaker Editions, 2004), and is reportedly to be made into a film scripted by Rushdie himself with his wife in the leading female role.
- 19 I am grateful to Florian Stadtler, who compiled the chronology and the bibliography.

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PART I

Themes and issues

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2

VIJAY MISHRA

Rushdie and Bollywood cinema

‘nobody from Bombay should be without a basic film vocabulary’

*Midnight's Children*¹

I

Any study of Rushdie remains incomplete, indeed deficient, if not seen through the literature of migration and cinema. To read Rushdie through these – demographic shift and artistic form – simply means that we are more likely to get our understanding of him right than if we do not. The fact of diaspora, of the trauma of migration, explains many facets of Rushdie's reading of culture: his emphasis on the mongrelisation of our lives, delight in the chutnification of history, and importance given to the moment when ‘newness’ enters the world. Indeed, some, like Timothy Brennan, have found Rushdie's anti-nationalist, non-foundational reading of the nation state particularly prescient.² The fact of cinema explains a number of matters of representation in the Rushdie corpus which without an understanding of cinema would be lost. Given the brief of this chapter, though, we may want to set aside the theme of migration and diaspora, referring to it only in as much as it impinges on our reading of Rushdie's engagement with cinema, in particular Bollywood/Bombay cinema.

When Rushdie writes about Indian urban culture as a culture ‘full of fakery and gaudiness and superficiality and failed imaginations’ but also full of ‘high vitality, linguistic verve’³ and metropolitan excitement, he reads Indian urban culture through the eyes of his beloved Bombay and its dominant art form, the Bollywood cinema. The homage to Bombay and its cinema began early as is evident from Rushdie's tribute to *The Wizard of Oz*.⁴ We note that Rushdie saw the film at the Metro Cinema in 1957 at the age of ten, a crucial age at which he also saw, as it seems from his novels, two Bollywood films which had a decisive influence on him: *Shree 420* (‘Mr 420’, 1955) and *Funtoosh* (‘The Madhatter’, 1956). Metro Cinema, now decrepit, is at the corner of First Marine Street (Anandilal Podar Marg) and the Esplanade (Mahatma Gandhi Road), next to Cinema Lane and not too far away from the Dhobi Talao area. The child of ten experiencing this classic Hollywood fantasy may have been ignorant of foreign countries and