



Introduction

Reading Rushdie
after September 11, 2001

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The appearance of yet another collection of essays on Rushdie's work will no doubt seem odd to many people. Isn't there too much already written about Rushdie, for Rushdie, against Rushdie? Can't postcolonial critics talk about someone else for a change? Perhaps it is the very fact of Rushdie's familiar presence on the contemporary literary scene that makes this collection seem both redundant and necessary. For it might be equally odd if a journal devoted to twentieth-century literature did not, at the end of that century, take a moment to dwell upon the work of this man. At least for one brief moment, he became, in a sense, the very symbol of the literary for many people across the globe. Of course writers have suffered persecution, exile, and even death for as long as anyone can remember, and we may be sure that among Rushdie's own contemporaries there are many—including those whose names we may never know—who have paid dearly for publishing their impressions and opinions. However, for various reasons (no doubt related more to the political dynamics of the 1980s than to Rushdie's own work) it was *The Satanic Verses* and the storm around it that provoked more discussions, in more countries, about the status of the literary than perhaps any other work of our time. The 1993 French publication *Pour Rushdie: Cent intellectuels arabes et musulmans pour la liberté d'expression* (*For Rushdie: Essays by Arab and Muslim Writers in Defence of Free Speech*, 1994) (Anouar) gives us a sense of the charge of such discussions. The polemical debates that ensued over *The Satanic Verses* forced many people—readers and writers

of all kinds—to reflect seriously about the effects and scope of literature, its responsibility and freedom.

But it would be unfair to suggest that Rushdie's significance as a writer is entirely indebted to the accident of the fatwa. The appearance of *Midnight's Children* in 1981 was a remarkable event in its own right. For many English-speaking Indians, the book was tremendously exciting: a sprawling, clever, and delightful English novel in which the foreign words were not French or Italian but Hindustani, and in which they recognized familiar figures and events from their own history. The pleasures of reading the book were certainly different from the pleasures of reading R. K. Narayan or Anita Desai, and this had to do both with the immensity of the book's vision and with Rushdie's infectious enjoyment of the language. It was almost as though Sterne had suddenly appeared in the twentieth century as an expatriate Indian, for here was a narrator both *firangi* and *desi* (foreign and native)—a *desi* hidden in a *firangi* or vice versa. Two towering works about colonial India—Kipling's *Kim* and Tagore's *Gora*—had already dramatized for us this figure of the non-Indian Indian, of hidden ancestry and deceptive appearances. Rushdie's Saleem gave it a new and provocative spin by dramatizing this dual descent not just thematically but stylistically as well.

When *Midnight's Children* first appeared, we could not have foreseen how precisely this couple of the *firangi-desi* would emerge to dominate various trends of Rushdie criticism. It has done so, not only in the questions that have risen about Rushdie's relation to the diasporic South Asian community in Britain, about the relative appeal of his work in Asia and in "the West," but also in the debates about his "authenticity" as an Indian writer and about the precise ways in which Indian names and words appear in his work.¹ Indeed, an uneasy suspicion of the *firangi-desi*, of the nature of his alliances and the strength of his kinship, has put increasing pressure on the concept of "hybridity," which seeks to hold some of these tensions at bay.

Like the criticism of all canonical works, that of Rushdie's also reveals changing currents in the academic world. While the initial response to his work was more concerned with questions of literary representation and the critique of metaphysical categories, recent criticism has been more attentive to Rushdie's own location within diasporic culture, to his class affiliations, and to the explicit political ends of his work.

Concurrently, Rushdie's nonfictional writings have also drawn more

attention, particularly since the events of September 11, 2001. Although Rushdie has been writing on literature and politics for over 20 years, none of his articles (barring his responses to the fatwa) elicited as much commentary as these recent ones, perhaps because they seem to join, rather than interrupt, the chorus on the street. While most of his earlier political essays (for instance, those collected in *Imaginary Homelands*) come from a recognizable liberal-left position, these new articles are surprisingly indistinguishable, in their tone and argument, from many mainstream media responses to the events of September 11.

In several op-ed pieces and short essays published in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Guardian*, Rushdie seems to accede rather easily to the most prevalent stereotypes about Islam. For example, in a piece that expresses his distress at the attacks of September 11, he describes a fundamentalist as one who is against “freedom of speech, a multiparty political system, universal adult suffrage, accountable government, Jews, homosexuals, women’s rights, pluralism, secularism, short skirts, dancing, beardlessness, evolution theory, sex” (“Fighting the Forces of Invisibility”). While such caricature is familiar to readers of his novels, these characterizations become disturbing when Rushdie claims in a later article that this fundamentalism is inextricably linked with Islam:

If this isn’t about Islam, why the worldwide Muslim demonstrations in support of Osama bin Laden and al-Qaida? Why did those 10,000 men armed with swords and axes mass on the Pakistan-Afghanistan frontier, answering some mullah’s call to jihad? Why are the war’s first British casualties three Muslim men who died fighting on the Taliban side?
 (“A War That Presents Us All with a Crisis of Faith”)

It is one thing to be concerned about the political mobilization of religious passion in South and West Asian countries and quite another to present these examples denuded of any context and thus to attribute them to some dehistoricized notion of “Islam.” Where is the writer of *The Satanic Verses* who exposed the terrible transformative power of such labels? Where is the Rushdie who wrote that there “is no consensus about reality between, for example, the nations of the North and of the South,” and cautioned that if “writers leave the business of making pictures of the world to politicians, it will be one of history’s great and most abject abdications”? (“Outside the Whale” 100).

The intellectual endeavor by “sections of the left” that have drawn connections between the history of US foreign policy and the attacks of September 11 has been sharply criticized by Rushdie. Such queries and reflections are, according to him, “among the most unpleasant consequences of the terrorists’ attacks on the United States” (“Fighting the Forces of Invisibility”). Well, one may quibble about whether the left response is necessarily one of the “most unpleasant consequences,” but these recent pronouncements and his support for the war on Afghanistan—“America did, in Afghanistan, what had to be done, and did it well” (“America and Anti-Americans”)—have certainly distanced Rushdie from the left intellectuals who had hitherto been among his supporters. Indeed, such remarks might even startle the man who wrote that

those of us who did not have our origins in the countries of the mighty West, or North, had something in common . . . some knowledge of what weakness was like, some awareness of the view from underneath, and of how it felt to be there, on the bottom, looking up at the descending heel. (*Jaguar Smile* 12)

Did this sense of solidarity stop at the borders of Afghanistan? Or is it that despite its position as the sole global superpower, the attacks of September 11 have suddenly transformed the US into one of the nations that is “on the bottom, looking up at the descending heel”? The nature of Rushdie’s recent assertions has not gone unnoticed: Jonathan Freedland, in a commentary in the *Guardian*, wonders if Rushdie is letting his enthusiasm for US culture lead him to an endorsement of the current Bush strategy; and Tariq Ali, in his article “The New Empire Loyalists,” has famously labeled him as part of the new “belligerati” set.²

When Rushdie, implicitly identifying with Muslims and Pakistanis, calls for a secular political space in Islamic societies, or when he condemns the corruption and tyranny of many Islamic governments, it is easy to agree with him. His desire that religion be restored “to the sphere of the personal” is one that many of us share. But when he suggests in the same article that Islam’s “depoliticization is the nettle that all Muslim societies must grasp in order to become modern” (“Yes, This Is About Islam”), we are forced to pause. The facile distinction between a politicized Islam and modernity seems insufficiently aware of the historical forces at play. The particular face of fundamentalist Islam we see today is closely linked to modernity; as many historians have demonstrated, it

gained momentum in part because it was widely perceived as a response to the military and commercial depredations of the West. Moreover, the decades of the 1950s and the 60s saw socialist and left-oriented protest movements in many postcolonial countries systematically undermined with the support and guidance of the CIA, and politicized Islam was encouraged to fill this vacuum. Here we must remind ourselves of certain particulars, such as the arming and support of the mujahideen in Afghanistan and the buoying of the Wahabi Saudi regime by the US, which cannot be dismissed as quickly as Rushdie now wants (“Yes, This Is About Islam”).

What to make of this shift in approach? Part of the perplexity arises from a sudden onrush of doubt: did we misread the earlier texts, overlook the clues that would explain this surprising volte-face? Were those who had always dismissed Rushdie as another panderer to Western tastes for the colonial exotic right after all? We can see both aspects of Rushdie in the critical reception of his novels in South Asia. On the one hand, his writings were lauded for their innovative linguistic and narrative style, for enacting an assertive, and sometimes even aggressive, South Asian sensibility, and for their satiric approach to the history and politics of the region. On the other hand, critics cast doubt on the originality of his linguistic dexterity, denounced his work as a particularly insidious form of cultural imperialism, and read his success as further proof of his insider status in the Western establishment. The *desi* and the *firangi* were not enmeshed in exciting new ways, these critics claimed; the former was merely—once again—being used for the entertainment of the latter.

Rushdie’s novels themselves, however, offer some defense against such attacks. To take just two obvious examples, the castigation of the anti-immigrant and racist policies of Thatcherite Britain in *The Satanic Verses* and the caustic description of American imperialism in *Fury* suggest that such critics may have been too ungenerous. Arriving in New York, the protagonist of *Fury*, Malik Solanka, muses:

Might this new Rome actually be more provincial than its provinces; might these new Romans have forgotten what and how to value, or had they never known? Were all empires so undeserving, or was this one particularly crass? . . . O Dream-America, was civilization’s quest to end in obesity and trivia, . . . Who demolished the City on the Hill and put in its place a row of elec-

tric chairs, those dealers in death's democracy, where everyone, the innocent, the mentally deficient, the guilty, could come to die side by side? Who paved Paradise and put up a parking lot? Who settled for George W. Gush's boredom and Al Bore's gush?
(87)

Is the author of this dark vision the same person who now finds Londoners' diatribes against American "obesity, emotionality, self-centeredness" utterly shocking? ("American and Anti-Americans").

In his essay "The Cultural Politics of Rushdie Criticism: All or Nothing," Timothy Brennan discusses an analogous shift in Rushdie's stance after the fatwa. He maintains that while *The Satanic Verses* was, after all, not that different in its "savaging of Islam" from Rushdie's other works (110), the affair of the fatwa "dislodged Rushdie from his earlier views" (118) and led him to adopt a less nuanced tone of accusation against Islam. But Brennan concludes by distinguishing Rushdie from less compassionate and more virulent critics of Islam. Reminding us of Rushdie's consistent attempts to create a literary language in which "the experience of formerly colonized, still-disadvantaged peoples might find full expression" (Rushdie, "In Good Faith" 394), Brennan suggests that "the angry protesters from within the community of nonliterary Islam forget that Rushdie has little in common with those who indulge in scares over the civilizational threat of the 'Islamic terrorist'" (126).

This essay by Brennan was published in 1999. It is unlikely that the same claim could be made quite so convincingly today. Did the attack on the World Trade Center echo the trauma of the fatwa? Is this why Rushdie has so uncritically accepted the terms and narratives generated by the American media? His adoption and use of the word *terrorist*—a term inherently linked to the justification of state monopoly over violence—is a case in point. "Terrorism," according to Rushdie, "is not the pursuit of legitimate complaints by illegitimate means. The terrorist wraps himself in the world's grievances to cloak his true motives" ("Fighting the Forces of Invisibility"). This is, at the very least, an odd statement, given Rushdie's long history of support for the Palestinians, who are near the top of the West's "terrorist" list today.³

As we have seen, far from critiquing the practice of violence, the use and circulation of such a term instead renders legitimate the most terrible forms of counterviolence. Slavoj Žižek's analysis, asking us to

view today's "terrorist" as an example of the *homo sacer*⁴—the man who may be killed with impunity because he is outside the law, neither adversary nor criminal—presents a far more perceptive description of the current situation.

Rushdie's recent piece on Kashmir also seems quite distant from his own earlier writings on the disputed territories. As late as June 1999 he was still advocating, like most South Asian peace activists, "Kashmir for the Kashmiris." He pointed out that the Indian army in Kashmir is seen by many as an occupying force, and that what most Kashmiris want is a greater degree of autonomy: "to be allowed to run their own lives" ("Kashmir, the Imperiled Paradise"). Three years later, he is still enraged by the betrayal of the Kashmiri people by both the Indian and the Pakistani governments, but now he seems to be convinced that the autonomy of the Kashmiris can best be ensured by bringing in yet another interested party: a Western peacekeeping force ("The Most Dangerous Place in the World")—a recommendation that, incidentally, is echoed in William Safire's piece on the same page.⁵ Rushdie's reliance on the disinterested goodwill of the West seems to be in accord with his new allegiances.

Perhaps Rushdie views the US, like him, as being imperiled by some (undocumented) fatwa. But the ancient maxim advocating friendship with the enemy of one's enemy may not always be wise policy. If Rushdie indeed wishes his voice to be heard in the countries of South and West Asia, he will not be helped by his endorsement of the "war on terror." If he still believes, as he wrote in the essay "Is Nothing Sacred," that persuasion, not force or contempt, is the most effective way of engaging in political action, then he might have to reconsider his views—about US policy as well as about processes of change in Islamic societies.

Certainly Rushdie is not the first writer to present us with a set of political writings incongruent with the general trajectory of his work. But since he is a public figure writing on current events, and since the issues he addresses are so relevant to postcolonial studies, we felt we could not ignore his recent journalistic writings. It is his literary work, though, that constitutes the strongest and most complex part of his oeuvre, and it is this work that has turned him into a public persona. All the essays presented in this issue were written before September 2001, and all are, in some way or another, concerned with the latent political shape of Rushdie's literary work. Through detailed textual readings, they docu-

ment in his novels the varied moments of resistance to colonial and neo-colonial power. They provide a timely reminder—for the writer as well as his readers—of the import and significance of such moments.

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For this issue, we have gathered six essays that both respond to current criticism and offer fresh readings of Rushdie's work. Many of the essays are in some way concerned with the genealogy of this work. They explore the embedded narratives and allegorical allusions that make his novels a gathering place for figures who might otherwise never encounter one another. But they are also concerned with the larger picture—with the ethical distinctions authorized by the narratives, with particular imaginings of nationhood and community, and with the old difficulties of understanding narrative in conceptual terms.

Andrew Teverson's essay on *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* takes as its starting point the book's evocation of the work of the thirteenth-century Sufi poet Farid ud-Din Attar. Discussing how both Attar and Rushdie mount a defense of storytelling by resorting to allegory, Teverson looks closely at the particular arguments presented by *Haroun* in this context. Responding to Srinivas Aravamudan's criticism that Rushdie's ideal of free speech in this book demonstrates "everything that is wrong with liberal assumptions about literature," Teverson suggests that we read Rushdie's allegory of storytelling less in terms of a naive plea for free speech and more in terms of the relationship it advocates among cultures. In spite of the significant differences between Attar's and Rushdie's work, both imagine ideal communities where dissent would not be brutally silenced. Teverson invites us to think of the model of multiculturalism proposed by the book in relation to its form of narration. Just as, in Rushdie's text, supplementary narratives subvert and perplex the main story, so too in this model of public space, dissenting minority voices challenge and subvert the dominant national discourse.

Rachel Falconer's essay is also concerned with the genealogy of Rushdie's work, but Falconer looks westward. She reads *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* in terms of the classical narrative of *katabasis*—the ancient Greek term for the hero's journey to the underworld. The specific structure of this narrative, marked by the four pressure points of threshold crossing, zero point, backward look, and *sparagmos* (dismemberment) in-

forms Rushdie's portrayal of the life shape of an immigrant in modern times. The protagonists react to these moments by either contracting into an inner core or expanding until they are finally blown apart by an Orphean *sparagmos*—which is also the point when their work is appropriated by the world. The reading is instructive for showing us how particular narrative and representational forms persist through time; by drawing attention to the literary history of the work, Falconer asks us to consider the implications of Rushdie's allegory. Showing how catastrophe finally forces all the protagonists out of their egotism and into a more responsible relation to their world, she argues that such moments are of particular significance for migrant artists, who are thereby compelled to forge a new social connection.

Allegory has indeed become a privileged term in Rushdie criticism, not only because of Jameson's influential essay but also—and more importantly—because of the highly allusive nature of Rushdie's own writing. Patrick Hogan returns to this terrain as he responds to Keith Booker's recent criticism of Rushdie's work as representing a compromised or naive political position. Paying close attention to the allegorical significance of the early, Kashmir chapters in *Midnight's Children*, Hogan suggests that these chapters dramatize the conflict between tradition and modernity that is of central significance to the novel as a whole. Rushdie's narrative of Kashmir's passage to modernity allows us to understand the political charge of the novel in terms of a fundamental distinction the narrative makes between two different conceptions of identity, which Hogan names practical and categorial identity. Drawing on Ashis Nandy's work, Hogan reads the novel as a critique of the ways in which modernity has undermined more traditional and fluid structures of practical identity and offered in its stead more rigid and perhaps inherently violent forms of categorial identity. The novel's utopian impulse, on this reading, would lie not so much in its looking forward to postmodern, "hybrid" forms of identity but in its looking back to a time when religious or national affiliation had not yet assumed paramount importance in terms of self-identification.

John Su's essay, like Hogan's, examines the politics of *Midnight's Children* by revisiting the question of form. Following several other critics, Su perceives a critique of epic values in the book. However, for him, the most provocative aspect of this critique lies not in the novel's implicit rejection of teleological history but in its parody of the myth of the hero

and of communities founded on the power and charisma of heroic individuals. He proposes that we read the novel's valorization of failure—best exemplified in the life of its protagonist Saleem—as its way of preserving the possibility of a utopian future. By drawing our attention to Rushdie's engagement with epic tropes, he shows us how particular narrative conventions are closely linked to conceptions of political space. In this way Su's essay shares some of the concerns that Falconer brings to her reading of *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*. However, while Falconer argues that in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* even the final stage of the Orphic conflict, the *sparagmos*, should be read as indicating a "progression" for the protagonist and his world, Su proposes that in *Midnight's Children* the hero's failure signals the narrative's ironic stance toward all narratives that maintain the integrity of the heroic trajectory. That is why for Su's reading of *Midnight's Children*, what is significant is the hero's failure, not his death—which might always be available for mourning, sublimation, or communal appropriation.

Alexandra Schultheis's essay on *The Moor's Last Sigh* addresses academic debates about Rushdie's preoccupation with form by moving away from questions of genre to those of aesthetic pleasure. Schultheis finds the general pessimism of the novel tempered with "the regenerative potential of the aesthetic," which not only provides knowledge of difference and hybridity (as the study of history might), but also opens alternative paths of identification and pleasure. Discussing Rushdie's deployment of the nation-as-family metaphor, she argues that by divorcing the feminine from the maternal, the novel unsettles a trope whose function lies in domesticating difference.

Schultheis does not simply want to reiterate literature's ancient claim to widen our sympathies and deepen our imaginative powers, but rather to demonstrate how specific narrative devices—the suture and the palimpsest—are central to Rushdie's attempt to critique and complicate the nation-as-family metaphor. By tracing connections among cinematic, psychoanalytic, and narrative theory, Schultheis suggests that Rushdie's novel consistently encourages the reader to negotiate between multiple images of the past as well as multiple—and often incompatible—identifications.

Shailja Sharma returns to the politics of class, which have assumed central significance in Rushdie criticism. Comparing Rushdie's work to that of other South Asian diasporic writers such as Farrukh Dhondy and

Hanif Kureishi, she finds that Rushdie's work manifests a far closer relationship than theirs to South Asia. His work thus stands out because of the sheer detail and breadth of his acquaintance with various nuances of life in India and Pakistan. Nevertheless, within the South Asian diasporic community in Britain, Rushdie is generally perceived as an outsider, especially since the publication of *The Satanic Verses*. Despite his support of leftist politics in Britain, he is viewed as an antagonist by many British South Asians because his ideals are read as being those of the liberal upper class. She argues that by bringing class tensions to the foreground, and by exposing the radically different experiences and attitudes of South Asian immigrants, the reception of the novel has compelled us to reconsider its own representation of migrancy.

All these essays suggest thoughtful and promising directions for new criticism in postcolonial studies. Selecting them from among the large number of submissions we received and editing this special issue has been a long and fairly arduous process. We are grateful to Lee Zimmerman and Jim Martin for their support and help. Finally, we wish to thank all those who gave us an opportunity to read their work, and in particular the contributors—not only for their wonderful essays but also for their patience and understanding.

Notes

1. See, for instance, Harish Trivedi's "Salman the Funtoosh: Magic Bilingualism in *Midnight's Children*." The charge of inauthenticity, of mixing idioms in inappropriate or unconvincing ways, continues to haunt Rushdie. Thus, in a recent review of his latest novel *Fury*, James Wood has responded to protagonist Malik Solanka's quick and surprising grasp of American idiom with similar distrust: "A cartoonish and inauthentic voice produces a cartoonish and inauthentic reality" (34).
2. In response to a *New Statesman* survey about fallen icons ("Smashed Hits"), Tariq Ali names Rushdie, with the following comment: "When literature masquerades as imperialism, all one can feel is . . . SHAME."
3. See Rushdie's "On Palestinian Identity."
4. Zizek is referring to Giorgio Agamben's work on *homo sacer*, a figure from Roman law who "may be killed but yet not sacrificed" (Agamben 8), and who, Agamben believes, plays an essential function in modern politics. Neither in-

cluded nor excluded from the juridical order, such a figure is susceptible to the force of the law but never protected by it.

5. We might recall in this context that during the recent Kashmir crisis, even as the British government was engaged in efforts to allay the threat of war in South Asia, it continued to approve arms sales to both India and Pakistan. Export licenses for arms equipment covering over 200 categories were issued to the two countries during the period from December 2001 to May 2002 (Norton-Taylor).

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