

**Andrew Teverson 2007: *Salman Rushdie. Contemporary World Writers*. Manchester: Manchester UP. xvii + 259 pp. ISBN 978-0-7190-7051-8**

Christopher Rollason  
Metz (France)  
rollason@9online.fr

If ever a writer's work lacked primal innocence, it is Salman Rushdie's. It is impossible to write about the Indian-born, US-resident, British national, secular-Muslim, postcolonial and globalised novelist/polemicist/celebrity without being controversial. Equally, there is more than one Rushdie, and that in numerous senses. Generically, there is a postmodern Rushdie claimed as a British writer, and a postcolonial Rushdie seen as part of Indian Writing in English (IWE); ideologically and chronologically, there is an earlier Rushdie viewed as a standard-bearer of progressive movements and a later Rushdie seen by some, at least, as a convert to establishment values; qualitatively and again chronologically, there is, for many, an earlier Rushdie, author of epoch-making fictions, and a later Rushdie whose works are of lesser value. Above all, there is a 'literary' Rushdie, emblematic of magic realism and postcoloniality and the author of *Midnight's Children* (1981), and a 'non-literary' Rushdie, his name a battleground between the advocates of free speech and those in both East and West who demand theocratic censorship, the author of *The Satanic Verses* (1988). Thanks to Khomeini's fatwa and the surrounding controversy, Salman Rushdie has surely become the writer most written about in literary history by those who have not read and will never read a word of his writings. Any detailed study of his work has to operate some kind of balance between these 'literary' and 'non-literary' aspects, and the volume under review opts essentially for the former while incorporating comment on the latter. This is no doubt a necessary choice for a study which aims to cover Rushdie's entire *oeuvre*, most of which is of no interest to those who see him only through the *Verses* prism; nonetheless, readers of a book like Andrew Teverson's still need to remember that the name *Salman Rushdie* has global reverberations for those who do not read books.

The book is divided into two main parts, 'Contexts and Intertexts' (five chapters) and 'Novels and Criticism' (six chapters), plus an Afterword. It proposes a reading of the *oeuvre* up to *Shalimar the Clown* (2005), thus following in the footsteps of, for example, the French-language study by Marc Porée and Alexis Massery (1996), which offered a comparably detailed overview up to *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995). Teverson assumes that understanding Rushdie means swallowing him whole, and, across a literary production perceived by many as wildly uneven in quality, accounting for and integrating everything. There is a chronology at the beginning; the end matter consists of endnotes, a (fairly brief) bibliography, and an index.

The first half of the book locates Rushdie's writing within a series of different frameworks – 'Political and Intellectual Contexts', '[Indian] Writing in English', 'Intertextuality, Influence and the Postmodern', and, finally, 'Biographical Contexts' (a dimension which in this case not even the most fervent textualist can ignore). From the

beginning, the reader notes Teverson's use of devil's-advocate tactics, taking up elements of the anti-Rushdie case and then wholly or partly refuting them: thus, in the introduction he already cites a critic like Aparna Mahanta (2001) who castigates Rushdie for, allegedly, writing only for Westerners and for "a tiny stratum of India's and Pakistan's elite, ... deracinated, speaking English, thinking English" (7) – a stricture so generalised that it could be levelled at any IWE writer. Teverson responds by calling Mahanta's argument "overstated" and "sensationalist", while admitting that she does identify a problem in that Rushdie, while at least some of the time claiming to speak for the underprivileged masses, is, as a hybridised metropolitan intellectual, by definition not a member of those masses (8). His method here typifies the study as a whole and reveals in Teverson a critic who, while never reducing Rushdie to his non-literary avatar, is acutely aware of the complex political connotations of his work – seeing his subject as a writer whose fiction "intersects with many of the most pressing debates in contemporary cultural and political affairs" (10).

The chapter 'Political and Intellectual Contexts' develops the proposition that "for Rushdie, politics is central to his art, but art is also central to his politics" (13). Teverson examines the charge levelled by Aijaz Ahmad (1992) that Rushdie is compromised with the poststructuralist obsession with discourse to a degree that estranges him from real political engagement. Arguing that, rather, "Rushdie ... is a writer who is prepared to bite off big chunks of the world and chew them over" (13), Teverson defends the significance of his work for progressive politics, roping in two heavyweights of postcolonial criticism, Edward Said and Homi Bhabha. The Said invoked is less the Foucault-influenced and at times arguably determinist author of *Orientalism* (1995, first published in 1978) than the later, 'contrapuntal' Said of *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), for whom, according to Teverson, Rushdie is one of those postcolonial writers who "write back 'to the metropolitan cultures' in order to disrupt the 'European narratives of the Orient'" (22; the term "write back" is from Rushdie's own celebrated article 'The Empire Writes Back With a Vengeance', published in the London *Times* on 3 July 1982). Rushdie's authorial stance is further validated from Bhabha's conception, as advanced in his 1994 volume *The Location of Culture*, of "newness as a form of cultural impurity" (23), entailing the privileging of hybridisation as a key determinant of the postcolonial (and Rushdiean) world-view.

Next considered is the issue of English as the chosen linguistic medium of a large part of Indian and other postcolonial writing, and of Rushdie in particular. Against the authenticists who claim innate ontological superiority for those writing in Indian languages as against IWE practitioners, Teverson stresses that since Independence English "has been made into one of India's many languages" (34), and that a writer like Rushdie does not reproduce the metropolitan version of English unscathed, but, rather – at least in his more 'Indian' texts – succeeds in localising it (it could have been added that one reason for those Indian writers who feel most at ease in English to publish in that language is that English is the only language that allows a novelist to reach a pan-Indian audience without having to go through translation). Mention is made of Rushdie's well-known and controversial statement in his introduction to the 1997 volume *The Vintage Book of Modern Indian Writing 1947-1997* (co-edited by himself and his then partner Elizabeth West) expressing a preference in qualitative terms for IWE

over writing in Indian languages as far as post-Independence prose writing is concerned (though, like most commentators, Teverson fails to add that two paragraphs down Rushdie qualifies that statement by stating he believes the reverse is true for poetry). It is concluded that Rushdie's use of English (anyway the only language he knows well enough to be a writer in) is, hybridised as it is, postcolonially legitimate, constituting him as one of those who engage in the "reclamation of English for counter-hegemonic purposes" (37), and allowing him to "undermine rather than confirm the oversimplistic binary opposition that pits vernacular languages against English" (40).

Teverson next considers Rushdie's relationship to the discourses of poststructuralism and postmodernism. He distances himself from the more extreme manifestations of Roland Barthes' 'death of the author' position – an ideological stance that in any case has surely been called in question by history in, precisely, Khomeini's call for the *literal* death of the author Rushdie. Teverson posits that Rushdie's work embodies a "dynamic image of the author as agent" (56), as one who acts upon the given in order to contest it. He further contends that Rushdie, though influenced by postmodernist technique, is ultimately *not* a postmodernist, arguing that if his texts at times display something resembling a postmodern "free play of signifiers", those ludic patterns have nonetheless, and crucially, been "*historically validated*" (emphasis in the original) (61). On this reading there is no question of recruiting Rushdie as a second Thomas Pynchon, still less as a disciple of Lyotard or Foucault. Indeed, Teverson further dissociates himself from the poststructuralists in the next chapter, by offering a chronological overview of Rushdie's life and writings, the latter being located in their biographical context. This chapter foreruns the more detailed novel-by-novel analysis of the book's second part, but is also useful in that it examines some of the minor works that are not novels – the 1987 Nicaraguan travelogue *The Jaguar Smile*, the 1994 story collection *East, West* (the book, though, contains no detailed consideration of the two essay collections of 1991 and 2002, respectively, *Imaginary Homelands* and *Step Across This Line*); it also includes the first tranche of a two-part discussion of *The Satanic Verses* and the surrounding 'affair'.

The book's second half centres on a detailed examination, again chronologically ordered, of Rushdie's nine novels up to *Shalimar the Clown*. Teverson offers a number of positions of indubitable interest to Rushdie criticism. *Midnight's Children* is analysed less from the familiar magic-realist prism than as a latter-day instance of another genre, namely the historical novel as conceived by Walter Scott (Teverson proposes potentially fecund comparisons with *Waverley* and *Ivanhoe*) and theorised by Georg Lukács. For the other major novels (his take on *The Satanic Verses* will be considered later), Teverson usefully stresses the crucial divergence of *Shame* (1983) from *Midnight's Children* in that Rushdie's novel of Pakistan painfully highlights the closure and narrowness of that country's society as opposed to the burgeoning multiplicity of the India celebrated in its predecessor; affirms *The Moor's Last Sigh's* construction of Bombay as metonym of Indian pluralism as against Hindu-particularist sectarianism; reads *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999) – a shade controversially in view of the very non-Indian music of that novel's Indian rock'n'rollers – as a pregnant exploration of hybrid globalisation; and welcomes *Shalimar*, Rushdie's then latest offering, as a path-breaking fusion of "the interest in US-led globalisation apparent in the novels of his

middle period ... with the sustained focus on a South Asian national experience apparent in the novels of his early period" (217). In addition, Teverson integrates *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990) into the debate as being not just a children's book but a paean to pluralism, and valiantly justifies the two novels most often viewed as minor, *Grimus* (1975) and *Fury* (2001) as manifestations of the Rushdiean world-view (the first as a satire on poststructuralism, the second as a further, post-*Ground* exploration of the global).

In his summing-up chapter, 'Critical Overview and Conclusion', Teverson comes down in favour of Rushdie as being, throughout his career, a novelist who adopts an oppositional, satirical and subversive stance towards established power, be it secular or religious, Western or Eastern. He sees Rushdie's political critique, as, if essentially negative, nonetheless necessary: "he does not conform to an ideology ... he does not see it as his job, as a novelist, to provide answers; ... rather, he sees himself ... as the grit in the state machine that unsettles the machinery" (205), ending with a flourish by quoting *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*: "When you know what you're against you have taken the first step in discovering what you're for" (216).

We may, though, ask exactly what it is that Rushdie *is* for and against, and since Teverson's book appeared there have been several new developments. In June 2007, Salman Rushdie became Sir Salman Rushdie, and the knighting of the 'empire writes back' man himself both stirred up antagonism in postcolonial critical *milieux* and reignited the *Verses* controversy via hostile demonstrations, notably in Pakistan; while 2008 saw both the third-in-a-row consecration of *Midnight's Children* by the Booker Prize judges (this time for the award's fortieth anniversary) and the nomination for the Booker longlist – though, it transpired, not shortlist – of Rushdie's latest work (and his first-ever historical novel set in remoter times), *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008). The new novel appeared to mixed reviews, once again raising the issue of the relative literary merits of the earlier and later Rushdie.

The knighthood controversy came as a reminder that the *Verses* issue is still being fought over, and here Teverson's book, while useful, perhaps does not quite make the unequivocal contribution to the anti-censorship, libertarian cause that might have been expected (here, splitting discussion of the book/affair between two different chapters does not help). Teverson notes that Rushdie studied early Islamic history as a special subject as part of his Cambridge history degree (77-78), and quotes the full text of Khomeini's fatwa (91) (though not making it clear that the Ayatollah could not possibly have read a book that then existed only in English). A careful analysis of Rushdie's novel as satire is followed by an account of the 'affair' in which, arguably a shade disturbingly for Rushdie's more secular-minded readers, Teverson allows himself the question: "Should such acts of blasphemy ... be subject to censorship?" (155). If one reads on, that question in fact turns out to be rhetorical, as he goes on to cite a very interesting reading by Sara Suleri, in her 1992 book *The Rhetoric of English India*, that would constitute *The Satanic Verses* as no less than a plea for a secular Islam, a seeming betrayal that "seeks to desecrate a cultural tradition in order that that cultural tradition might be revisited and renewed" (158). However, the very mention, in a book like Teverson's, of the possibility of a ban (and how could such a ban be enforced in the Western world, unless, say, the UK morphed into a province of Orwell's Oceania or the

US repealed the First Amendment?) seems unnecessarily to subvert the study's own rationalist *raison d'être* as an account of *all* Rushdie's fiction. Teverson mentions the important volume, first published in French in 1993, *For Rushdie: A Collection of Essays by 100 Arabic and Muslim Writers* (Abdallah *et al.*; actually it consists of 99 essays plus a musical score by a Moroccan composer, by a total of 226 signatories, one item being a text signed by 127 Iranian intellectuals), but not that this volume contains a crucial vindication of *The Satanic Verses* by Edward Said, 'Against the Orthodoxies', which culminates in the affirmation that "Rushdie is the intifada of the imagination" (1994: 261). What is missing from Teverson's account is the robust and informed libertarianism that characterises the defences of Rushdie offered at the time in Said's statement or in Malise Ruthven's book *A Satanic Affair* (1990), or more recently by Christopher Hitchens in his critique of theocracy *God Is Not Great* (2007).

The question of the post-fatwa Rushdie (has he made a pact with the establishment? has the quality of his fiction declined in parallel?) was foregrounded in a text by Priyamvada Gopal of Cambridge University, 'Sir Salman's Long Journey', published in response to the knighthood in *The Guardian* on 18 June 2007 and widely syndicated. Gopal lamented the circumstance that "a once-beleaguered writer has accepted a quaint honour from the British establishment", charging Rushdie simultaneously with political betrayal ("what he once undertook in the name of shared human values and goals, he now identifies largely with the West") and artistic decline (the "lamentable transformation of a visionary and complex writer into a weak-voiced celebrity ... too busy being a pastiche of his former self to actually write well") (2007). Against such severe charges it needs to be established whether Rushdie's recent non-fictional writings really manifest such an ideological shift, and, should that be so, whether his alleged uncritical stance on the West is actually reflected in, say, the in many ways very anti-American *Shalimar the Clown*. It could be argued that Teverson's method in this book is not the best equipped to deal fully with contentions of this kind, by reason of its chronological reading of the fiction and all-inclusive approach to the *œuvre*. However, those constraints themselves reflect the impossibility of embracing in a brief compass all aspects of so literarily and politically complex a phenomenon as the work of Salman Rushdie. One day the attempt will be made to account in full for both the literary and the non-literary Rushdie. That will, however, be an enormous task, and meanwhile Andrew Teverson's book should be welcomed by all those concerned with postcolonial writing and with the relationship between literature and politics, as a valuable source of reference and a significant, if partial, contribution to debates that are of crucial significance for our times.

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Christopher Rollason (BA and MA Cambridge, PhD York) is an independent British scholar living in France. He has lectured at the University of Coimbra and collaborated as a guest lecturer with several Indian universities, including Jawaharlal Nehru University (Delhi). He has been Language Editor for the *Atlantic Literary Review* (Delhi), and is currently an editorial board member of the Indian journals *Reflections* and *Pegasus*. He has co-edited the anthology *Modern Criticism* (2002) and has many articles published on Indian Writing in English, Hispanic literatures, cultural and translation theory in journals including *JSL* Delhi, *Hispanic Horizon* (Delhi), *San Marcos Semanal* and *Boletín de la Academia Peruana de la Lengua* (Lima). Currently he is co-editing a volume of critical studies on the work of Vikram Chandra.

Address : 16 rue de Belchamps, F-57000 Metz, France. Telephone 00352-4300-23090. Fax 00352-4300-23905.