Salman Rushdie
(b. 1947)

Biography

Salman Rushdie was born in 1947 in Bombay, India, the son of a prosperous Muslim family. His family then moved to Pakistan.
In 1961 Rushdie's family moved to England, and later he attended King's College, in Cambridge.
In 1981 *Midnight's Children* became a best seller and Rushdie received first the Booker Prize, then the Booker of Bookers (1993) and the Best of the Booker (2008). His novel was turned into a film by director Deepa Mehta. In 1983 *Shame* appeared.
In 1985 *The Satanic Verses* was published in Britain; a copy was burned at a Muslim public protest in Bradford. *The Satanic Verses* was then banned in India, Pakistan, South Africa, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab states.
The American edition of *The Satanic Verses* was printed in 1989. Rushdie went into hiding after *The Satanic Verses* was denounced as blasphemous to Islam and he was ordered to be killed (*fatwah*).
In 1990 he published *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, a children's book, and in 1995 *The Moor's Last Sigh* appeared. In 1998 the *fatwah* was lifted.
In 1999 Rushdie published *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* and moved to New York. *Fury* was published in 2001: it is a black comedy, an inquiry into the darkest side of human nature, and a powerful love story. It is also an astonishing portrait of New York. Other popular novels include *Shalimar the Clown* (2005), set in Kashmir, and *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008). The children's book *Luka and the Fire of Life* (2010) deals with Haroun's brother.
Two Years, Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights (2015) is another 'story of the imaginary', dealing with a 'war of the worlds'.
On 12 August 2022, while he was about to give a public lecture in New York State, Rushdie was stabbed by an attacker. He was gravely wounded, but he managed to survive the attack.

Revising tradition, revisiting history

In Rushdie's works, the postcolonial revisitation of history is carried out through memory, not through objective historical details. It is based on oral and choral tradition; it is unreliable since it depends on a memory which invents and tells imaginary 'histories', so the point of view of the narrator is not scientific, but magic, fantastic, creative. **The border between truth and invention, history and imagination, thus, blurs, and there is a cross-fertilisation of levels**. As in postmodernist novels, reality is no longer understandable; history becomes fiction, so the narrator resorts both to over-plotting – to show how mysterious history can be – and to parody – to prove how many interpretations it can offer. 'Reality is a question of perspective; the further you get from the past, the more concrete and plausible it seems – but as you approach the present, it inevitably seems more and more incredible. Suppose yourself in a large cinema, sitting at first in the back row, and gradually moving up, row by row, until your nose is almost pressed against the screen. Gradually the stars' faces dissolve into dancing grain; tiny details assume grotesque proportions; the illusion dissolves – or rather, it becomes clear that the illusion itself *is* reality' (from *Midnight's Children*).

Style

Rushdie's style is based on excess, hyperbole, grand epiphanies and unresolved contradictions in a Baroque variety of styles including Dickens's realism, Sterne's hyperrealism, Fielding's heroic comic novel, the Indian narrative tradition, its folklore and its mythology. The result of this combination is a style characterised by:

- lack of linear progression;
- satirical tones;
- realism/myth shift;
- ample space for folklore and popular tales.

Midnight's Children is thus a **metafictional parody of novelistic conventions**, most of its intertextual references being Sterne, Márquez, Grass. Rushdie unveils the narrative structure and addresses the reader, reflecting on his own function as a narrator-cook-entertainer.

He parodies the national myths of growth and unification as well as historiography, juxtaposing them to the trivial level of daily life. He uses Magic Realism by introducing the supernatural in daily routine, thus freely operating on history. He challenges western rationalism and decentres his discourse on the unprivileged so as to offer a postcolonial perspective.

Post-colonial/postmodern similarities

Labelling Rushdie as either a postmodernist or postcolonial writer is not easy, since the debate about the theoretical fields is still on. However, he seems to show features common to both fields:

- an interest in metafiction, which shows how complex the relationship with the literary conventions and classical writers is. He revises the traditional master narratives from a postcolonial point of view;
- a revisionist view of history which questions historical data and certainties and decentres the colonial definitions of nationality;
- an attention to rewriting classical works by employing a variety of techniques like irony, parody, open-ended narrative, plurality of narrative levels, contamination among genres, and Magic Realism.

Midnight's Children (1981)

Midnight's Children is a complex novel, at once the history of India, the story of a boy's coming of age, the saga of his family and the epic of the liberation of a people. The narrative framework of *Midnight's Children* consists of a tale reminding the expert reader of the *Arabian Nights*. It ranges from the boy Saleem's life story – which Saleem Sinai himself tells orally to his wife-to-be Padma when he is already grown up; it shifts to the history of India's independence; it deals with Saleem's family saga. Like a good cook, the narrator blends all his narrative ingredients, often using features of Magic Realism as a device binding the Indian culture of the past to contemporary multicultural society. He also uses a variety of cinematic techniques (zoom in/out, medium shots, close-ups) to show the hypnotic power of this medium as part of a hybrid post-colonial Indian culture. The problem of **the narrator's identity** and as a consequence, of **India's identity**, is crucial in the novel, since Saleem and his family may be seen as a microcosm of what has happened to the country: born on the night of India's independence,

Saleem is a special boy, endowed with the gift of telepathy, as all the other boys and girls born on that night. However, he has no certainties about himself, he is not even the real son of his parents, and he says:

'Who what am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I've gone which would not have happened if I had not come. Nor am I particularly exceptional in this matter; each 'I', every one of the now-six-hundred-million-plus of us, contains a similar multitude. I repeat for the last time: to understand me, you'll have to swallow a world.'

Saleem often appears to be an unreliable narrator, mixing up dates and details of events he never witnessed. He also draws attention to his own telling of the story thus using a metanarrative technique (self-reflexivity): 'Like an incompetent puppeteer, I reveal the hands holding the strings...'.

Legacy

The legacy of Rushdie's style – and of other popular writers like Amitav Gosh, Vikram Seth and Vikram Chandra – is deeply felt by the new generation of IWE (Indians Writing in English), young authors like Tishani Doshi, Palash Krishna Mehrotra (*The Butterfly Generation: A Personal Journey into the Passions and Follies of India's Technicolor Youth)* or Singh Dhalival (*Tourism*) who speak English often better than hindi or their mother tongue. Yet the cultural models of this new generation are wider than just Rushdie's Magic Realism: they look at existentialism, American literature and underground rock; they love new technologies, satellite TV and Bollywood. The Indian culture they show is therefore an ironic mixture of tradition and consumerism, social injustice and globalisation. As Amitav Gosh said, 'India today is not only a place, but a wide transnational culture.'