

LITERATURE  
Salman Rushdie

"I am Pessimistic about the Changes Occurring in India"

Salman Rushdie has come a long way from the time Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa compelled him to live in strict confinement. These days, Rushdie travels abroad much more, goes out for dinner, shops for his own clothes and has, at least, some semblance of a social life. Now he's back in the news with his new novel *The Moor's Last Sigh*. It's vintage Rushdie: set against the backdrop of contemporary India, the novel is a dazzling mix of satire and sadness, history and humour. And in what has become all too predictable, the applause has been accompanied by the jeers of a ban.

At the centre of the controversy is the book's unsparring portrayal of right-wing Hindu zealots in Bombay and a brilliantly etched caricature that many believe to be of Shiv Sena chief Bal Thackeray. Even before he had seen the cover, Thackeray gave his verdict. "He has no motherland," he said last fortnight. And, therefore, he had "no business" writing about people he had little knowledge of. As for a ban, Thackeray said he would defer his decision until he had read the book.

Foresight and ill-fortune intervened. The distributors, Rupa & Co., withheld the book's release in Bombay. Said its Delhi manager R K Mehra: "In view of the sensitive situation, we are exercising voluntary restraint." The death of Thackeray's wife last fortnight put the Rushdie controversy on the backburner.

Thousands of miles away, the controversy is yet to generate much heat. It's a measure of how much the security strait-jacket around Rushdie has been relaxed that all it took for Copy Editor AMRIT DHILLON to reach him was to take a short taxi ride from the office of his publishers, Jonathan Cape, to the elegant Halkin Hotel just off London's Hyde Park Corner. Rushdie, smartly attired, was waiting in the room with two policemen in tow.

He spoke on a range of issues: the "controversial" aspects of his latest novel; the future of secularism in India and how it feels to be exiled from his beloved Bombay. Asked what was the first thing he would do if the fatwa against him was lifted, Rushdie said: "Catch the first plane to India."

Excerpts from the interview:  
Q. It's ironic that first,

The Satanic Verses was banned to appease Muslim sentiments and now your latest novel has been restricted to appease a section of Hindu sentiments.

A. As I understand it, there are two kinds of problems. First, I hear this rumour about Sonia Gandhi being upset about the naming of a dog in the novel. And I gather that there is some attempt to have the book banned in the rest of India because there is a dog called Jawaharal in the novel. I find it a rather ridiculous issue.

This is not a novel that sets out to ridicule the India that Nehru brought into being, but actually to lament the damage done to that vision of India in the succeeding years. Most of the leading characters in the novel are passionately in favour of the independence movement except for one who is pro-British — an Indian character who is pro-British — and it is this figure, in order to annoy his family who are nationalists, who names his dog Jawaharal.

It has to be seen in this context. It is the one anti-national character who does this to annoy and all the other major characters in the novel are annoyed by this. Given this background, it would be tragically ironic if people who claim to be protecting the flame of Nehru's memory should see this novel as being hostile to it. This is a point I wanted to make because I think that it is important that this is said in India before people get the wrong end of the stick; before people say, "There is a dog called Jawaharal in the story, so it must be against him. End of story." Read the book and you will see. I hope that Sonia Gandhi or the Government, or whoever else it may be, understands that this is what is happening in the book.

To come to the Shiv Sena, it is quite plain that I feel that there are forces in Indian society that are transforming it in ways not always beneficial. And if you set a novel in Bombay and you set it in real history, then clearly it is difficult to avoid the events there and the political movements that exist there. In the novel, it's the behaviour and the political interventions of the party called the Mumbai Axis, that's probably more based on the Shiv Sena than the character Raman Fielding is based on Thackeray.

Now there is stuff that is an obvious joke. The cartoonist is fairly obvious in this connection. Although in the novel, the reason why I preserve the idea of a cartoonist is not so much to lampoon Thackeray as because the novel is about artists, and I wanted to make this contrast between the great artist and the cartoonist.

It would be slightly wrong of Thackeray to think that it was only based on him because, of course, his leadership of the Sena is an obvious historical fact. A novel is not a photograph. It does not operate the way in which even a newspaper operates. And so I would say that plenty of people, newspapers, journalists criticise Shiv Sena and Thackeray every day and in language far worse than anything found in my book.

I would have thought that the best thing that the Shiv Sena and Thackeray can do in order to prove their democratic bonafides is to step back. How many people are going to read this, how many votes are they going to lose as a result of this?

I know that there was an attempt to prevent the release of this movie in which Thackeray also believed himself to be portrayed. I know there were some violent attacks in which the director was attacked and the film was censored.

Q. So there seems to be an increasing culture of intolerance in India.

A. The India that came into being in 1947 was an India of which the three planks, broadly speaking, were secularism, democracy and socialism. Now there seems to be a weakening of the democratic impulse, there's more censorship in the country. The growth of Hindu nationalism in the main but also growth of religious extremism of other kinds, both Muslim and Sikh, represent a real threat to the secular principles of this nation.

One can hear people talking about the need to rewrite the Constitution to desecularise it. And then, of course, in the economic sphere, the change in economic structure with the arrival of free-market economics in a very radical way... very dramatic. All these things seem to be changing the country so fundamentally that one could say that the country which came into being in 1947 is being transformed into something else.

Q. The transformation in India that you talk about — are you pessimistic about it? What do you feel about the



EXCERPT

Raman Fielding's name derived, according to legend, from a cricket-mad father, a street-wise Bombay ragamuffin who hung around the Bombay Gymkhana pleading to be given a chance: "Please, babujis, you give this poor chokra one batting? One bowling only? Okay, okay — then just one fielding? He turned out to be a lousy cricketer but when the Brabourne Stadium was opened in 1937 he gained employment as a security guard, and over the years his skill at nabbing and expelling gatecrashers came to the notice of the immortal C K Nayudu, who recognised him from the old days at the Gymkhana and joked, 'So my little just-one-fielding — you sure grew up to take some expert catches'. After that the fellow was always known as JO Fielding... His son learned a different lesson from cricket. From the start the Parsis and Muslims tried to steal the game from us," he would declaim. 'But when we Hindus got our teams together, naturally we proved too strong.'

rise of communalism, the BJP?

A. I am quite pessimistic. I am anxious not to be too pessimistic because the Indian electorate has repeatedly proved itself to be more sophisticated than most commentators. But broadly speak-

ing, yes, I think I am pessimistic about it because I do not see a strong political force emerging against those ideas. I don't see a strong political force also in the intelligentsia. In large sections of it, there has been an unnerving desire to do business

with communalist ideas and that is worrying. I think it is a perfectly proper function of people who care about India and write about it to express their misgivings and their fears and I have those misgivings and fears.

Q. About three years after the fatwa, you announced that you had embraced Islam. Recently, you said that you regretted that decision. Why?

A. It was the time when I felt very depressed and very abandoned and despairing. It was very easy for everybody to just blame me and not see any other problem. I thought that I must try and do something to say to ordinary Muslims everywhere that, 'You have been told that I am this terrible enemy of yours and that I am not and I never was'. And I did not know how to say that in a way that anybody would listen and thus it came from that and so it came from perfectly, I suppose, decent motives.

But it was the wrong thing to do because it put me into a place where I couldn't speak honestly about my feelings. The fact is that I am not an enemy of Islam — how could I be when my whole family are Muslims? It would be like being an enemy of my mother. But I am not a believer. I know it is very shocking in India where everybody has some kind of religious belief, but for me, I have never felt the need for that belief to help me explain the world.

Q. How would you describe your emotional relationship with India?

A. There is only one place for every human being and always only one place that gives you the feeling of being at home. I was born in Bombay and even now going to Bombay is the only time when I have the feeling of coming home.

By a strange and sad irony, given that I got paid quite a lot of money for *The Satanic Verses* — it was the first time really in my life that I was given a big paycheck — it has always been my idea to use a chunk of that money to buy myself a foothold in Bombay. Just so that I could go there and not have to stay with friends; not have to stay in hotels. Just have a two-room flat that you could lock up, and when you go back you can open your own front door.

This is the first time in my life that I have ever felt like in exile. Until now, I felt like somebody who chose to live in England as many Indians have but who re-

tained this connection with India. I didn't feel separated from it; I still don't feel separated from it but I have not been able to go there. It's *The Moor's Last Sigh* the first book I have written about India without going to India. Fortunately for me, on the many visits I have made before, I have kept very detailed notes, journals and diaries.

Q. It must be disappointing for you that India is going through such a rapid change and you are not there to witness it.

A. It's more than disappointing. It's a great loss, as a writer, and if it were not for circumstances, I would be on the first plane. It's the thing I would most like to do.

Q. Some years ago, you said that you foresaw the emergence of a new breed of Indian writers who will challenge the political system. This hasn't happened.

A. I don't remember saying that. What I do remember saying is somewhat different. I mean, leaving aside the political challenge, when I came to India when *Midnight's Children* came out, there were writers who were somewhat older than myself. There was Anita Desai, R K Narayan, Raja Rao, all these figures. But in my generation, or younger, at that time I thought they were really very few. What I think is very interesting, in the 15 years since that time, there is an enormous number of wonderfully gifted Indian writers in English.

Q. Following the path set by you in *Midnight's Children*?

A. Whether they exactly follow my path or not, I think it's probably true that *Midnight's Children* opened a door for some people. Its success encouraged a kind of world audience and big publishers to look towards other Indian writers. Also, it gave permission to people to write their own work. I sometimes felt that some Indian writers have kind of written their *Midnight's Children*-novel and once they've got it out of their system, they go on and write better novels. Rohinton Mistry, for instance, is a very fine writer. Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, lots and lots of people. Mukul Kesavan is a young writer whose book I've said I think has a lot of promise. But I'd like to see the emergence of a really important woman writer. I think there is a kind of lack in that area. I would like to see *A Suitable Girl*.

Q. One of your characters

says, "Embrace your fate. Rejoice in what gives you grief. That which you would flee, turn and run towards it with all your heart. Only by becoming your misfortune, will you transcend it." Is this how you have been trying to cope with your ordeal?

A. Somewhat, yes. I mean, not exactly, because you know you put it in the mouth of other characters and it becomes what other characters would say rather than you yourself. But in some way, it's been necessary to say all I've felt. I think the hardest thing has been for me to find a way of going on being myself. The fatwa and the events that followed could quite easily have pushed me, the writer, in different directions. These events could have made me more cautious, more frightened, more conservative as a writer. Or on the other extreme, they could have made me angrier, more bitter, more polemical as a writer. And I felt that the thing was not to be deflected in either direction. Not to allow myself to become defined by the fatwa.

Q. What's your typical day like?

A. I have a straightforward writer's day. By about half past nine, I'm writing, usually for about four or five hours a day. Then I do whatever I'm supposed to do. These days, it is little less circumscribed than it used to be, in the sense that, I can get out.

Q. How often do you go for dinner? Can friends come and see you?

A. The one thing that is still very abnormal is that the place where I live is kept completely secret.

Q. Even from closest friends?

A. Yes. Just because I don't want to burden other people with the knowledge. But, in terms of going out, I don't do it that much — not nearly as much as the tabloid press would have you believe. The difference is that every time I do go out, there is a photographer and it ends up in the newspapers.

Q. When you go out, what kind of precautions are taken?

A. I shouldn't talk about it. I'm not really supposed to talk about it. Sufficient precautions are taken. The reason this has worked is that people don't know how it's done. There was an attempt by the Government of this country to imprison me and have the police force of this country become my jailors. Amazing, rather brilliant ef-

Continued on page 12

Untouched by the Preoccupations of Modern Life

BOOK REVIEW



Iris Murdoch the German pro-Nazi existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger. Murdoch, a former Professor of Philosophy at Oxford University has written theses on existentialism and a critique of the work of Jean-Paul Sartre.

Another character, Mildred, sets out for India to seek fulfilment from Hinduism or working alongside the Albanian nun Mother Teresa helping the poor of Calcutta — she appears uncertain which.

In any case, Mildred gets sidetracked when, on a practice run in London's rundown east end, she encounters an Anglican priest devoting his life to the destitute.

Here the novel leaps abruptly into the modern age as Mildred contemplates becoming an Anglican priest herself.

The church of England voted only in 1992 to allow women to become priests and Murdoch was a keen advocate of the move.

are frequent themes in Murdoch's fiction. The author has said that, while she does not literally believe in god or the after-life, she has faith in the underlying meaning of Christianity and a belief in human goodness. She has expressed interest in Zen Buddhism.

Her novels, she once said, are erotic mysteries and deep dark struggles between good and evil.

Philosophical debate in *Jackson's Dilemma* comes in brief soliloquies in which key characters reflect on "darkness" and "evil," barely interrupting the fast-flowing narrative.

This superficial treatment of grand themes has exasperated Murdoch's detractors.

It is a continuing enigma to me how so obviously intelligent, not to say intellectual, a woman as Iris Murdoch can write such affected, vapid, unreal novels," wrote a reviewer of her previous novel, *The Green Knight*.

*Jackson's Dilemma* skims the psyches of its

characters, most of whom turn out to be scarred by past tragedies.

The spurned bridegroom Edward is haunted by the memory of failing to save his brother from drowning.

Tuan's life is blighted by the story of his aunt who fled from the train that took her family to a Nazi concentration camp so that she could retrieve the family dog.

The aunt was never seen again and, although Tuan's father survived the camp to come to England and marry a Scottish Presbyterian, Tuan is unable to shake off her memory.

"I cannot marry any woman. My father's sufferings, my grandfather, my grandmother, all of that indelible sorrow, all that is forever, I must carry on one sharing it with any other being," says Tuan at one point.

A few pages later, Tuan has succumbed to the advances of Rosalind and agreed to marry her.

Such abrupt developments it seems are not unknown in Murdoch's life. Her husband, a former professor of Literature, once told how he first glimpsed Murdoch cycling past his study window at Oxford University and instantly decided she was the woman he would marry.

The eponymous Jackson is Benet's servant, a skilled cook and handyman. His past is a mystery, but he is adored by the cast of *Jackson's Dilemma* who all agree that he is "a good man."

"You are an avatar with a broken wing," Oliver, a successful but boozy artist, tells him.

Jackson is Murdoch's force for good and he is the key to the novel's tidy conclusion.

BOOK REVIEW

In the face of so many impressions to the contrary it is always worth reminding ourselves that Islam is above all the religion of reasoned faith, neither wholly one nor wholly the other, but the two aspects in perfect complementarity.

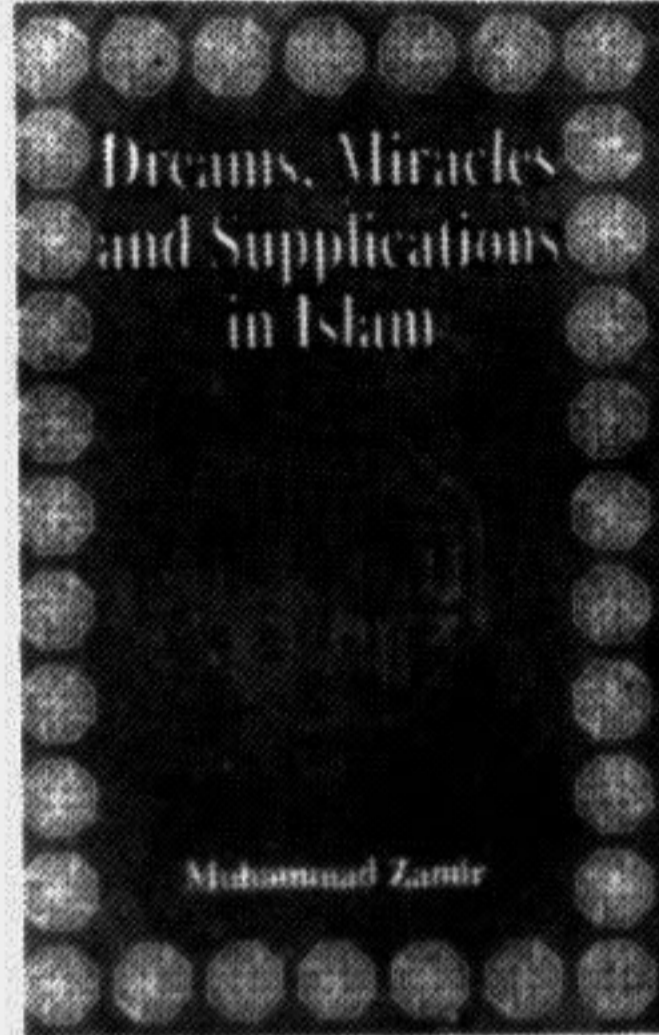
Muhammad Zamir has written the book under review with young people in mind particularly those who are daily bombarded with the false message that Islam stands for obscurantism.

And indeed one could not have hoped for a more qualified person to set out this point of view. Muhammad Zamir is one of the country's distinguished diplomats, with a profound knowledge of the Arabic language. He has drawn upon, on the one hand, his background of worldly experience at the highest levels of the state and, on the other, a life-long urge towards intense religious investigation (carried out, in recent years, in the proximity of Makkah Mukarrama and Medina Munawara). This dual exposure has enabled him to develop a balanced modern appreciation of the total Islamic experience, its early history, its fundamental tenets and practices, the Holy Quran itself and the exemplary life of the Prophet Muhammad.

Nothing could more clearly get across the flavour and eloquence of this refreshing, stimulating approach than to quote a passage in its entirety:

"Islam wants faith in God to be not only effective and permanent but also, if required, based on knowledge and research. It leaves wide

Dreams, Miracles and Supplications in Islam, by Muhammad Zamir, University Press Limited, Dhaka, 1995



open all fields of thought, physical and metaphysical, scientific and philosophical, intuitive and experimental, organic and otherwise — so that the intellect can penetrate it.

It does not lay down restrictions. Islam is a truly modern and vibrant religion and does not have to be afraid of a person seeking knowledge to widen his vision and broaden his mind. It believes that if the intellectual abilities of man and his mind can be unshackled, it will only empower him with greater self confidence. The internal nature of man will then become sound and healthy.

When this is so, his external life as a Muslim will also attain greater productivity." (p.196-7)

One of the book's most interesting sections is a close reading of some key Suras from the Holy Quran. This helps one to get across the way in which each *Sura* is like a tapestry of criss-crossing themes, which now pop up on the surface and now run hidden, influencing the

techniques of mining the Holy Quran's riches.

Given these inexhaustible topics in the actual text of the Holy Quran one fails to see the need for straining after artificial patterns, such as in the discussion regarding the number 19 (p.25). But this is only a minor quibble which does not detract from the book's overall nobility of purpose and its illuminating nature.

Reviewed by Salahuddin Imam

Prisoner

(This poem is dedicated to the valiant fighters of the 1971 war of independence)

Michael Matthias

Lonely as ever, I stand  
Under the foot of this  
Massive concrete monument  
The silence-interrupted  
By the twittering of birds  
Does not disturb  
Those who lie here  
Beneath the vast stretch of land  
In eternal rest.

O valiant fighters of freedom  
Your lives were sacrificed  
For the cause of justice  
But, was not your blood shed in vain?  
For while you rest here in peace  
The super powers  
Destroy each other  
Guns of vengeance displaying  
Terrorism, hate and nuclear power.

Monuments, epitaphs  
Honour the place where you lie  
But in our memory  
You are immortal.  
O brothers and sisters will you share  
The bliss you enjoy  
Under the sacred ground  
With me?

Here I stand above you  
Conscious of my existence  
But not with the reward  
Which you have gained  
For in the bowels of mother earth  
Lies your bones  
In the heavens above your soul  
While I stand here  
Wrecked in pain and agony  
A prisoner, in my own body.