

essay

Salman Rushdie: Handcuffed to History

by Shamsad Mortuza

GEORG LUKACS IN HIS CANONICAL work, *The Historical Novel*, credits Sir Walter Scott for maintaining the 'glorious middle way' while representing the past in a realistic manner. Lukacs finds Scott an 'honest' writer whose 'conservative' outlook has given a 'true' account of the past. Conventional historical fictions prescribe/believe in the realistic recuperation of the past in the present.

Historiography or postmodern fiction narrating history does not claim any such 'truth'. For their authors, there are no truths or events of the past which one can represent through language in the present with absolute unquestionable certainty. Postmodern writers recognise both history and literature as discourses. History, like fiction, needs to be read first within historical, social, and ideological contexts. This reading demands establishing history against its grain, and postmodern writers take an acknowledged active role in the interpretation of the history rather than a passive viewing role. They do not merely chronicle historical events rather intervene in history.

Instead of the professional withdrawal of the author from history, a deliberate attempt is made by the postmodern writers to place themselves inside histories. Postmodern writers do not bother to camouflage the thin line that separates fact from fiction. The ontological tension between historical fact and fictional intervention is nurtured by postmodern writers. They take the liberty of flirting with fantasy and contradicting familiar historical fact. This active role taken by the postmodern writers while re-doing history and refusing to view the past 'as it really was' is the essence of what Linda Hutcheon calls historiographic metafiction in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. For Linda Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction falls into two major types: "On the one hand, we find

overt, deliberately manipulative narrators; on the other, no one single perspective but myriad voices, often not completely recognisable in the textual universe."

Salman Rushdie exploits both these types in his works. His historiographic metafiction is the counter-canon which fracture our received or established notions of the past with interpretative nuances of history. Rushdie's narrators in *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* are in search of the meanings of history of the Indian sub-continent. He has "commandeered" himself the job of rewriting history. Being a "mohajir," an immigrant, Rushdie is as stigmatised as the Yeatsian 'Rough beast'. He anticipates the opposition he might face in re-doing the Bethlehem of historical truth yet dares to meet the challenge: "Outsider! trespasser! You have no right to this subject!"

Poacher! pirate! We reject your authority. We know you, with your foreign language wrapped around you like a flag: speaking about us in a forked tongue, what can you tell but lies? I reply with more questions: is history to be considered the property of the participants solely? In what courts are such claims staked, what boundary commissions map out the territories?"

Rushdie thus offers himself to salvage history from its archive, from its "archaeologised" documents, scriptures, and artifacts. He prefers to join the participants club of history, relying mainly on his imagination which he identifies as memory. His protagonist, Saleem Sinai, in *Midnight's Children*, spins an autobiographical story into the history of India; in *Shame* his peripheral hero Omar Khayyam finds himself at the centre of the universe that rotates on the axis between shame and shamelessness while *Shame's* brain-sick heroine Sufiya Zinobia Hyder in her trance enters the nucleus of patriarch and religious design only to unnerve it.

Saleem Sinai tells us that he is "buffeted by too much history" which has resulted in his disintegration. He wants to record his story before he forgets. After all, "We [Indians] are a nation of forgetters." Saleem recalls his infantile Bombay days at the end of 1947: "[l]ife in Bombay was as teeming, as manifold, as multitudinously shapeless as ever... except that I had arrived; I was already beginning to take my place at the centre of the universe; and by the time I had finished, I would give meaning to it all."

At another point of the story, Saleem informs: "I became directly responsible for triggering off the violence which ended with the partition of the state of Bombay."

The partition of India, the killing of Gandhi, the Indo-Pak war, the creation of Bangladesh, everything spirals inward from the real world and settles in the psyche of the narrator as we glimpse the inner truth. This centrifugal movement of history is the Rushdiean way of coping with the confrontation between the past and the present. In his essay, entitled "Errata: Or, Unreliable Narration in *Midnight's Children*," Rushdie writes, "Time and migration had placed a double filter between me and my subject, and I hoped that if I could only imagine vividly enough it might be possible to see beyond those filters, to write as if the years had not passed, as if I had never left India for the West. But as I worked I found that what interested me was the process of filtration itself. So my subject changed, was no longer a search for lost time, had become the way to remake the past to suit our present purposes, using memory as our tool."

Rushdie is aware of the risks involved in remaking the past to serve the present with the help of his not-so-reliable memory. His history, therefore, does not merely take an account of historical events. Rather, he wants to shape his material that the reader will

be "forced to concede his central role." Rushdie assigns this pivotal role to his narrators not with authenticity but with authority because Rushdiean history follows the Darwinian maxim: survival of the fittest. In *Shame*, referring to the tug-of-war of the army generals and dictators, Rushdie comments: "History is a natural selection. Mutant versions of the past struggle for dominance; new dominance of fact arise, and old, saurian truths go to the wall, blindfolded and smoking last cigarettes. Only the mutations of the strong survive... History loves only those who dominate her: it is a relationship of mutual enslavement."

At the same time Rushdie is driven by the true desire of an artist to impose his vision on the world. This desire involves the question of selection as well. He asks himself, what to retain, what to dump, how to hold on to what memory insists on relinquishing.

Natural Selection and Artistic Selection of history compete with each other and are survived by the fittest version told by the over-assertive narrators. Saleem Sinai can make Ganesha sit at the feet of the poet Valmiki and record Ramayana. Rushdie later admits that Saleem was wrong in naming the epic. After all, Ganesha, the ardent listener of Valmiki, is responsible for Mahabharata not Ramayana. Rushdie probably got carried away by the analogy he was trying to draw between the elephantine nose of Saleem Sinai and the elephant-headed god, especially when his story was the story of Maha Bharati, the undivided India. But his nakoo narrator continues to prolong the list of such mistakes. Saleem claims that his father heard Lata Mangeskar singing on All India Radio in 1946, saw General Sam Manekshaw (instead of Aurora) heralding the triumph over Nazi in the liberation war of Bangladesh, and he was borne across the Sundarbans in the tidal upsurge of 1970.

Rushdie envisages his narrators to be unreliable. But he does not want them to be the conventional stock-type fools. The level of intelligence of Rushdie's narrators is shockingly high, and hence they force us to give them the benefit-of-doubt to their claims of truth. Saleem Sinai can boldly argue: "Reality is a question of perspective... Rereading my work, I have discovered an error in chronology. The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi occurs in these pages, on the wrong date. But I cannot say, now, what the actual sequences of events might have been, in my India, Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time. Does one error invalidate the entire fabric? Am I so far gone, in my desperate need for meaning, that I'm prepared to distort everything - to rewrite the whole history of my times purely in order to place myself in a central role?"

The rhetorical questions seem to answer for themselves. Saleem, in his desperate need for meaning has gone to the extreme of equating himself with the events which surround or develop around him. We don't mind thinking of him as *Midnight's* child, the twin brother of the nation. But we cannot reject outright his history as 'his story' because his narrators (the subject) assert their versions of historical events (the object) in order to gain some control over the world they represent. And, we suddenly discover ourselves "mysteriously handcuffed to history" along with Rushdie's narrator in *Midnight's Children*.

The pressure of history is withdrawn with equal abruptness. When Saleem Sinai invites us to 'swallow' his world, we learn that he prepares and preserves histories and chutney whiffs with equal diligence. Preservation of chutney gains equal status with preservation of history: "My chutneys and kasaundies are... connected to my nocturnal scribbles - by day among the pickle-vals, by night within these sheets, I spend my time at the great work of preserving."

Memory, as well as fruit, is being saved from the corruption of the clocks."

Surely, Saleem's role as preserver of history or the chutnification of history is not meant to be taken seriously. Boatman Tai's chutnified account of Naseem's development of the desired headache informs how Saleem's grandmother gets the pretext to expose her face to Doctor Aziz. This incident, Saleem tells us, overlaps with the end of the World War. The bathos deserves equally shocking comment from the grandson: "Such historical coincidences have littered, and perhaps befoiled, my family's existence in the world."

The parody here is obvious. Linda Hutcheon explains the use of parody in historiographic metafiction as an attempt to restore history and memory in the face of the distortions of the "history of forgetting" and also to put into question the authority of any act of writing by locating the discourses of both history and fiction within an ever-expanding intertextual network that mocks any notion of either single origin or simple causality.

Thus, we begin to recognise the presence of the layman narrator closing in on the centre from the periphery. The over-importance laid on the errata de-centres - and consequently - dismantles the world we know. We are reminded of the painter in *Midnight's Children* who tried to get the whole of life into his art only to recognise, "I wanted to be a miniaturist and I've got elephantiasis instead." Contradiction within the convention like this surfaces in Rushdie's texts and we identify the broken pieces at the backdrop of gender, race, and class contexts.

[The paper was presented at the "Re-thinking English" conference held at the British Council, February 22-23.]

About the writer: Shamsad Mortuza is Lecturer in English at Jahangirnagar University.

books

Commonwealth Writers Prize '97

THE COMMONWEALTH WRITERS Prize is a prestigious book prize awarded annually for the Best Book and the Best First Book, selected from eight regional winners.

The regional winners of the 1997 Commonwealth Writers Prize are as follows:

Africa

BEST BOOK — *Under the Tongue* (Zimbabwe) by Yvonne Vera, published by Baobab Books, Zimbabwe.

Yvonne Vera was born in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, where she now lives. Her collection of short stories *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals*, and her novels *Nehanda* and *Without a Name* were short listed in the Commonwealth Writers Prize for 1993, 1994 and 1995 respectively. *Without a Name* won her the Zimbabwe Publisher's Literary Award.

She worked as a cotton picker at the age of eight in the Chegutu area of Zimbabwe.

Yvonne Vera is a doctoral graduate of York University, Toronto.

Under the Tongue

Under the Tongue reveals Yvonne Vera's prodigious talent as a novelist. Written with shocking lyricism, poise and intensity, *Under the Tongue* invites the reader into the hurt and emotion of its young, deeply wounded heroine, Zhiha. With a restless courage and sensitive wisdom, Vera challenges and uncovers society's worst silences and taboos.

This is the first Zimbabwean novel to explore frankly and unapologetically, the harsh secrets which aid betrayal within families. Here, told in mesmerising detail, father and daughter are linked in an anxious, suffocating and fatal contact.

We are led into the agonising depths of violence and despair, but this is also a novel of strength, of magic, of innocence, and the simple celebration of living: "A dream cannot be forgotten, it grows roots where silence lingers. It is true there is a word beyond memory, fearless, gentle, full of buried worlds — a word licked with an ancient tenderness. It is true there is a word sweetened by death, lit by a fire gathered from a falling star."

Under the Tongue — published by Baobab Books — with its focus on the power of language to change worlds, is a dazzling, compelling and unforgettable read.

BEST FIRST BOOK — *At the Edge* (South Africa) by Ronnie Govender, published by Hibbard Publishers, South Africa.

Ronnie Govender was born in Cator Manor in 1934. His interest in storytelling and theatre was fuelled by the masterful stories his mother and grandmother told him and his siblings. He became truly enthralled by the formal theatrical arts after witnessing Andre Huegenot's performance in *Oedipus Rex* in his standard 7 year.

As a fiery young adult Ronnie believed that no writer could escape involvement in the struggle against apartheid. The sixties were busy year for him; he was involved in work for SACOS and COSAW. He was teaching. He was a sales manager for a



Beryl Bainbridge

brewery. He also formed Durban's Shah Theatre Academy, where many of SA's leading theatre practitioners have been trained and where he nurtured his love of community theatre. During this time he also wrote many of his best plays: *The Lahnee's Pleasure*, *Swami*, *Off-Side!*, *In-Side*, *Blossoms from the Bough*, *At the Edge* and *1949*. *At the Edge* was invited to the Grahamstown and Edinburgh Festivals, and also to perform in Glasgow and Toronto. 1949 has its world premiere at the 1996 Grahamstown Festival Main.

At The Edge

This collection of fourteen short stories by Ronnie Govender firmly establishes him as a writer with insight and compassion; the

backdrop for these tales is Cator Manor during the forties, fifties and sixties — at the edge of apartheid upheavals in South Africa.

Ronnie Govender relates stories from his youth in Cator Manor with rare compassion, humour and love. Nobody had ventured to explore the lives, tragedies and patois of the Indian communities in South Africa until Ronnie wrote these stories in the sixties. His love of community theatre inspired and drove him to the stage, and his skills were honed over the years — his writing for stage and print becoming a delightful tongue-in-cheek commentary on South African society.

Chairperson of the judging panel — Professor Francis D Imbuga, Kenyatta University, Nairobi.

Caribbean and Canada

BEST BOOK — *Salt* (Trinidad) by Earl Lovelace, published by Faber and Faber, UK.

Earl Lovelace, born in Toco, Trinidad, has spent most of his life on the islands of Trinidad and Tobago. His early work was in agriculture and as a forest ranger. He has been a journalist, been Writer-in-Residence at the University of the West Indies and at universities in the United States and Britain, and has given lectures, readings and participated in conferences internationally.

His books have been translated into German, Dutch, French and Hungarian, his short stories have been widely anthologised and his essays and reviews have appeared in many publications. His works include *White Gods Are Falling*, which won the BP Independence Award, the Caribbean classic *The Dragon Can't Dance*, *The Wine of Astonishment*, *The Schoolmaster*, *A Brief Conversation* and *Other Stories* and *Jestina's Calypso* (a collection of plays).

Salt

Salt is an extraordinary *tour de force* by one of the pre-eminent literary presences in the Caribbean, a novel which explores like none before it the intermingling of cultures that is the contemporary West Indian experience.

Ever since Guinea John, with a price on his head for insurrection, put two corn cobs under his armpits and flew from a cliff-top back to Africa, taking with him the secrets of levitation and flight, his descendants, condemned to life on the island, have found that the "New World" has remained out of their grasp. Now comes Alfred George, schoolteacher turned politician, who, after nineteen years of teaching his pupils to escape overseas, is forced to face the question: how to welcome the diverse races of Trinidad to their own island and how to set free a people who, more than a century after 'Emancipation', are still struggling under old captivities?

BEST FIRST BOOK — *Fall on Your Knees* (Canada) by Ann-Marie MacDonald published by Alfred A Knopf — Canada.

Ann-Marie MacDonald is a writer and actor. Her play *Goodnight, Desdemona* (*Good Morning Juliet*) won the Governor General's Award, The Chalmers Award and the Canadian Authors Association Award and has had more than fifty productions worldwide. It is published by Coach House Press. Other works for theatre include *The Arab's Mouth* (Blizzard Press), and the libretto for the internationally acclaimed chamber opera, *Nigredo Hotel*. She won a Gemini for her role in the film *Where the Spirit Lives*, and was nominated for a Genie for her role in *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*. She lives and works in Toronto.

Fall on Your Knees

From one of Canada's famous playwrights comes a stunning novel of epic proportions and storytelling power — finely written, rich and very moving, by turns dark and hilariously funny.

Following the cures of history in the first half of the twentieth century, *Fall on Your Knees* takes us from haunted Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, through the battlefields

of World War I, to the emerging jazz scene of New York City and into the lives of four unforgettable sisters.

The mythically charged family — James, a father of intelligence and immense ambition, Matera, his Lebanese child-bride, and their daughters: Kathleen, the eldest, a beautiful talent preparing for a career as an opera Diva; Frances, incorrigible liar and hell-bent bad girl; Mercedes, obsessive Catholic and protector of the flock; and Lily, the adored invalid who takes us on a quest for truth and redemption — is supported by a richly textured cast of characters.

Chairperson of the judging panel — Ms Jane King Hippolyte, Sir Arthur Lewis Community College, St Lucia.

Eurasia

BEST BOOK — *Every Man for Himself* (Great Britain) by Beryl Bainbridge, published by Gerald Duckworth & Co Ltd, UK.

Beryl Bainbridge is one of the greatest living English novelists. Author of fifteen novels, two travel books and five plays for stage and television, she has twice been shortlisted for the Booker Prize and has won both the Guardian Fiction Prize with *The Dressmaker* and the Whitbread Prize with *Injury Time*. *The Bottle Factory Outing*, *Sweet William* and *The Dressmaker* have been adapted for film, as has, most recently, *An Awfully Big Adventure* starring Alan Rickman and Hugh Grant. Her last novel, *The Birthday Boys*, followed Scott's ill-fated expedition to the South Pole in 1912 and was shortlisted for the 1992 Whitbread Prize.

Every Man for Himself

On Wednesday April 10th 1912, RMS Titanic left Southampton on her maiden voyage to New York. Four days later, half an hour before mid-night, she struck an iceberg. By 2 am the last lifeboat had rowed frantically away. Then, within only twenty minutes, the great ship had sunk and 1500 people had lost their lives.

Every Man for Himself recaptures those four crucial days lost with the ship. Never has Beryl Bainbridge's spare, laconic style of writing been used to better advantage. No word is wasted to convey the intensity of emotion and the fatality of the journey.

The story is told by Morgan the young nephew of the owner of the shipping line, his fate linked to a Jewish tailor from Manchester, a deserted opera singer and the mysterious Scurra. Was the Titanic, despite repeated ice warnings travelling too fast? Why was she issued with a certificate of seaworthiness when there was a fire blazing in the stoke hold of No. 10 bunker? And why did Scurra, long before tragedy struck, remark that it was every man for himself?

BEST FIRST BOOK — *Interesting Facts About the State of Arizona* (Great Britain) by Jeremy Poolman, published by Faber and Faber, UK.

Jeremy Poolman was born and educated in England, but spends much of his time in the United States and on Waikake Island, New Zealand. *Interesting Facts About the State of Arizona* is his first novel.

Chairperson of the judging panel — Professor Kaiser Haq, University of Dhaka.

Bangladesh

SE Asia & South Pacific

BEST BOOK — *Leaning Towards Infinity* (Australia) by Sue Woolfe, published by Random House, Australia.

Sue Woolfe spent her childhood in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales. She was educated at Sydney University and the University of New England. She made films, wrote textbooks and edited film subtitles.

Sue is the author of *Painted Women*, the novel and play and co-author with Kate Grenville of *Making Stories: How Ten Australian Novels Were Written*. She has a daughter.

Leaning Towards Infinity

This is not my story. It is the story of Frances Montrose, an Australian woman with no formal mathematics training who carried across the world, in a borrowed suitcase bulging with a friend's ball dresses, something no one knew about. The discovery of a new number.

I can barely add up so I can't tell you much about her mathematics. Only to say she was a genius. And she was my mother, my love, my emptiness. Her mathematics was her secret passion and her curse. And my curse too, Hyatia Montrose.

"With this book, Sue Woolfe places herself amongst the finest of Australian writers... I would not be surprised if it became a cult book of great durability."

Thomas Keneally

BEST FIRST BOOK — *Where We Once Belonged* (Western Samoa, New Zealand) by Sia Figiel, published by Pasifika Press, New Zealand.

Sia Figiel was born in the village of Matautu Tai, Western Samoa in 1967. She was educated in Western Samoa, New Zealand and the United States of America. A performance poet, Sia Figiel won the Polynesian Literary Competition in 1994. She was also the 1996 Artist in Residence at the Arts in Education program in American Samoa. *Where We Once Belonged* is Sia Figiel's first book.

Where We Once Belonged

"I does not exist. I am not. My self belongs not to me because 'I' is always 'we', is a part of the 'aiga... a part of the nu'u, a part of Samoa. Alofa Filiga is thirteen and lives in the village of Malaefou in Samoa. Growing up in the village, she learns to come to terms with violence, womanhood and her own personal search for identity. Sia Figiel's first book uses the traditional Samoan storytelling form of suifilelo to deromanticize Western perceptions of Pacific Islands women. This forceful and honest adult work is a modern tragicomedy of youth and culture."

Chairperson of the judging panel — Kee Thuan Chye, Literary Editor, New Straits Times, Malaysia.

The regional winners will be invited to London in April, together with previous winners, to take part in the Festival of Commonwealth Literature (27 April-6 May 1997). The overall winners of the 1997 Commonwealth Writers Prize will be announced at an award ceremony at the Stationers' Hall on April 29.

Based on the Book Trust press release.